

Jasper Mountain School

Toward Academic Success



Background

Jasper Mountain opened its doors in 1982. The school was started in 1989 with a desire to design a program for learning that would be tailor-made for abused children. From day one, the program had a vision to maximize the learning possibilities for a very unique population: abused children who had little or no previous success in school.

School Vision Statement

Jasper Mountain School exists to provide the best learning experience possible to the challenging children that the agency serves.

The Challenge

As we soon observed back in 1982, trauma and learning in school do not mix well together. This is not to say that trauma does not result in significant learning. A child learns not to trust, learns to be anxious around adults, and learns to be vigilant of the motivations of others. There are further debilitating effects as well. If the goal is for a child to come into an academic setting ready to learn, ready to emotionally experience the enjoyment and excitement of discovery, then the effects of traumatic experience will hinder learning in a variety of ways, including both the child's development of counter-productive coping mechanisms, as well as the negative affects of trauma on brain functioning. Examples of these hindrances include: disruptive behaviors, dissociation, hyper-vigilance, self-regulation deficiencies, difficulty contextualizing ideas, inability to trust others, social difficulties, debilitating anxiety, and belief in the inevitability of failure.

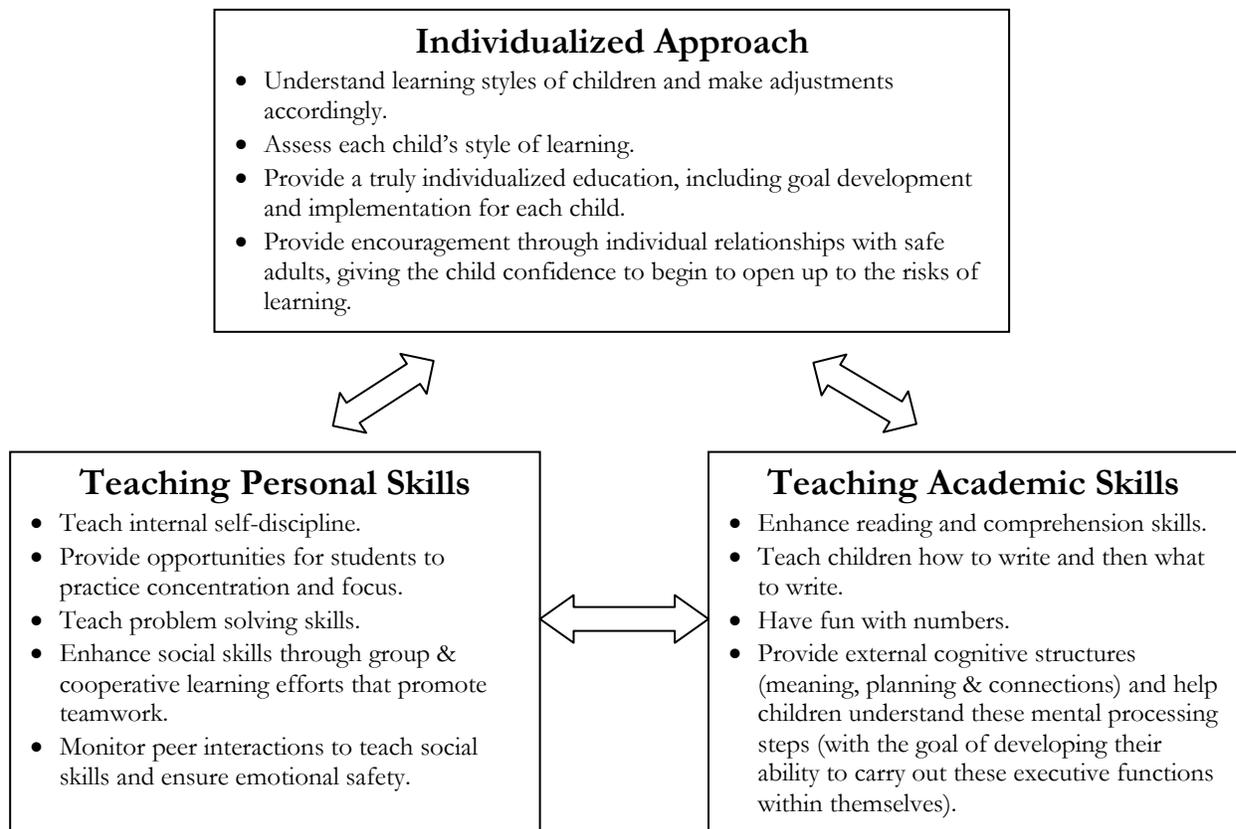
The Response: Jasper Mountain School Goals

As can be seen in the challenges listed above, there are many reasons why seriously abused children generally do poorly in school regardless of their intellectual ability. Considering these hurdles, developing an environment of academic success with this target population is a complex proposition that must be built on solid theory and practice. At Jasper Mountain, we have built our methods on solid theory and practice, and we have also been tutored in what works best by the best teachers of all--the abused children we have served over many years. Jasper Mountain School is committed to addressing the challenges these children face, while also taking it a step beyond: designing a program that is meant not only to inspire successful students, but to inspire children who want to become lifelong learners. To accomplish this aim, the school has focused on three primary goals addressing the children's needs. Together, the goals and our strategies for accomplishing them lead to the school's desired learning environment.

Goal 1: Educating abused children in the academic skills they will need to achieve personal goals and success in learning.

It is essential to provide children with the building blocks of academic success. This includes not only reading, writing and math, but also listening, cooperating, accepting direction, and a host of social skills in and out of the classroom. Without the basic tools that must be gained by specific instruction, the children will not have the needed foundation. But there is no “one-size-fits-all” in the education of abused and traumatized children. Each child’s individual learning style and mental health challenges must be integrated into a successful approach. The following are strategies utilized at Jasper Mountain School to help each child build an educational and personal foundation:

Strategies for giving children the necessary foundation in academics and personal skills.



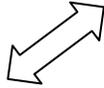
Goal 2: Integration of the educational program with mental health treatment to turn personal growth into academic success.

Trauma and child abuse produce a multitude of challenges for young children. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a classroom. Treatment and academic instruction must be seamlessly integrated to maximize both. The primary reason to have an on-site school is to provide such a seamless integration. Issues such as behavior management, medication management, and establishing a safe and predictable setting for all children, must be effectively achieved.

Strategies for integrating education & treatment.

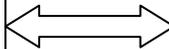
Treatment goals come into the classroom.

- Each child's educational goals include an understanding of the child's mental health treatment goals.
- Integrate mental health staff in the classroom.



Maximize each child's experience of success and achievement.

- Improve self-confidence through achievement.
- Take small incremental steps and build on successes.
- Provide learning at the child's pace.
- Reduce anxiety & performance pressure.
- Use only even competition, where all children have a good chance to win.
- Help the child set reachable internal goals.
- Monitor peer interactions to ensure a positive, encouraging environment.



Provide safety through structure, while maximizing each child's freedom of expression within the structure.

- Provide consistency in treatment and academic rules and expectations.
- Help children prepare for and initiate transitions from one activity to another to assist children in self-regulation.
- Develop behavioral limitations while providing conceptual freedom.
- Enhance expression of all types.
- Provide color, energy, interesting items and space to be expressive in the learning environment.

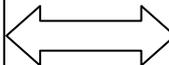
Goal 3: Instill an attitude of enjoyment in lifelong learning.

Learning can and should be challenging, stimulating and fun. In the long run it is less important that the child learn times-tables than he or she learn to enjoy working with numbers. The ability to read is important; the love of reading will make a huge difference in academic success over time. To instill this kind of excitement about learning, the plan must include active involvement of both children and adults.

Strategies for instilling values of lifelong learning.

Adults create a dynamic setting by utilizing multiple active & enjoyable learning methods.

- Use experiential hands-on learning approaches where adults are involved and excited.
- Encourage creative and innovative projects.
- Build in success (failure is not fun for anyone).
- Value mistakes as opportunities to learn.
- Use positive reinforcement & incentives.



Children are active participants in creating the learning environment.

- Foster self-directed learning.
- Children have choices in learning areas and help develop personal educational plans.
- Children are encouraged to develop ownership of the content and process of their schooling.

The Learning Environment

Considering Jasper Mountain School's goals and the strategies we use to achieve them, let's take a more global look at the learning environment. What would a successful school for abused children look like? As noted previously, most traumatized children have been in school before and many times it was a negative experience. Since their brains filter new experiences through past negative memories, it may be helpful to shed the trappings of "school." The "un-school" looks different, feels different and is different. What does the child experience walking into the environment? Is there color, energy, interesting things, and space to be expressive, or is there rigid order, regimentation, posted rules and regulations and constrictions on movement and activity? Year by year, we learn more about the importance of all the following components in creating a very special educational setting for the children we serve:

Learning is fun & interesting with opportunities for self-expression.

- Adults build interest in learning through the use of thematic units.
- Teachers educate outside the box, developing learning zones, including outdoor education.
- The school's annual plan provides opportunities to express creativity through exhibits of art, plays, performances, and music recitals.

Learning facilities are fully utilized.

- The program makes full use of the physical facilities to support educational outcomes.

Children are involved & invested in their own learning.

- Children are involved in teaching others (and in doing so, learn more themselves).
- Children set personal learning goals.
- There is less focus on seat work and more focus on self directed work.
- Students lead learning.
- Teachers move from instructors to facilitators.
- Children team-teach with peers and adults.

Adults work as a creative team in the classroom.

- Team teaching is a regular part of the school program.
- Treatment staff also teach.
- Cooperative learning methods are used.
- The program develops incentives for staff creativity.

Academic & personal foundations are built & tracked for each student.

- Schooling is year-round.
- The age of a child does not determine his or her status or placement.
- The school has methods of evaluating each child's and the program's strengths and weaknesses.