Preschool has changed a lot since most adults were in a classroom. “The stakes are higher today,” says Christine Ader-Soto, senior vice president of early childhood development at The Y in Central Maryland.

“When I went to kindergarten, we were finger painting and doing what you typically don’t see in preschool centers today, because in the past it was more focused on the social experience of school. Today, it’s getting ready to enter school fully prepared to take on the rigors of public education.”

The Y is one of the largest early childhood school providers in the area. It branches out to several locations, including 35 Head Start centers and six traditional preschool centers. Combined, they care for almost 2,000 children under the age of 5 each day, and the play that is incorporated now is very purposeful.

“It might look like play, but what’s actually going on is a very intentional effort on our part to follow a curriculum that supports school readiness,” she says. They focus on social and emotional development—like learning to share or take turns—and language and literacy development.

Michelle Gold, director of the Goldsmith Early Childhood Education Center at Chizuk Amuno Congregation, says the preschool encourages a play-based philosophy. “We believe children at this age (18 months to 5 years old) need to play and explore their environment and create things and investigate,” she says. “Play goes away after kindergarten. That’s how children learn to be social and be successful in the world, and they don’t have a chance to do it after preschool or up until kindergarten. So we feel it’s really important for them to develop their skills to be successful later on in life.”

Elementary schools still have playgrounds, of course, but by that point, Gold says those social skills and personalities are already developed on a foundational level. “Sometimes parents get caught up in the academic skills. ‘When is my child going to learn to read?’ ‘When are they going to learn their colors and shapes?’ All of that is
going to come because that’s developmental. Their brains become ready to learn that,” she says. “But it’s not like that with social skills. It’s not natural for children to share. They have to learn.” “If their first time in kindergarten is also their first social experience, they’re starting with bare bones,” she continues, so they’re behind on managing a social-emotional balance with the academic development.

That social-emotional balance comes in many forms, which the Hearing and Speech Agency (HASA) prides itself on. The nonprofit serves individuals with communication differences and challenges, including the Gateway School, which works with students whose primary challenge is communication-based, integrating them with children without communication impairments.

“It’s a really supportive way for students with communication difficulties and those who are simply in the classroom because their parents want them to be exposed to a variety of different people in their lives to acquire the skills they need to be ready for kindergarten, no matter what kindergarten looks like for that individual child,” says Erin Stauder, HASA executive director. Gateway staff incorporate academic skillsets into fun learning environments that rely heavily on parent contact and input to ensure skills learned at school are implemented in the home, too, she says. “A lot of the current research is showing that the results are inconsistent about what the long-term academic impacts are of early childhood programming,” she says. “But the impacts of the social development and social language development maintain themselves.”

Waldorf School of Baltimore nursery teacher Lisa Bechmann says its preschool program also focuses on the social interaction aspect. The children engage in daily practical activities: In her class, for example, Monday is baking day. Her 16 students make bread, which becomes their snack for the day. “Within that, they get the opportunity to experience the process so they know that their bread doesn’t come out of a package at the grocery store. They’re engaged in making their own food,” she says, garnering all their senses. “Children this age are doers. You want to engage them into actually doing the activity, getting their hands into it.” Stories or songs go along with the activity, making it multidimensional.

“Children are really learning to be an individual in the context of a group,” she says. The sensory experience is key, too, which is why outdoor play lasts two hours at Waldorf, out in the garden, playground or a wooded area nearby. “That’s how they learn about nature. Every day we go outside and we see what’s new in that mud puddle or behind that tree, what’s growing today as opposed to the direct instruction experience of just talking about it,” she says. Activities like these excite students about education, Bechmann says—some of her students can’t wait to do what the first-graders are doing. This is exactly what she wants to hear.

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