

Taking Classes Outside

Ascension Lutheran Early Childhood Center builds outdoor area where children and nature interact

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From left, Grace Williams, Paige Ishimoto and Amelie along with teacher Liz Page at Ascension Lutheran Early Childhood Center in Thousand Oaks.

For many children, recess means precious minutes of freedom under the sun, endless swinging, tag games and monstrous sandcastles. This favored subject of young schoolchildren is now the main event at Ascension Lutheran Early Childhood Center in Thousand Oaks. “Studies show that young children thrive in educational settings that incorporate elements of the natural world,” said Pam Musburger, the center’s director. “We believe that an emergent-nature centered curriculum is the best foundation for early childhood education.” Ascension Lutheran Early Childhood Center is in a house on Hillcrest Drive, just behind Ascension Lutheran Church. Staff members have organized the inner rooms of the house to resemble cozy classrooms for each age group and outdoors they have begun to

do something special. Musburger said that construction of an outdoor school has been a three-year journey filled with research and development of projects. The objective for each of the projects is to create a science-based environment in which the staff can facilitate a science, math and art curriculum outdoors.

Reconnecting to nature

“Our whole vision of the outdoor school started from a conference we attended three years ago that focused on the book ‘The Last Child in the Woods,’” said Blanca Berra, a teacher at the Early Childhood Center as well as its outdoor program facilitator.

Berra said the book concludes that children today are constantly surrounded by television, video games and hectic schedules. She said they have a hard time relating to nature and any notion of free play. “We as a staff came together and realized that this was something that was important to us, and we wanted to do the best we could to teach our kids about the importance of nature in our lives,” Berra said. The center then began its journey to reconnect its children to the outside world. “We saw how society has embraced fast food and technology in a way that discourages children from any sort of sensory experience,” Musburger said. Musburger said it would be difficult to explain the sensation of “squishy mud in between your toes,” or a “ladybug on your nose,” unless you have had the experience. And not one video game can do that. “We saw the need for children to appreciate foods that come directly from our earth,” Berra said. “So we added a garden that grows fresh fruits, herbs and vegetables.” Now the children help to clean the vegetables for snack time and even save any garden bugs that show up for their bug classification table. “Children gravitate to nature naturally. They will stop dead in their tracks at the sight of an earthworm wiggling on the ground,” Blanca said. “We encourage that and now have a compost station where they can feel an earthworm give them a hand massage, while learning the importance of using organic castings to enhance the garden.”



Grace Williams, left, watches Lilly Bilic and Naomi Bernardino fill a water pump at Ascension Lutheran Early Childhood Center. The site emphasizes an appreciation for the outdoors.

Lessons from a sunflower

Marilyn Johnson has been teaching at the Ascension center for more than 12 years and has seen a dramatic difference in the children. “Incorporating academics and nature helps to give the children a visual on each problem,” Johnson said. “This morning we each measured a sunflower and each child was able to hold the measuring stick up against the sunflower and calculate the height for themselves. They respond better and learn faster when they are given actual visuals.” Another teacher at the center, Liz Hoskinson, has already seen the results of teaching the children outdoors. “It has really connected the kids with nature. I heard one of our little girls say, ‘The petals have fallen off the sunflower, but that’s good because now we will have sunflower seeds,’ and it was delightful to hear how they are learning.” United in the mission, staff and parents have volunteered their time and talents to develop an outdoor nature center classroom.



Teacher Blanca Becerra reads to Julia Lin in the outdoor reading area.

Parents get involved

“The majority of our projects have been accomplished by the parent volunteers, including the construction of a small creek, the installation of a small bridge over the creek and a manual water pump that creates water to flow freely into the children’s play area,” Musburger said. One of the parent volunteers, Kevin Moore, father of 5-year-old Tyler Moore, a student at the school, has completed multiple projects for the center. “Tyler and I did a father-son project and helped to construct the bridge over their creek,” Moore said. “Tyler loves to help, and we were able to learn a lot together.” Moore also helped to put in drinking fountains, the patio shade, two sheds for storage and the manual water pump. “What is so special about this school is that all the parents are so eager to pull together and unite in this cause,” Moore said. “Children love being outdoors, and this school loves to encourage that.” Berra said that they started the project attempting to fill every section of their backyard with fun-filled learning stations. Now they can do everything from digging in the mud for worms, fishing in a creek, to constructing bridges out of wet sand. A.J. Dawson, 4, especially enjoys the manual water pump. “I like digging in the sand when the pump pours water down,” A.J. said. “My friends help me and we get really excited. We really like digging. “We believe that the fundamental building block to taking care of God’s Earth is through knowing it, feeling it, smelling it, and having a consistent relationship with it,” Musburger said. The Early Childhood Center is encouraging other schools to participate in the outdoor school program. “By fostering a meaningful connection to nature we hope to influence the lives of the next generation in terms of environmental issues and of nature,” Musburger said.



Paige Ishimoto, ringing bells, and Grace Williams, on the drum, sing during a music class at the Ascension center.