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Education

Nature — Sawyer style

Students spend four days learning to entertain themselves without fancy gadgets.

By Mona Shadia

More than a dozen children went on an adventure Monday, discovering nature's treasure trove of fun activities. They played in the local woods and learned about how their counterparts from Tom Sawyer's generation amused themselves before computers and video games.

Fourteen kindergartners, first- and second-graders, attended the opening day of a four-day winter camp at the Environmental Nature Center dubbed Tom Sawyer's Adventure Camp, named for the Mark Twain character. The center is a Newport Beach nonprofit dedicated to educating children through experiences with nature, said Lori Whalen, the center's director of education.

With directions from Dan Green, the center's lead naturalist, the children learned how to have fun without electronics. He taught them how to make toys from nature.

Green gave them clay and asked them to pretend that the clay was wood, and to use their imagination in making whatever they wanted out of it.

Although the idea was to get them to make an animal or an object from nature, "Ironically, they are making what they are familiar with," Green said. "They are making remote controls."

Will Volner used his clay to make a tower. The 5-year-old, who says he wants to become a race car driver, said he erected a tower because they are tall. Another child made a spaceship from Star Wars, and another wanted to make a missile.

Teaching children to appreciate nature and use their imagination is no longer an easy task because most are playing video games on their computer, Whalen said. They are suffering from nature deficit disorder, she said.

"Without people going outside and learning about nature and be fascinated by it, if they hear about a development going in open space, they won't care because they never climbed a tree before," Whalen said.

The nature center provides field trips almost every day during the school year, where students get to touch and experience what they read in their text books. All the programs are designed to meet the state's science or social sciences standards for their grade level, Whalen said.

"They may learn about pump drills in a text book, but it doesn't mean anything to them until they come here and get to use one and understand how it works," Whalen said.

The children who signed up for the winter camp were scheduled to do a lot with nature during the camp's four days, as well as play simple school yard games, like Jacks, Hopscotch, or kicking the ball.

The center provides programs for adults, but mainly concentrates on children's activities, Whalen said.

"It's important to start with kids at a young age to understand how everything is connected and how everything they do affects the natural world and, in turn, eventually affects them in the long run," she said.

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