The Minnesota Experience: Identifying Challenges and Strategies

Group G (Tearoom)

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

Facilitator: Marylynn Pulscher
Note-taker: Megan Dayton

1. Introduction of participants:
Not recorded

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

- Unsupervised play: hard to pick-up, hard to maintain, expectation of structure- (if it doesn’t have structure, it is unorganized)
- Money: lack of it affects accessibility
- Fear of liability, fear of touching stuff
- Multidisciplinary teams hard to gather. Everyone too specialized
- Boards are too archaic—too 20th century
- Worry about overuse of natural areas; play area becomes dirt patch

3. Specific suggestions that would help overcome challenges

- Structure activity to teach stewardship- capitalize on the nurturing aspect of (especially) young children
- Family exploration kits at Visitor Centers
- Nature Center bingo hikes, eye-spy game -Touch and See programs- bones with a skeleton, sticks with a tree. Use simple prompts to encourage play.
- Work on stakeholders. Let doctors & schools know what is available. Bring stakeholders to natural play areas
- Research what kids like. Learn from the kids
- Make creative use of what is already present. “Often the best things cost nothing”
- Build broad community buy-in
- Take a clue from kids, what do they want or like? (Parent training could affect that)
- Address the liability concern with sensible warnings. “Respect Mother Nature and enjoy yourself”
- Address ADA requirements in natural play piece- even using natural elements (make sticks the proper dimensions for example).
- Address fear of outdoors by education; For example, offer a camp-out checklist for visitors. (MN Parks and Rec. does this)
- Website: nature tip of the week
- Reverse education: kids teach parents
- Present nature play as a stress reliever, not something to check off on a to-do list everyday
• Gather a “nature team” (like Happy Trails) bit “Team Nature”. Parents come to learn-compete to build tent as family, have “nature game-day”
• Literacy packet on outdoors, like the baby manual they give to parents in hospitals
• Model nature loving behavior with kids. Teach outdoor skill-set
• Show the cycles of nature, make it present to kids daily
• Is overuse really a problem? We have been trained to not leave the path when outdoors

4. Stakeholders

• Physicians
• Schools
• Researchers
• Children
• Researchers --- Are kids who eat dirt healthier than those who don’t? Follow up on the studies that came out 4-5 years ago that showed dirtier houses made healthier kids, also kids with pets are healthier…
• Physicians --- Present the outdoors as a healthy activity- get exercise, eat healthy and get outside for one hour every day
• Families/Parents
• Legislators
• Education Boards