

## The Gingham Giraffe Celebrates 25 Years of Preschool

[The Gingham Giraffe Preschool](#) is celebrating 25 years of operation in Chatham this year. Lovingly called “Gingham” by its many students and their parents, the state-licensed, non-denominational school opened in 1990 when Gail Smith, the Director, saw a need in the Township for a program for young children that had a developmental focus. At the time of opening, Gingham was the one of the first not-for-profit schools in the area to offer a program for children under age three. It was also the first school to offer “curb service” for parents on the go, as well as a kindergarten enrichment program for public school students who require more than a half-day program.

While The Gingham Giraffe’s mission is to address all aspects of the growing child, Smith hesitates to call her program “academic”. While mastery of skills is expected at certain levels, more emphasis is placed on identifying the individual child’s learning process, and playing on their strengths, which lays a foundation that fosters confidence and a love of learning. “We try to identify a child’s learning style early so we can play to their visual, kinesthetic or auditory strengths. Children are encouraged to try new experiences at a young age, they learn to fail too, which helps them to be persistent, and eventually confident learners.”

In 1990, Gingham had six students. In recent years, enrollment has swelled to over two hundred children aged 2 – 6 years old. Luckily, Corpus Christi Church has enough spacious and colorful classrooms, as well as a full sized gymnasium and private playground, enabling Gingham’s growth while maintaining the important student to teacher ratio. Each classroom accommodates an approximate 6 month age bracket, to ensure that all children are the “same page” when it comes to basic motor skills and social development. Smith believes that everything from the toilet training process to pencil grip should be at similar levels for children in each classroom to foster confidence rather than

competitiveness.

Despite many more preschool programs coming to the area in recent years, Smith credits Gingham’s success to her amazing attentive staff, great teacher-student ratio and a small age gap in classrooms, as well as, the curriculum. It has been developed by her team of Teachers to be developmentally appropriate rather than to follow trends. Readiness dictates what we expect from children and determines how we challenge them. If they master one skill, we present the next one to them. This challenges those that can move ahead and keeps little ones excited about learning.

Those children struggling can be identified early, and a referral to a child study team can be made if necessary. “Since our opening, we have recommended more than forty children for Child Study Team evaluations. As technology has replaced human interaction, language has taken a back seat to touch screens – but children are still the same as they were before all this technology. My staff is excellent at offering support where needed. We also have partnered with a local Speech Therapist who will screen children at our recommendation.

This issue is close to Smith’s heart. She holds her degree in Special Education and taught children with perceptual and neurological impairment for several years before opening Gingham’s doors at Corpus Christi Church. Because of her expertise, she gives workshops on the topic of Early Childhood Intervention and has been quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*. Gingham’s staff, most of whom have been employed there for 15-20 years, attend workshops by pediatricians, EMT’s, occupational and language therapists, and social workers. Every teacher at Gingham is CPR certified as the frequency of food allergies has continued to increase. Families have been referred to Gingham often for the food allergy issue alone. Smith believes that in today’s day and age, a well-trained,

consistent, staff is more important than ever:

“Things are so different now from when was I was a first time parent. Young families move more often – and further – than they did years ago and often are far away from families. They don’t have a network to count on. They are busy! They are also losing the guidance of pediatricians due to the changes in our health care system. [Preschool teachers] have become the parents’ guides and confidants in every area of child rearing. The Early Childhood Teacher identifies symptoms and behavior that could be related to illness or developmental delays. We counsel parents in the area of behavior issues, show them how car seats are installed, help with eating habits, social growth and of course, toilet training. We are experienced professionals with lots to offer.

Realizing that while biological development may be the same in children, the world their parents live in has greatly changed in the last 25 years, and so Gingham’s offerings have evolved to meet the needs of busy families. The school offers morning classes for all ages, and includes flexible extended day options, expansion classes for more learning and “Stay & Play” that require no advance sign up on the part of the parent.

As one mother from Madison explained, “I love that if I need to get to a doctor’s appointment that day, or have a few more errands to run, all I have to do is send in a pre-purchased ticket for Stay & Play with her lunchbox, and Sophia can stay an extra two hours, no questions asked.” Gingham now offers an “Early Start” option for parents who may need to head to work earlier, and as always there is no need to park. Teachers walk children to

and from the car, as well as buckle their car seats. This ensures safety and supervision while allowing the child to become more responsible.

To ensure working parents remain connected to Gingham, there are “Theme Days” throughout the year, and parents – as well as grandparents and other care givers, are invited to attend. Cookie Cutter Day, The Olympics, and Art Show are just a few annual events that always draw a crowd of proud parents. Sports programs, as well as Science and Music classes by special teachers are another enriching part of Gingham’s curriculum that encourage children’s individual interests.

Over the years, Gingham’s alumni have gone on to graduate from NYU, Cornell Law School, Virginia Tech, Fordham, Temple Honors Program, Georgetown and many other prestigious schools. Often, parents visit to share this news and Smith and her team of teachers have received emails and college photos through our website as well as holiday cards. “It’s great to know that we had a part in starting these students on the right foot and their educational foundation began here. All of my staff love to hear from our alumni!” Parents of alumni are encouraged to contact the director or staff through [the school’s website](#), or to stop in for a visit.

Smith says, “The past 24 years have been an extraordinary journey. My staff and I have had a tremendous opportunity to enrich the lives of young families. Partnering with Corpus Christi has been a pleasure from the start. We can’t wait to see what the future brings.”