

PHEBE ANNA THORNE school



Photos by Abbe Foreman

Where Child's Play LEADS THE WAY

Within this play-based institution, the motto “Learning to Play. Playing to Learn,” is not merely a motto. It’s the heart and soul of the Phebe Anna Thorne School, where play is the catalyst to learning, growth, and development.

Set on the grounds of Bryn Mawr College in a newly designed, renovated space, Thorne School’s toddler and preschool classrooms focus on social-emotional development and nurturing the whole child. The curriculum is built upon proven research showing that play enhances children’s problem-solving and social skills. Free play leads naturally to self-confidence, curiosity, independence, and joy in learning. The kindergarten program, on the Haverford College campus, incorporates play into a full-day academic curriculum.

This basis of free play in early development instills in children a foundation for mastery of academics and life skills as they grow. The more our sense of play is fostered as children, the more we are inclined to seek and embrace learning throughout our lifetimes and be collaborative with our peers. Thus the Thorne School creates an ideal foundation for learning.

“We want our kids talking to each other not listening to headphones,” says Amanda Ulrich.

“We want them playing with blocks not computers.”

“Kids come to Thorne at different stages,” says Amanda Ulrich, Director of Phebe Anna Thorne School. “The common thread is that all kids need to play. At age two, it’s all about parallel play. At three and four, socialization comes into the mix, along with learning to share. Our teachers facilitate that. Play is the work of childhood. Our

classes are structured for development.” Ulrich first came to know Thorne School as a parent in 2005, then took a role as a teacher before rising to Director in 2015. “I’ve seen the school through multiple lenses,” she says. “Honestly, I fell in love with it.”

In a Thorne School classroom, which expands to the playground and sometimes into the surrounding campus, the flow of play is freeform and child-led. While the kids are encouraged to self-regulate, teachers don’t simply observe and shape play from a distance, they work to know every child as a whole person. “They’re down on the floor, they’re right in there playing with the kids,” Ulrich says of the highly educated, experienced teaching staff.

The educational program is individualized to nurture each child’s particular intellect and stage of development. In the toddler and preschool

programs, this means a wide range of opportunities for learning and exploration. Instead of worksheets and structured assignments, children engage in dress-up, reading, art, and puzzles, moving at will through open classrooms. For the kindergarten, more structured, academic activities fill the day. In all Thorne classrooms,

interfacing with technology is kept at a minimum.

Blocks are available in every class, encouraging experiential learning. Through play, children learn to develop stories and sequences, to collaborate with peers and flexibly integrate their ideas. They solve spatial problems, estimate, and plan as they build, and learn to cope with frustration when plans don’t work.

Thorne School features two specialized programs. The Language Enrichment Program, (LEPP) staffed with teachers and a speech-language pathologist, is for children with identified speech and language difficulties, providing individual support within a preschool classroom. The Early Intervention Program supports children with language delays, attention problems, social skills deficits, difficulties with behavioral self-regulation, and autism spectrum issues.

Children in all classes are known to transition smoothly into public or private schools from Phebe Anna Thorne School, and to excel socially as well as academically.

“When my daughter started school after Thorne,” says Ulrich, “she had so much self-confidence, and she was so caring towards her classmates. Other moms were constantly asking me where she’d gone to preschool.”

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