



Alaya Preschool

PROVIDING CONTINGENT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
IN HOUSTON, TX FOR OVER 40 YEARS
WWW.ALAYAPRESCHOOL.ORG

Guidelines for Program, Curriculum, and Environment

By Alaya Preschool



"To be able to create even a very small pot you have to know and follow all the laws of the universe. To create a little pot you have to use the raw materials of the whole universe. Without it you cannot create anything on this earth." —Tai Situ Rinpoche, a leading Buddhist teacher speaking on "a view of what it is to be well-educated."

In the ancient philosophies of both China and Japan, the three principles of Heaven, Earth, and Man* integrate human life with the natural world. Clearly, this is not Japan or China, but some familiarity with this vision can help our efforts to create a sane and healthy situation for our children. Heaven is the grandeur, the vision: what inspires human greatness and creativity. Earth: practicality and receptivity. The ground that supports and promotes life. When human beings combine the freedom of heaven with the practicality of earth, big things happen.

*Man here connotes anthropomorphic existence—human experience—not "man" as opposed to woman.



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Heaven: Curriculum

Curriculum Overview

Approach: The overall approach of Alaya's program is caring for the whole child. To do a comprehensive job of teaching and providing a good day for children in our care, we must see the child as a complex human being composed of many attributes and aspects, and we must see teaching as stimulating and enhancing the development of all these aspects of the child.

Focus: The focus of Alaya's program is to provide a curriculum and learning environment which concentrates on all aspects of a child's developing self: to nourish and sustain emotional health and well-being, to encourage physical growth/development, to foster satisfying social relationships, to enhance creativity, to experience and develop self-help and practical living skills, and to develop language skills and promote the development of mental ability.

- 1) Children need time to be children. The focus of Alaya is relaxation: children should not be pressured or urged in a hurried way. Children need time and personal space in which to grow. They need time to be themselves. To do nothing, to stand and watch, to repeat again and again what they did before. They need time to live in their childhood. Our children are young. This time in their lives is very precious. They should not be pushed to "learn".
- 2) Children learn most easily by means of actual, involving experience with people and activities. This is best accomplished in an open, carefully planned environment where children may take responsibility and make decisions for themselves and where they have ample opportunity to learn through play.
- 3) Children need to be themselves; it is confidence in their coping ability that underlies children's sense of self-worth.

Planning a Good Day for Children

Human Relationship: Warmth and empathetic understanding have been shown to be effective means of influencing a child's positive adjustment to school. Genuine caring about the children is fundamental to Alaya.



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- 1) Children need opportunities for person-to-person, one-on-one encounters.
- 2) Children need to be able to make personal choices and to be able to initiate individual contacts.
 - a) Informal learning experiences where caring is expressed—as quick as a fleeting hug or smile
 - b) The chance to talk and experiment with language

School/Family Integration: The most significant influence on a child's life is family and home. A child's anxiety over leaving home will be lessened if she/he senses a strong bond between her/his home and school.

- 1) Parents know their child and, even when confused or overwhelmed, can provide the teacher with great insight on the needs, concerns, and ability of the child. It is not the job of the teacher to psychoanalyze children or parents.
- 2) The teacher may be able to offer the parents meaningful help with the day-to-day concerns of the child.

Balance: There should be a balance between self-selection and teacher direction. Both approaches are valuable.

- 1) The virtue of self-selection is that it fosters independence and builds within the child responsibility for making his/her own decisions. It also provides a way to individualize the curriculum because each child is free to pursue his/her own interests.
- 2) There are times when children should participate in activities that will enhance their growth even if they are not particularly attracted to them, i.e.: circle time. Children can be encouraged to try different things in order to foster their total development.

Elements of Positive Curriculum

Curriculum Should be **Organic**: At Alaya, curriculum should emerge from the children's play experience and the environment, which serve as a bridge from the inner world to the outer.

- 1) Curriculum should have some connection and relationship to the world at large (season, holidays, elements, natural occurrences), as well as to the



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child's more immediate personal environment (family, friends, home, events, and experience).

2) Continuity and relationship between one activity and another allows for in-depth exploration and understanding. Activities should evolve in a natural order or from the interests, ideas, and/or questions they generate. For example, planting a garden:

- planting takes place in Spring/Summer (Seasonal)
- the ground has been prepared ahead of time (Planning)
- understanding how plants grow and what they need to grow (Research and Experimentation)
- some plants need a lot of sun, others shade; some grow fast, others slowly; some bear fruit or flowers above ground, others grow food below (Observation and Discussion)
- plants need care: watering, thinning, weeding, de-bugging (by hand, please) (Exertion, Follow-through)
- harvesting and eating the food that was grown (Completion, Result, Celebration)

Curriculum Should be **Comprehensive**: As organic curriculum evolves, keep in mind the whole child and that activities should be comprehensive, encompassing all aspects of a child's development:

- physical: large and fine muscle development including handling routines, i.e., eating, clean-up
- emotional: appreciation for limits and environment fostering growth in self-discipline/awareness/esteem
- social: appreciation for the value of other people/beings, social concern and kindness
- creative: expressed in play and applied in thought, expressed in the use of materials to create
- cognitive: language development and expressive skills

1) Daily activities and projects should include cooking/baking, creative arts and crafts, woodworking, clay, music, movement, stories, games, drama, puppetry, and the care of plants, animals, and environment.



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2) The use of planning charts can be helpful to aid seeing the continuity of curriculum as well as checking the effectiveness of the curriculum in terms of a child's development. The main emphasis in doing planning charts is visibility, not to become rigid or chart-oriented. A teacher should not lose the direct connection with the moment or the connection with the child's interests.

Curriculum Should be **Personal and Individualized**: Every child is different and learns at his or her own rate. Curriculum goals should be personalized to fit the children's interests with specific goals formulated to suit the individual children. However, it is always important to remember that it is the child's interests and abilities that set the tone for the goal, *not the ambitions of the teacher*.

There are three questions the teacher can use to determine whether the curriculum is individualized:

- 1) Are there some recent instances where curriculum was based on a child's specific interest?
- 2) Can examples be identified where a child was deliberately provided with opportunities to learn? What evaluations had indicated that she or he especially needed to know?
- 3) Can examples be cited where curriculum plans were changed because a child revealed an unanticipated interest or enthusiasm during the day?

Curriculum Should be **Stable and Regular, Combined with Flexibility**: Young children need to know what is likely to happen next during the day. This means that the order of events should be generally predictable. However, time schedules and routines should not dominate the day. A change of pace should be built into the daily program to avoid monotony and fatigue. In sum, it is best to maintain an orderly but elastic schedule, which includes both quiet and active times, where play/activity periods can be extended when children are quite engrossed in an activity.

Curriculum Should be **Based on Actual Experience and Participation**: Children are more involved, interested, and have greater appreciation when they are encouraged to use all their senses and avenues of learning. Curriculum at Alaya is to be based on "real" experiences with "real" things rather than limited to verbal and picture discussions. Talk about what is happening when it is taking place—learning is an experience—but also leave space for not talking: learning usually is not just a verbal experience.

Children see the world in a clear-sighted, direct way that lends a fresh perspective to the eyes of their teacher, and their tendency to live for the present moment is a lesson to us all.



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Pleasure, enjoyment, humor, appreciation, respect, and laughter should be a part of every child's day at Alaya.

Play

Play is Alaya: the ground from which things grow. Play creates and maintains the vessel or faculty for learning. Taking in, integrating, and creating is what we do our whole lives, not just in school. Play nurtures independence and friendship. Stories nurture wonder, courage, kindness, and vision. Arts and crafts nurture beauty, inquisitiveness, ability, determination, satisfaction, and self-esteem. Cognitive skills develop within all of this—in the context of playing and/or making something we cut, count, tie, and we learn symmetry and order. We make bows and string and sticks and imagine and appreciate the lives of others; we make and knead bread dough to learn proportion and appreciate effort.

It is the creative aspect of play that enables people to learn how to appreciate and work with others and the world while simultaneously learning about themselves.

Earth: Environment

"When you express gentleness and precision in your environment, then real brilliance and power can descend onto that situation." —Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

At Alaya, the classroom is our expression of wakefulness. This is reflected through our attention to:

- aesthetics—our rooms are pleasing to look at, be in; they are spacious; there is plenty of room for the children literally and metaphorically
- cleanliness
- organization—following the order of *lha*, *nyen*, and *lu*. *Lha* is literally "divine" or "God". It is the head, eyes, forehead. *Nyen* is literally "friend". It is the middle. *Lu* is literally "water being", the feet and shoes.

The teacher is an artist, trusting his or her intuitive sense, knowing that he or she has the power and capability to see what is needed in each situation and to create opportunities for our children to appreciate each aspect, each moment of their lives.