

# FAMILY MATTERS

A WEEKLY FEATURE FOR CALGARY FAMILIES

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KATE TAVENDER  
FOR NEIGHBOURS

## Jamie's school is a safe haven for children with cancer

For the Florence family, life changed irrevocably in June 2004. That was when Pauline and Judd's eldest daughter Simone, now 5, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) — the most common type of leukemia in young children. For the next two-and-a-half years, normalcy disappeared and was replaced by countless hospital visits, chemotherapy and other invasive treatments.

Their child's very survival would depend on this, as well as keeping Simone free of colds, flues and viruses. Run-of-the-mill illnesses like these can be life-threatening for many young children undergoing cancer therapies.

"Any time we had a fever, it's not like we could just give (Simone) Tylenol. We had to go to the hospital," says Pauline, who was constantly on the alert for bugs during her daughter's years of treatment.

"We always have germicide with us. You go to the swings, you get off and you germicide your hands. You go to the shopping mall, you wipe the kids' hands and you wipe the cart," she says. "I can spot a germ a mile away."

Trying to keep kids germ-free without re-

“Some of the common viral infections in the community can be much more serious infections for children who have moderate to severe immuno-suppressions.”

**Dr. Doug Strother, Alberta Children's Hospital**

stricting them to life in a bubble is a daunting challenge for parents of children with cancer. That's why parents like Florences are so grateful for Jamie's Preschool Society.

This registered non-profit organization offers a preschool program for children with compromised immune systems between the ages of three and six years old. It's named after the founder's son,

who had cancer more than 20 years ago.

Even though it's been around for decades, this unique school is still the only one of its kind in Canada.

Most of the children at the school have cancer and have been referred to Jamie's Preschool by the Alberta Children's Hospital. Siblings of cancer patients may also attend.

Gordon Laird, whose five-year-old son Addison is undergoing treatment for ALL, has both his children enrolled in the program.

"It's a different set of rules on an immuno-compromised kid," says Laird. "The wrong bug on the wrong day can be catastrophic.... (Without this preschool), life would be a form of house arrest."

Instead of house arrest, kids like Addison and Simone have a safe place to go. Jamie's Preschool takes special steps to ensure that the population that comes in contact with these children is infection-free.

"We do all the basics that are done in any school," explains long-time

teacher Liz Mackie. "We wipe down the tables and the chairs. But we also try to make sure no one comes into the classroom if they have a cold or a fever. If any of the children have a fever, they can't come. If I have a cold, I can't come. If we're going on a field trip on a bus, I make sure the driver is safe."

Everyone who comes into direct contact with the children at Jamie's Preschool is pre-screened by Mackie and then asked to wash their hands. Even a cold sore can keep you out of the classroom.

"We have a friendly, but guarded, environment so that (the children's) contact with other adults is screened," she says. "And the reason we want to protect them is that we want them to complete their treatment (without a setback) as quickly as possible."

With such protective protocol in place, Jamie's Preschool is a refuge for families since "normal" children's activities may pose a serious threat, say medical experts.

"Some of the common viral infections in the community can be much more serious infections for children who have moderate to severe immuno-suppressions," says Dr. Doug Strother, the acting director of oncology and marrow transplants at the Alberta Children's Hospital.

"Older children (with cancer) are able to go to regular school for example, but for young children who are more immuno-compromised, Jamie's is a very safe environment for them."

It's also lots of fun. "We like them to come and have fun and learn social skills and enjoy what other preschoolers would enjoy, like music and games," says Mackie.

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Don Molyneux for Neighbours

The protective measure at the Jamie's Preschool ensures children learn and have fun while undergoing cancer treatments. Clockwise from the left: Bryn Florence, 3, Lindsay Humphries, 4, Aidan Laudersmith, 4, Quinn Laudersmith, 3, Graydon Bishop, 4, Gabriella Bishop, 3, Caiden Peters, 4

## Homework needed before choosing a preschool

Calgary offers a wide variety of preschool programs and locations. While it's wonderful to have so many options, it can make choosing a program a little overwhelming.

Finding the preschool that works best for you and your child requires some research. The best place to start is by asking questions.

Look for a preschool that's a good match in terms of your parenting philosophy and your child's personality and temperament. If possible, attend the preschool's open house, or arrange for a visit. Find out everything you can about the school. Don't forget to take into consideration things such as convenience, class times, fees, location, recommendations from other parents, types of toys and equipment available, etc.

Here are some questions to get you started when interviewing a prospective preschool:

■ What type of preschool program? (i.e. play-based, learning-based, Montessori, co-op, religious, etc.)

■ What are the qualifications of the staff? Teachers and staff in any preschool program should have some level of training in early childhood education and development.

■ What is your maximum class size? Group size can be important when determining the best placement for your child. A small class size (less than 20) can be a benefit to some children, while other children may thrive in a class of 28.

■ Do you require parent volunteers? Some programs operate with one hired teacher and a variety of parent volunteers, who follow a schedule.

This is wonderful for those parents who can commit the time, thus affording them an important place in their child's early education. Other schools have both hired teachers and teacher's aides, thereby offering the children consistency of care, and the benefit of experienced staff. Most schools have the need for volunteers for field trips or special activities.

■ What is the discipline policy? A written copy of the school's discipline policy should be posted clearly for parents to read. Choose a school whose discipline policy reflects your own beliefs.

■ What is the school snack policy? With the increasing percentages of

children with food allergies, you need to be assured that your child is safe from possible harmful food and that the staff is aware of their allergies.

Many schools have adopted a "no nuts" policy, which protects children with severe allergies to nuts.

■ Other questions to consider include: Are there field trips or other extra curricular activities?; What is the teacher/aide: child ratio? Does the school have an open-door policy? (can parents drop in and observe?); What does the curriculum include? (circle time, music, art, large motor skill play, etc.)? With a positive start in preschool, children may look forward to elementary school with confidence and excitement.

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## FROM N10 SCHOOL: Parents grateful

But it doesn't stop there. "Once a month we try to do something above and beyond what a normal preschool would do," says Mackie. "We try to have outings."

Those include trout-fishing and visiting the RCMP headquarters in Kananaskis, spending the day at Calaway Park in June before the park is open to the public, as well as going to private showings of children's movies. The kids even have a private tumbling session at a gymnastics club once a week.

"They're children and they're active," despite their illnesses, says Mackie. "You want them to have a very, rich interesting life while they're in Jamie's Preschool."

No wonder parents feel so grateful it exists.

It's great," says Laird. "Even though Addison is living a pretty sheltered life in many ways, developmentally he's doing great. And I think that comes from having regular social engagement and an enriching environment out of the house. For all the same reasons that other kids go to preschool



Don Molyneux for Neighbours

**Quinn Laudersmith, 3, finished treatment for a Wilms tumour in October.**

and kindergarten, one of the important things is to find some way of carrying on with the things that are essential to a kid's development."

Jamie's Preschool allows kids to develop and even have a sense of nor-

malcy in the face of serious illness.

"The preschool is so fantastic that you are lucky, in a sense, that you are able to be there. The kids feel normal," says Florence. "It makes our life seem kind of normal."