

# An Investment for a Lifetime

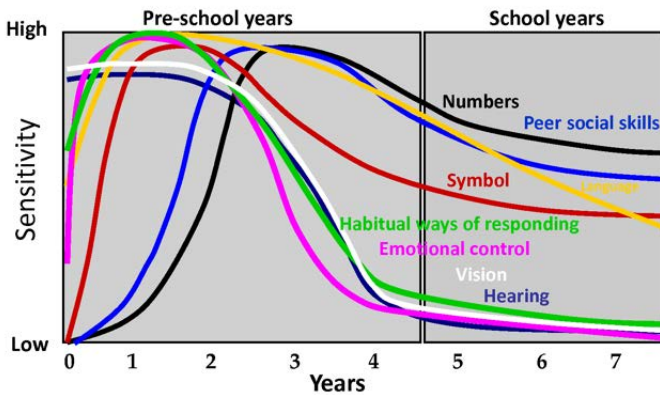
## The Research & Reasoning Behind Concord Hill School's Age 3-to-Grade 3 Model

By Nate Dennison, Head of Concord Hill School

### AGE 3 TO GRADE 3: THE MOST IMPACTFUL YEARS OF A CHILD'S LIFE

Early childhood is the most magical time in a person's life. Young children are sponges for learning; from birth they are wired to soak up every word, image, and interaction they encounter. As the body of brain research expands, the data continues to reinforce what we have always known in early childhood education: that the developmental phases and stages between birth and Grade 3 are the most sensitive and critical in a person's life. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Although the brain continues to develop and change into adulthood, the first 8 years build a foundation for future learning, health, and life success" (CDC, 2017).

#### Sensitive Periods in Early Brain Development



Graph developed by Council for Early Child Development (ref: Nash, 1997; Early Years Study, 1999; Shankoff, 2000.)

Harvard's Center on the Developing Child states, "Early experiences affect the development of brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. Just as a weak foundation compromises the quality and strength of a house, adverse experiences early in life can impair brain architecture, with negative effects lasting into adulthood." The Center goes on to explain, "The emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive-linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important for success in school, the workplace, and in the larger community. It is easier and less costly to form strong brain circuits during the early years than it is to intervene or 'fix' them later" (Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2012).

The special report, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Grade 3 Matters*, published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reinforces the importance of these early years: "Reading is the most crucial academic skill, because it is the foundation for learning. Through third grade children are learning to read; after third grade students read to learn. Without a strong foundation in reading, children are left behind at the beginning of their education. They lag in every class, year after year, because more than 85 percent of the curriculum is taught by reading. And by the end of third grade, 74 percent of struggling readers won't ever catch up" (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2010).

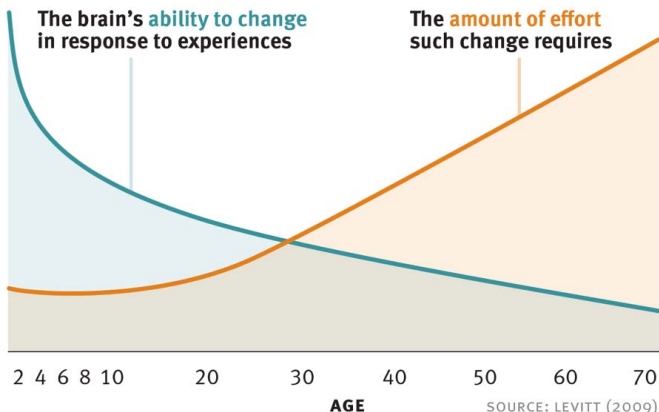
Concord Hill is designed to focus solely on these critical years of development. At Concord Hill we believe that providing a child with his or her first schooling experience comes with the highest responsibility and the greatest opportunity to guide a child and equip them for a lifetime of learning. Creating the ideal environment that nurtures each child's innate curiosity, creativity, and wonderment, while building foundational skills, self-confidence, and a sense of agency, are what make the six years of school from Age 3 to Grade 3 the most important and impactful of their lives.

### DESIGNED FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

In *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn*, John Hattie and Gregory Yates present "the biggest ever collection of research into what actually works in improving children's learning in schools" (Hattie and Yates, 2014). They present arguments for which interventions have the greatest influence on student learning, based on more than 800 meta-analyses of 50,000 research articles, involving 150,000 effect sizes, and about 240 million students. The findings affirm the design and potential impact of the Concord Hill model and program. Hattie's research is ongoing and since the publication of Hattie's *Visible Learning* in 2011, the list continues to evolve. The most current rankings of 252 influences and effect sizes related to student achievement place teacher efficacy, teacher expectations of students, Piagetian (constructivist) programs, response to intervention, and teacher credibility at the top of the list (Visible Learning Plus, 2018).

### Exceptional Teachers

Investing in the highest quality faculty and staff is a top priority at Concord Hill, with salary and benefits averaging above the 90th percentile in comparison to regional peer schools. Concord Hill faculty possess an average of 17 years of teaching experience, and 66% possess advanced degrees. With an annual professional development budget of \$25,000, the school prioritizes life-long learning. Faculty actively engage in professional development, continually honing their craft and staying abreast of the latest research and best practices in child development and education. Ever evolving and improving, Concord Hill is in the process of developing a new Professional Growth System connecting and aligning supervision, evaluation, self-reflection, and professional development, ensuring that professional learning translates into maximum teacher efficacy and student learning.



SOURCE: LEVITT (2009)

## Small by Design

Concord Hill provides an intimate and personalized experience for every child through a one-class-per-grade-level model and average class size of 15 students. Research indicates that the largest benefits for achievement are often found below a threshold size of 15 to 18 and are often found to be most pronounced for young children (Glass & Smith, 1979; Kim, 2006; Mosteller, 1995). With 22 classroom teachers and enrichment specialists, the remarkably low student-to-teacher ratio supports the ability to establish and maintain deep and trusting relationships with each child and family, fostering teacher credibility and trust. The warmth and connectedness that is cultivated in a community of only 90 students helps every child feel safe to take risks essential to the process of learning.

The low student-to-teacher ratio allows for teachers to get to know their students deeply and establish appropriately high expectations, as well as ensure that all students are finding success and no one is falling through the cracks. Teachers can differentiate instruction and provide individualized feedback at exponentially higher rates with the classroom student-to-teacher ratio averaging 8 to 1. Every child can feel known, secure, celebrated, supported, and challenged. With a Math and Reading Specialist supporting students in Kindergarten through Third Grade, not only can interventions be implemented at the first sign of difficulty, but the 6 to 1 student-to-teacher ratio for these core subjects ensures that all children experience high rates of success.

## Student-Centered Approach

The Piagetian (constructivist) approach—believing that students learn best when they construct knowledge through a process of assimilating new information with their existing (prior) knowledge—is at the heart of Concord Hill’s student-centered program and curriculum. The approach is alive throughout the CHS program—specifically in Preprimary and Primary which employs an Emergent Curriculum where projects derive from the children’s questions and interests—and evident through inquiry-based lessons and workshop models employed in Kindergarten through Grade 3. Students learn to see themselves as the drivers of their learning, building identities as readers, writers, artists, scientists, and mathematicians, actively constructing knowledge.

Hattie shared that a major takeaway from the Piagetian effect size findings is that “we must know what students already know, know how they think, and then aim to then progress all students towards the successful criteria of the lesson” (Hattie, 2012, p. 44). The intimate nature of the Concord Hill program allows for deep understanding of children’s prior knowledge and learning styles from which instruction can be best tailored to support maximum engagement and success.

## Nimble by Design

Concord Hill’s size and design foster an ability to be innovative and nimble as new research can immediately inform small and large changes for the program, where in larger independent and public schools it may take years or even decades to respond. For example, research continues to emerge based on new eye-tracking and brain imaging scans about the importance of phonics instruction as part of a Balanced Literacy approach (Goldstein, 2020). What has become clear is that children need explicit instruction in phonics to learn how to decode, and not just rely on context clues to determine unknown words. While phonics instruction has always been a part of the Concord Hill program, in light of this latest research, Concord Hill is reviewing the amount of time and the effectiveness of programs used to support students reading and writing, with updates underway.

## KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: PREPARING FOR TAKEOFF

### Ready, Set, Go!

Concord Hill is committed to helping every child launch from Third Grade with the confidence, character, knowledge, and skills to succeed beyond Concord Hill. We walk hand in hand with our families throughout the placement process and our reputation speaks for itself. Receiving schools know that Concord Hill graduates are students of the highest character, and contributing, caring members of their individual class, school, and the broader community. CHS Graduates are well-rounded individuals who have grown to become leaders, especially in their roles as Third Grade Seniors. They have benefited immensely from being big fish in a small pond and are ready for new adventures and challenges.

### Timing Is Everything

Most families can agree that when children are three or four years old it is far too early to determine which college or university is going to be a good fit. We believe that it is also too early to know which middle or high school will be best. Whether children spend all six years, from Age 3 to Grade 3, at Concord Hill, or join CHS for only a year or two, having the knowledge that is gained by Grade 3 empowers families to find the right fit for the next chapter of their child’s schooling career. When decisions are made for children when they are only four, five, or six, children have yet to engage fully in the more academic aspects of schooling, which provides critical information about their learning styles, interests, and abilities which are essential when determining an appropriate fit.

### Personalized Outplacement

Finding a great fit beyond our school is what Concord Hill does best. Unlike other early childhood programs, which serve largely as feeders to specific schools and programs, Concord Hill is known for working with each family to find appropriate matches for each individual child. Over the last ten years, students have been placed in 21 local independent schools and numerous public schools. This year alone, 13 of our 16 Third Grade students applied to 16 different independent schools, with 3 students planning to go public.

## AN INVESTMENT FOR A LIFETIME

Concord Hill has been a leader in Early Childhood Education since 1965. The Age 3-to-Grade 3 model is uniquely designed to not only celebrate and protect childhood, but to ensure a strong foundation during these critical and formative years. Concord Hill partners with families and prepares students for a life-long love of learning. It is for these reasons and more that families have chosen Concord Hill for over 50 years, understanding that an investment in a school whose mission is to provide what is best for our youngest children is an investment for a lifetime.

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