Director’s Corner: Exploring Nature

Our theme for this year’s Director’s Corner articles is **Why Explore?** Open-ended exploration of materials in diverse spaces promotes inquiry that starts with noticing interesting features, wondering about cause / effect relationships, thinking of possible explanations and testing them, and then learning from the outcomes. Nature provides engaging opportunities for children’s self-initiated discovery that blossoms into interests that children are motivated to pursue, both on their own and with the guidance of educators who are prepared to involve them in more systematic inquiry and deeper learning from books, experts, and other sources. We scaffold with the prompts, “I notice ___, I wonder ___, I think ___, and I learned ___” to support children’s use of the inquiry process and then introduce the formal scientific vocabulary.

During the 2008-09 school year, our educators discussed Richard Louv’s 2005 book, “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder.” Louv’s aim is to encourage discussion of “the increasing divide between the young and the natural world, and the environmental, social, psychological, and spiritual implications of that change” (p. 2). Since that time, we have worked more purposefully to include nature in the classroom, focus more on “nearby nature”, make our school more “green”, and improve our “outdoor classroom”. For example, our classrooms now include more plants and a wider variety of pets, we take more walks on campus and in Schenley Park, we have broadened our recycling and composting programs, and we have added more natural elements and gardens in our outdoor space. Both CMU and the city of Pittsburgh have supplemented our efforts with their own steps toward “green urbanism”. One result of these efforts is that this fall our children have had opportunities to observe diverse songbirds on our playground, as well as squirrels eating the seeds from our giant sunflowers, mother rabbits and cats caring for their young, and a groundhog emerging from the hole he dug in our bike path. Nature at its best!

With nature explorations, our educators utilize the full continuum of teaching strategies, from encouraging open-ended discovery, to modeling and coaching inquiry, to direct instruction. For example, we created a “mud kitchen” on the playground for free exploration, and we take a variety of “scavenger hunts” on campus and in Schenley Park (e.g., the 3’s recent scavenger hunt for trees and the Kindergarten’s search for living and non-living things). Those explorations led to guided comparison and contrast to distinguish types of trees, experiments with trying to root plants brought back from the park, etc. The teachers respond to children’s questions and supplement the group experiences by sharing non-fiction nature books, showing time lapse video sequences of plant growth or web cams of natural habitats, inviting experts to talk with the children, etc.

Why do these efforts matter? During nature investigations, children have opportunities to progress in all developmental domains. For example, nature explorations help children gain confidence in their skills and foster initiative (Self-esteem & Independence), encourage peers to support each other’s ideas and negotiate plans (Interaction & Cooperation), provide rich topics of conversation and contexts for recording observations (Communication), provoke inquiry with diverse opportunities to compare, sort, and quantify (Discovery & Exploration), build skills for controlled movement and use of tools while managing risks (Physical Capabilities / Health & Safety), and inspire children to both perceive and create beauty (Artistic Expression & Appreciation). Remember, exploration is more about noticing, wondering, and predicting than about knowing all the answers. So, relax and venture outdoors with your family. You’ll be amazed at what you can discover together!