

Getting dirty while learning

When preschool students at the CDES Department Lab School at Fullerton College wanted to find out how many legs a roly poly had, they didn't head to the computer to look it up. Instead, the teachers at the nature-based preschool turned it into a lesson. They collected a few of the delicate bugs, made a roly poly-friendly habitat, looked at them with a magnifying glass, drew diagrams, and finally — without the help of Google — came up with the answer.

"Children and teachers are co-researchers," said Tom Chiaromonte, department chair of the Child Development and Educational Studies Department at Fullerton College. "They aren't little blobs that we feed and put down for naps. They are naturally inquisitive beings that have great critical thinking abilities."

That's the idea behind The Lab, a Reggio Emilia-inspired nature-based preschool in Fullerton. The goal of the school is to help students ages 2 to 5 explore the natural world, instead of following a curriculum inside a classroom.

The Lab isn't the only school in Southern California that uses the natural world as a classroom. The Environmental Nature Center (ENC) preschool in Newport Beach opened in September to 72 students.

"I believe kids learn best through play, and they require space in which to exercise their physical and mental capabilities," said Kim Grimm, a mom of two students who attend the ENC preschool. "Spending time outdoors allows them the ability to explore and play through interactions with the natural world. They're encouraged to ask questions, take risks and do experiments."

Sue Bierlich, the ENC Nature Preschool director, said that using nature to teach students is especially important now that kids are introduced to electronics at an increasingly younger age.

"Children are relying on those things rather than being innovative and creative and having inquiry-based learning where they're generating it through their environment," Bierlich said. "Children are also developing a fear of being in nature, a fear of bugs and a fear of doing things because they're not being exposed to it like we were in the past."

The Saddleback Children's Center in Rancho Santa Margarita also focuses on nature-based play with its certified Outdoor Classroom Project.

"The way we implement it is — anything you can do inside you can do outside," said Meagan Kraszewski, the director of the Saddleback Children's Center. "There are so many different ways you can incorporate that into a school. Here



specifically we have regularly scheduled outside time, and we encourage teachers to also take them outdoors as much as they can while maintaining a consistent routine."

Students use the park near the school to go on nature walks, work on art projects in the courtyard or participate in outdoor tabletop activities. The students are encouraged to garden and often are allowed to eat what they grow. While the students have the option to play outside, they also have the same projects inside.

"We want teachers to work with the children and facilitate different learning activities and encourage taking risks by showing them what they're able to do with guidance," Kraszewski said. "We even encourage them to go outside in the rain. They might play in the puddles or gutters and stop and see the slugs and worms that come out. There's just so much to explore within

our own natural world."

Saddleback Children's Center outdoor classroom specialist Kristina Amante helped create the program with Carla Leveratt, and she thinks that bringing the classroom outdoors is important for children.

"It gives them a love for nature," Amante said.

Sonia Semana, the director of the Lab School, thinks that learning outside just makes sense.

"It makes sense for them to be immersed and to build a connection with the world they're going to inhabit," Semana said. "Plus, everything we've done is based on research and understanding that when children are immersed in green spaces, they have the ability to focus and the ability to sustain their focus, and do a lot better as far as emotional growth. They have inquisitive minds and are very curious. They want to make sense of the world around them, and that begins with the natural world." ∞