Director’s Corner: Navigating Niches

In recent months, we have reflected on our parenting and teaching roles by considering key principles of life “in the wild”. Contemplating the ways that biodiversity, adaptation, communication, and interdependence promote survival in animal species gives us a new perspective on our own lives with young children. This month, I suggest that one way to connect all of the above concepts is that of the ecological niche, which is basically the role each species plays within the natural world. An organism’s survival depends in part on its ability to establish a unique niche where its basic needs can be met in ways that support the good of the community and avoid unfavorable competition with other organisms. For example, squirrels play the part of “spreaders” that enhance the health of the forest when the seeds and berries they store and eat either get left behind or excreted in new places where they can grow. The opossum has many helpful adaptations, including being resistant to many diseases, which means that they can eat insects like mosquitos and ticks that carry disease. They can survive with different types of food in rural, urban, and suburban environments, so they are generalists who can fill available niches in varied habitats.

Schools and families are in many ways like ecosystems. Their sustainability depends on having diverse individuals well adapted to different roles in an interdependent web of activity with careful communication. As humans, we are born ready for social interactions, but establishing a reciprocally beneficial balance is a delicate operation. At school, we help each educator contribute his or her diverse talents to enrich our program and communicate clearly to ensure that everything that needs to be done is handled well. In the classroom community, both adults and children have jobs to do so that the days and weeks flow smoothly. Basically, we want everyone to have a niche that fits well and have every niche well filled. But, of course, with life comes change, which disrupts the balance. Changes in staffing, special visitors, school delays, etc. may all mean that some niches are vacant. Here’s where human ingenuity has the potential to save the day without waiting for generations of evolution to restore the balance. For example, in the kindergarten, one student each week has the job “substitute” (i.e., the one who fills any niche that is vacant because of an absence) and another is the “assistant” who handles any unexpected job that arises. The educators have a similar system with substitutes and a floater, but we also work as teams so that roles assigned to individuals get covered by the team when necessary and responsibilities assigned to teams can be flexibly delegated among the members to make the best use of the available talents at the time.

Families can navigate niches in their home ecosystems in similar ways by taking a team approach. Before children, adults in the family establish a pattern of life wherein they have their personal needs met, divide work inside and outside the home, etc. Then a baby is born or adopted and the balance of nature shifts dramatically, because there is more work to do and often less skill or energy to go around. Gradually, the adults find a new rhythm, gain new skills, and perhaps renew their energy, particularly as the infant becomes more interactive and affectionate, which rewards the adults for their efforts. As children grow into apprentices within the family culture, the synchrony among the members may progress to yield genuinely symbiotic relationships wherein everyone benefits. That is, until the next major change, such as a new job, a move, a new baby, etc. At such times, taking a team approach can ensure that each member has a meaningful niche and that every role is filled, even if by someone outside the family. In fact, families supporting each other and collaborating with educators when inevitable gaps arise is a new level of teamwork that strengthens the whole community. Thank you for choosing to partner with us to raise and educate your young children!