

Focus presents: ArtsCalibre Academy

Arts-inspired education helps children reach their full potential

This September for the first time in the Victoria area, children will be able to attend a unique, arts-based kindergarten/grade one class.

ArtsCalibre Academy founder Sandra Walton is a revered, experienced educator who loves working with young children. For the past few years ArtsCalibre's preschool has won the hearts and minds of both children and their parents. One parent who says her daughter would attend ArtsCalibre seven days a week if she could, says, "The ArtsCalibre program has helped our daughter grow and mature, and we are overjoyed at her new-found love of learning."

Walton has a Masters in Education and has taught in a wide variety of settings, always employing the fine arts to help children blossom. The arts, she believes, nurture children's inborn curiosity and creativity, allowing them to find answers in ways that work for them. Says Walton, "I wanted to create an environment where children are excited and motivated to learn."

A visit to ArtsCalibre's preschool certainly gives the impression that Walton has been successful in her endeavour. Three-year-olds enter the classroom through colourful streamers hanging from a rainbow arch, happily talking with their friends and teachers (three of them). There is a lot of love and joy in the air. And they are excited about the morning project: to create candles for Father's Day.

Walton says she and her early childhood teachers use a theme-based approach.

While the children are having fun making candles, for instance, they effortlessly learn about how solids can change to liquids and vice versa; and about colours as they melt crayons into the wax. Another recent theme involved growing things. The whole class got involved in charting their own growth, growing plants, learning about how a cocoon becomes a butterfly, and other "applied" growth situations. "What they are learning is relevant and makes sense," says Sandra; "They made connections about what growth is in different contexts."

Such fun, creative projects give ArtsCalibre children an early start in skills related to reading, writing, math, science and music. It sets them up for academic success throughout their school years.

Next year the preschool will

be housed in the beautiful new Arts Wing of the Cedar Hill Recreation Centre.

In September local children can also attend a similarly arts-inspired kindergarten/grade one class in the newly renovated Gordon Head Recreation Centre. Walton is thrilled about the setting: "The children will be surrounded by active living;



Photo: Tony Boursali

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—Sandra Walton

the program itself will include individual piano lessons and swimming and yoga." Walton is also working with the facility to ensure that parents who need after school care for their children can register their kids in appropriate fitness and arts programs after the 3 pm bell rings.

The new program will meet and exceed BC curriculum standards. And parents will have the option of enrolling their children in either full or half-day programs for kindergarten (not all children are ready for a full-day by age 5). There will be a maximum of 15 children in the class, led by teacher Tara Robertson with the support of Sandra and other staff.

The teachers, of course, are a big part of the Academy's success. One mom, Michelle, notes, "The enthusiasm of the staff is limitless. My shy, non-participating daughter has blossomed under the loving care of the teachers. She comes home daily having learned new songs and dances, and is eager to show them to me."

Walton explains such blossoming this way: "Although our program is well planned and structured, the curriculum and our staff are still very flexible in determining each child's needs, and what ignites their imagination." It's also easy to notice when a child isn't getting something. Says Walton, "My job is to connect with the kids...and do whatever it takes to help them be intrinsically motivated. If I can get them hooked and excited at this early age, they will be lifelong learners."

"Everyone learns at different rates and through different means," adds Walton. Her own daughters, ages four and six, have driven home that reality: "One of my daughters is very process-oriented and the other is a doer. They have to be taught differently. Creativity and flexibility are crucial to helping them believe in themselves."

Parents will be glad to know that Sandra Walton is committed to growing ArtsCalibre Academy with her students—by one to two grades per year, to Grade 5 and beyond. She's also determined to keep costs for ArtsCalibre programs below those of traditional private schools: "I want it to be down to earth and affordable for families."

The ArtsCalibre website has more information, and Sandra Walton welcomes the opportunity to discuss your child's needs.

ArtsCalibre Academy

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Photo: Tony Boursali

ArtsCalibre's staff (clockwise from top):
Michelle Woods, Deirdre Cassidy,
Sandra Walton, Zara Hillert.

