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Nyack school hopes to reconnect kids with nature

Hoping to teach children to embrace nature rather than avoid or fear it, the Montessori Center of Nyack has created a new environmental program.

The center will try to teach kids as young as 2 years old to appreciate nature and intends to involve everyone from teachers and lunch coordinators to parents and neighbors.

In fact, the latter will play a key role, offering their wooded yards or Hudson River properties for field trips. The Montessori Center itself is home to artificial grass and rubber mulch.

Administrator Dorothy Goren and curriculum coordinator Harriet Teplitzky said the program was needed because of the current state of the planet and because care needs to be taken when it came to the environment and kids.

"As nursery school teachers, we always look to the children because they are the future of tomorrow," Goren said.

Teplitzky said research shows that children have a natural affinity for the natural world.

"But in the 21st century, the opportunities for children to interact with living things is rapidly decreasing," Teplitzky said.

Video games and TV viewing have come to take up a great deal of some kids' time, she said.

Meanwhile, there are also concerns about safety when it comes to letting children run around outside.

Add to that a number of "health scares" - you'll get sunburned if you're outside, or bitten by a West Nile mosquito or Lyme disease-infected tick.

These and other factors have combined to put an unnatural distance between children and the natural world, Teplitzky said. At the same time, childhood obesity and diabetes are on the rise, and Teplitzky said there is a link.

The fear of and disconnect between nature and children most concerns the educators because they worry that it will prevent the discovery of solutions to the planet's pressing environmental woes.

They were surprised in the spring when kindergartners gathered in a neighbor's backyard to enjoy a nature field trip.

"When an ant came onto the picnic blanket, they scattered," Teplitzky said.

The kids didn't just run off laughing; they were genuinely frightened by the ant's presence, she said.

Children also are confronted by the planet's problems daily. They see and hear about the cutting of the tropical rain forest, the dying of coral reefs and the possibility that polar bears might go extinct.

"This is very, very abstract for young children," Teplitzky said.

It is also frightening because they begin to wonder if they might disappear right along with the polar bears, she said.

Goren said allowing children to experience nature in their own backyard was a way to educate without instilling fear.

So Montessori won't be focusing on the planet's problems at the North Pole or in Brazil, but in Nyack, in yards where they are comfortable.

Training for the new program, which is called Hurt No Living Thing, has already begun. It will be enveloped into the school's overall curriculum by the time school resumes Sept. 4.

Goren said the center has hired an environmental educator, Brooke Smokelin, to instruct the staff on how to impart knowledge of the natural world to children.

Kelley Hadel, whose children attend the school, was among the parents to participate in last week's training session.

"I think the environment's very important," Hadel said. "It's hard to find a place for kids without scaring them. They hear so much on the news."

Her children, Emma, 7, Wolfgang, 5, and Margot, 3, are filled with questions about the environment. They wonder why the lights should be turned off when they leave a room, and where the electricity goes.

They also have wondered why there were so many thunderstorms in the spring, and if it means anything.

They also remain awed by nature's wonder, and just the other night, spent time trying to catch fireflies, Hadel said.

It's that awe, that wonder, that the Montessori center hopes to nurture.

Returning students will be encouraged to bring their snacks and lunches in reusable containers, and they will be asked to put any cans or bottles into the recycling bin.

But the center hopes to go much further, Goren said.

"We really want them to get out and get dirty," she said.

So the kids will play outside, plant flowers and dig for worms.

"We want them to experience nature firsthand," Goren said.
