Nature Classroom Update

The summer months will bring the transformation of the playground into a Nature Classroom where there will be exciting opportunities for the children to experience and explore the natural world. The construction will begin within the next few weeks on the west end of the playground.

Last summer the Center received a Nature Classroom grant that included the services of a landscape architect to plan the site, training the teachers, and materials for the classroom such as a nature art table, raised planting beds, and blocks. This was a Hitchcock grant administered through Dimensions Foundation and Arbor Day Farm.

Dimensions Educational Foundation research documented the fact that children need connections with the natural world as a part of their healthy growth and development. The Foundation has noted a large decline in the time that children today spend outdoors, and linked the decrease to an increase in childhood obesity and fear or dislike of the natural environment (rain, wildflowers, birds, trees). They found children have many misconceptions about the natural world when they have little contact with living things. However, the Foundation also found that children benefit highly when they are able to explore, discover, and play in a natural setting such as a Nature Classroom.

Dimensions researchers documented evidence of valuable skill development occurring across all learning domains when a child spends daily time in a well-designed outdoor space with a nurturing adult. They found that this is particularly true for children with sensory integration challenges.

Children of all ages benefit from experiences in a Nature Classroom. Dimensions is working with the Los Angeles Public Schools to include Nature Classrooms in their schools. One test site in a school with many at-risk children found that in a relatively short time, children not previously reading were reading, those not writing were now writing, and teachers who were feeling hopeless and burnt-out were full of enthusiasm and energy again for their work. The results are truly impressive.

The Center’s Nature Classroom will provide teachers a larger stage for teaching the children. It will become an extension of the indoor classrooms. There will be many different types of activities available for the children, such as art, block building, music, and water play.

I envision the Nature Classroom as a part of the University that will allow the Education Department to educate future teachers about the importance of exposing children to the natural world on a consistent basis.

Many of the Center teachers have taken classes to teach them the skills they need to work with the children in the Nature Classroom. We are taking advantage of new classes offered this summer and fall.

The 2006 November fundraiser provided seed money to begin work on the nature classroom. This work included a drain that was installed on the playground this spring. It is helping to keep the playground less muddy and keeping rainwater from entering under the preschool room door. The 2007 fundraiser provided additional funds for the work. We will know more how far the work can proceed once the bids are completed and work actually is underway.

Parents will have the opportunity to help with some of the work next month. We hope that many of you will offer your time to help build this valuable resource for the Center’s children.

To learn more, visit the Arbor Day Farm’s website arbordayfarm.org to see photos of the Nature Classroom on their property. Dimensions Foundation research is available at their website dimensionsfoundation.org — Connie
The semester is over and we said good-bye to many of our student employees for the summer. We also had a few graduate and move on to new adventures in life. We are blessed to have so many wonderful student employees.

What a wonderful time of the year as the children have been able to enjoy outside play time and walks. It is great to have the Sky Shade on sunny days. All the infants are getting time outside. The older infants run and play, the crawlers will go out in the stroller and our youngest infants we will carry in our arms. Everyone benefits getting out in the fresh air. Please remember for safety reasons that all walkers need shoes with closed toes.

The days we have to stay in because of the weather the older infants have fun jumping on the bouncy mat. We do have kids that love to jump and this is a safe and fun way to jump or bounce.

The pegs and pegboards and the easel pegboard have been favorite activities in our room. With the pegs and pegboards, the children have a chance to stack the pegs on top of each other and make tall towers. At the easel board, they get to place larger pegs into the board. Both activities are wonderful for eye hand coordination.

This month I would like to share how pretend play works into our curriculum. Pretend and imitation plays are among the most important ways that children learn about the world and relationships with people. The children imitate other people in order to understand how objects are used and a way to keep the attention of others. Before long they make believe with realistic items. As social pretend play begins, children explore social roles such as being a mother, father, or baby. Pretend play may also help children cope with fears and anxieties.

We have welcomed two new infants to our room. Claire Hilliker and Caden Reynolds. Claire is the daughter of Rachel Hilliker and Caden is the son of Joann and Chris Reynolds. Ali AlGhafl has moved to the toddler room. We have had a couple of sad good-byes. Sarah Althawadi will be moving to another city as her Dad continues his education. Aubrey Franz is staying home with her brothers and Mom as Angela is becoming a “stay at home Mom” along with pursuing a career change. We wish both families well in their times of change.

Shanna, Lynn, Gina
You may have noticed some changes in the layout of our classroom in the last several weeks. It is our attempt at maximizing the space. By transforming the environment, we can promote independence and self-regulation. We have also changed the format by opening more centers each day, which provides several choices and the opportunity to be more spread out in the classroom. It makes for a smoother day, as there are not as many children in each center, and having a variety of activities available is more stimulating.

We strive to be creative in adding new and interesting ideas to meet specific goals and objectives in the developmental continuum. For instance, we recently bought strainers and funnels to use with sand or water, in the sensory table. Some of the objectives that can be met, while children explore this activity include: sustains attention, understands how objects can be used, and shows a beginning understanding of cause and effect.

As a group, the children have done letter collages, as an art or literacy activity. Several objectives are met here, as well, including: learns to be a member of a group, demonstrates basic fine motor skills, sustains attention, and develops expressive language. It is rewarding to us, as teachers, to stimulate the toddler’s sense of wonder, simultaneously creating a rich learning environment.

The “hair washing” sensory event was a big success. As soon as the first child was lifted to the counter, and I began washing her hair, we had an audience. The toddlers all wanted to be next and continued chanting, “I want to do this...can I be next?” I had only a few that were tentative about the experience, but by the end of the morning had changed their minds, and joined the crowd. After a shampoo, rinse, and towel dry, Miss Megan combed and styled each child’s hair. The toddlers enjoyed and were very responsive to the individual attention the each received. As the morning ended, several were asking if they could do it again. Watch for pictures documenting the activity. I will be updating the picture window soon.

We have been going outside twice each day, as the weather allows. We all love the pleasure of being outdoors, and continue to look forward to the day when Nature Playground is complete. For now, as well as the climber, bikes and playhouse, the toddlers are busy with several other activities. These include: painting the building and fences using large paint brushes and water, sidewalk chalk, blowing bubbles, playing with balls, and decorating the sidewalk with powdered tempera paint and then spraying with water bottles. We are always on the lookout for bugs, bunnies, birds, airplanes, and helicopters. There are so many sights, smells and sound for us to experience while outside. We will soon be adding the sand play to the list. Hooray for Summer!

We have several children who are in serious potty training mode. Some signs to watch for if you are curious about your own child’s readiness include:
- staying dry through nap and overnight, and for longer periods of time during the day.
- your child can easily pull their pants up and down.
- your child recognizes when he/she is in the process of urinating.
- most importantly, your child shows interest and desire.

If you have any questions for us, we are always happy to take the time and answer them for you.

We have some new faces in the toddler room. We would like to welcome Ali AlGhafli who has transitioned from the infant room, and Caleb Pyfrom and Sterling Smith who are new to the Center. Sterling’s big brother Harrison is a preschooler. We are all excited about the addition of our new friends and look forward to a fun-filled summer.

Laura, DuRell, and Erin

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**Toddler Room News**

**Alan, Ethan, Daniel and Serena like to scoop and pour sand in the sensory table.**

**Bethany really enjoyed the hair washing activity.**

**The Toddlers love to play with bubbles when they are outside!**

**Sam, Caleb, and Brooklyn check out a letter collage on their wall.**
The preschoolers have had a busy spring. Several of our friends have graduated and new friends have joined our classroom. We spent time working on a variety of alphabet and number activities. We decorated our classroom by designing an alphabet mural. Our students who were graduating made large posters to illustrate their favorite preschool activities. The children love to display their work and are ready to offer new ideas.

The last two weeks we have talked about different types of dwellings. We looked at pictures and discussed how people in other parts of the world live. We observed construction in our own community and made a large mural with houses. The children also constructed buildings from boxes. After reviewing the shapes we had worked on earlier in the year the children used squares, triangles and rectangles to draw houses and buildings. In the literacy room we looked at pictures of construction equipment and made a small group construction site poster. We have some very good artists in our classes! A favorite activity has been using Styrofoam and golf tees to hammer and nail. While we were outdoors we also supervised one or two children as they hammered actual nails into tree wood. One boy said he was going to build me a huge house when he got big.

Miss Delois has been working with the children in the afternoon. She got a group of children involved in constructing a bridge. The children love to work with their hands! We will encourage them to continue to build with blocks, which will help to develop their spatial sense.

We have planned several field trips. Next week the classes will visit the Omaha Children’s Museum. They will see the Dinosaur Exhibit. We have several interesting classroom activities planned around this field trip. One child told us he plans to be to a paleontologist when he grows up. So, we thought he and his friends would enjoy digging for dinosaurs in the sand. We will freeze some small dinosaurs in ice and allow the children to chip at the ice. The following week we will visit Gifford Farm. The children love learning about animals and there is so much we can do to teach them about farm life. We hope to have fun with the children and teach them a variety of new concepts over the coming weeks.

Sincerely,

Shari, Keon, Pat and Delois

June Birthdays

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