

The Minnesota Experience: Identifying Challenges and Strategies

Group B (MacMillan Auditorium)

Children in Nature: Healthy Development by Design Conference
Minnesota Landscape Arboretum - November 6, 2008

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Note-taker: Chris Gamm, Plantmobile & Day Camp Coordinator, MN Landscape Arboretum

1. Introduction of participants:

- Stacy – Richardson Nature Center, Bloomington
- Becky – day use nature center in St. Louis Park. New traditional playground by parking lot, how to entice all the new visitors beyond this small area to the larger more natural areas.
- Ali - grad student at Yale, children and relationships to their environment (built and not)
- Sarah – UMN early childhood center
- Kim – St. Louis Park school district early childhood ELL & literacy program
- Gary – supervisor of Baker near wilderness settlement with Three Rivers Park district (cabin/overnight)
- Peggy – director of programs and operations at the Bell Museum, residencies for play-yards, leading design of 6 acres outdoor space – soccer fields into exhibit areas
- Steve – landscape architect & planner, just starting this arena of child play, thinking re: city planning and his bike pathway planning
- Idell – 4H in Duluth through Extension, after school env. Service learning
- Philip – undergrad in urban forestry at UMN, works for extension (my MN woods site)
- Carrie – teaches ADHD teens in an alternative school in St. Peter
- Martice – mom, teacher in Edina, works for company that builds playgrounds

2. Specific factors that challenge you in the work of connecting children to nature

- Fear from the adults – injury, poisonous plants, insect bites, liability (lawsuits)
- Observation skills – what does a GOOD natural learning play space look like? (unknown)
- What is understood as NATURE? Wild, managed, active, leisure, cultural (language challenges)
- How to use an indirect experience as a springboard toward a direct experience?
- Bell Museum is seeing a dramatic drop in visits – how to express value of experience to teachers?
- Bringing other teachers on board or getting them to understand that there are different ways to meet the standard goals/outcomes of curriculum (this teacher uses Reggio Emilia: philosophy from a small Italian town that has child centered early childhood priority. Sees children as full citizens. Lets children's interest direct the project, embedding skills (math, communication, etc) into the project. Unstructured child led curriculum.)
- How to document that they are learning something? How to show that free play or child led projects are effective ways of teaching/learning?

- The challenge of balancing structure and unstructured. KEEPING/TEACHING CREATIVITY
- Accessibility. Transportation to a place. Having a place near the child's home
- Money
- Ignorant administrators/bureaucrats

SUMMARY CATEGORIES OF CHALLENGES:

- Fear/risk
- Communication and language
- Accessibility (visiting nature and having nature close to home)
- Creativity
- Balance between structure and un-structure, scale (terrarium, arboretum)

3. Specific suggestions that would help overcome challenges

- RE: FEARS: can be overcome by adult modeling, adults giving perspective about magnitude of risk, exposure over time, sharing all the many benefits of an experience with parents/children that may change the ratio of risk to payoff
- A mediator (naturalist) who acts between children and parents to alleviate concerns
- Guidelines for free play area: don't pick anything that's alive, and don't use anything as a weapon. Otherwise, as they explored, staff person would help them problem-solve: I don't know if that stick is strong enough to climb on, but here's how you could test it out
- What are the risks of NOT doing these nature connections? (fear of the greater risk)
- Carrie said "better a broken bone than a broken spirit."
- Showing/engaging parents in these activities and what kids do with them. (for example, a pile of rocks and parents ask "what is that for? My kid is just going to throw a rock across the room" and then the teacher saying, "well, come see how the children use this pile of rocks. I've never seen any rocks flying.")
- Need Oprah or other way of PR to get word out about benefits to adults

SUMMARY OF OVERCOMING CHALLENGES:

- COMMUNICATION:
 - A handbook that clearly and concisely shows benefits of "risky" or nature activities
 - Translation to other languages
- ACCESSIBILITY:
 - For and with all people, and that everyone has a role on many scales of environment—from within the home, to the neighborhood, to the town
 - Nature nearby, where we live
 - Open up what we mean by "nature" and scale of it. Find it where you are
 - Systems, i.e. "daylighting" storm water drainage, infrastructure that every town needs to plan and design – see it as the opportunity it is for engaging children and

families *while also addressing a public works project that HAS to be done and so a budget will be found for it.*

- Bring “nature” to an environment that the child is already comfortable in, as a first step. (plantmobile into the classroom.)

4. Stakeholders

- Developers
- Administrators
- Co-workers
- Families
- Funding sources
- Watershed districts
- Government
- Advertisers getting involved in order to sell their products (Persil laundry detergent company launching campaign of the importance of letting kids get dirty)