



The Observatory

Los Gatos-Saratoga Observation Nursery School ~ Issue 4 ~ May 2009

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Attention Families

By Jane Krejci, Director

Want to get out in the woods with your children on Saturday afternoon?

Then we have a class for you!

Our Saturday afternoon class is designed for families – or fathers – or mothers - with one or more children. Siblings from 3-6 are welcome.

This is an opportunity to be with your children on Saturdays while they actively play in remarkable settings that include trees, streams and nature trails and a 100-year-old schoolhouse in the Santa Cruz Mountains. It is also a chance to talk about work/life balance and to develop friendships and parenting skills. This is an alternative to participating in organized team sports. It is a predictable time that your family can look forward to each week.



Like other Mountain School classes, it offers a balanced, developmentally appropriate curriculum for 3, 4, 5, and 6 year olds in settings where they can develop in their own unique ways; benefit from the joys of discovery; and learn from each other.

Children are eligible if:

- ~ 3 years old by September 1
- ~ in Kindergarten
- ~ in first grade when attending with a younger sibling

Adults will be required to:

- ~ attend one daytime class per week (15 Saturdays per semester)
- ~ write 10 observations per semester
- ~ participate in four evening meetings per semester (3 Circle Meetings, 1 General Meeting)
- ~ participate in school-wide maintenance activities.
- ~ contribute to school-wide fund-raising activities.

At the discretion of Teachers, this Saturday class may be combined with other Mountain School classes.

Families new to LGSONS will have an 'information session' with Teacher Jeanne in late June or early July.

For more information contact: info@lgsons.com

Extended Family

By Lisa Liddle, 4/5s, Co-Chair

*One of the greatest things about the experience that is Mountain School, is being immersed in, and surrounded by life. Plants, people, and animals are a big part of our experience. For many of us, there is quite a bit of “life” at home; in addition to our own progeny, many of us have pets. As anyone with pets knows, most of the time they are a delight, other times not so much (especially just after you get to clean up that lovely spot on the carpet). However, loud, quiet, messy, furry, or scaled, all pets become wondrous when viewed through the eyes of a child. They are living dolls, younger siblings to educate, and at times, the totally devoted companion for a lonely child.

Pets are very important to our family, and I know, many of yours. Whenever our eight-year old, Nicole, describes (verbally, written, or illustrated) our family, she begins with our complete array of pets, then her sister, and then maybe dad and mom! Audrey, our three-year old, regularly announces to strangers, who are walking their dog(s) or not, that we have dogs, “Casey & Scout”, and we proceed to pet their dog upon receiving the owner’s permission. Our animals are ever-present on our minds and teach us many of life’s important lessons.

Our two large dogs, both rescued mutts (one via the 2004 Mtn. School Auction), are very loving and spirited. But that spirit has gotten them into trouble many times, whether it’s digging in the muddy yard for critters, getting skunked (for the 5th time!), or chasing deer and the neighbor’s goats. Scout has a knack for howling whenever Audrey sings (which is often!) and he spurs Casey to sing along or bark. My husband has spent countless hours fixing our perimeter fencing, both wooden and “invisible”, and smaller dog yard area (with redundant system) which has cost him the annual case of poison oak in addition to sore muscles. Then, there are the medical conditions which inevitably occur in any pet’s lifetime, some more severe than others. But we love them dearly and, at nightfall, when peace has settled in our family room, we wouldn’t trade those big sparkling eyes of our canine friends peering up at us for anything.

Our three Abyssinian cats give us their own purebred challenges. Suffice it to say, they pre-date our marriage by more than six years which means my husband is gaining saint status! Years of our indoor-only cats sleeping on our bed (even on protective coverings) have caused Mike’s allergies to surge. Vomiting (the cats, not Mike) several times a week in our bedroom and bathroom leads to a healthy, sometimes tense banter between us. (The feigned threat of taxidermy looms at least once a month). The mother cat is now getting thin and frail at age 16, but could still have six plus years left. Our girls love the cats, even with their aloof nature. Audrey calls “Rudy” the king, “Prima” the princess, and “Palomine” the mama ~ “Rudy, you’re my best boyfriend EVER” Audrey said one night using a bedtime

snuggle with our 14-year old male cat. However, because of the way our female cats act toward children, our next feline friends are bound to be mixed breed with a more open and loving disposition, and hopefully stronger constitution!

Then we come to our two pet rats which arrived on Nicole’s 7th birthday. They are sweet and easy to handle, as long as we steer clear of the cats and dogs. When “Smokey” died in early January, it was, luckily, our family’s first tragedy beyond the common goldfish expiration. The hardest part was that Nicole discovered the rat’s fate by herself, and then again, two weeks later with what turned out to be a sickly replacement. We now have two healthy rats . . . hopefully, for a while. In the small animal category, we have also temporarily cared for guinea pigs, and more recently the class gecko which was accompanied by live crickets, some of which we nearly lost in the playroom. Nothing like bringing nature’s melodies inside and down the hallway!

“... We love them dearly ...when peace has settled in our family room, we wouldn’t trade those big sparkling eyes of our canine friends peering up at us for anything.”

Our hearts are with our furry friends, especially the larger ones, who seem to be wise in ways we don’t understand. The week after Smokey died I took Audrey to a “celebration of life” for my friend’s mother. Audrey told everyone that Grandma Dorie would take care of Smokey in Heaven. We were recently flying to Detroit to see great-grandmother, who at 96, made a special request to meet Audrey for the first time, before she passes. Audrey understands that she is “getting old”, so we hope to bring whatever joy we can . . .

Family pets can teach us the “circle of life” in a soft, domesticated way as Mountain School imparts the lessons of the more natural world. As we were dressing to go to the auction last night, Rudy jumped up onto our bed and threw up his food, that he just inhaled, inches from our pillows. While we are fortunate to have our companions enrich our lives, sometimes we have to remind ourselves!



Please Welcome...

By The 2009 Nominating Committee - Rebecca Curran, Jaime Fleming, and Priscilla Amend

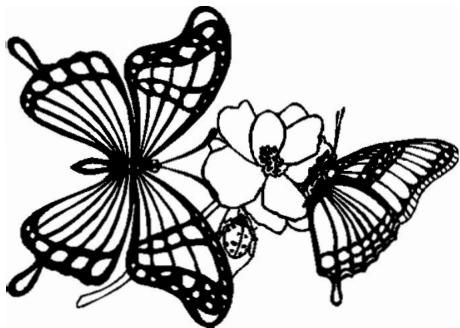
Please join us in welcoming the incoming Board of Directors for the 2009 - 2010 school year. These people, along with our beloved teachers, put their time and talents into making Mountain School the magical place that it is. Thank you to all for so generously volunteering.

Voting Positions

Chair Jill Hansen
Treasurer Bill Skeet
Information Membership Jane Dodge
Registration Membership Priscilla Amend
Secretary Shannon Richiuso
Fundraising - Auction Items Tiffanie O'Brien
Fundraising - Party Planning Maura Dietz
Fundraising - Financial Sheila della Ratta
Facilities Chair Melissa Wagner
Programs Co-Chairs Jaime Fleming and Lisa Liddle
Newsletter Annette Rau
Forms/Correspondence Rebecca Curran
Purchasing Christine Zafiropoulo

Non-Voting Positions

Social Staci Checklenis
Turkey Trot Pam Coscarelli, Katja Wick, Tracy Pingree and Angie Giacalone
Garden Cathy Spears
Webmaster Kim Ladin
School Photos Coordinator & T-shirt/Sweatshirt Sales Anne Warner
Marketing Communications Annette Nystrom
Community Service Liaison Jean Lattie
Workday Coordinator Holli Roeber
Animals Martina Menekshe
Carpool Facilitator Janine Andersen
Librarian Jane Dodge
Go Green Ashleigh Coffeng
Misc. Fundraising Yumi Hiroshima
Raffle Yumi Hiroshima, Nadya Gulesserian, and Shilpa Garg
Health Coordinator Sharon Elder
Grant Writing Margaret Pettit



School Updates

By Jane Krejci, Director

1. Would your school age child like more time at Saratoga Springs?

There is an auction item available for a one week camp (Monday-Friday 8 a.m. -6 p.m.) between June 12 and August 21. Ages 5-12.

A bargain at \$140 (value \$250). Contact Annette Nystrom if you are interested. annettenystrom@yahoo.com

2. Would your 2-3 1/2 year old like to attend Mt. School Summer School?

There are still a few openings in the Tuesday/Thursday morning class - also open to families who are not currently enrolled in LGSONS.

Contact Teacher Laura if you are interested. laurasnyder2@sbcglobal.net



Auction Thank You

By Jen Chen

Thank you to all the volunteers, attendees, and donors of this year's auction, Le Club Cirque: A Night under the Big Top. We raised over \$31,000 for Mountain School!

Fall Camping Trip

By Katja Wick

I have already booked group sites at Portola Redwood SP for Oct 9th to 11th. Just so people can put it in their calendars. More information and a chance to sign up will be provided at the beginning of the next school year.

The 3 R's? A Fourth Is Crucial, Too: Recess

By TARA PARKER-POPE/The New York Times: Published February 23, 2009; Submitted by Annette Rau

The best way to improve children's performance in the classroom may be to take them out of it. New research suggests that play and down time may be as important to a child's academic experience as reading, science and math, and that regular recess, fitness or nature time can influence behavior, concentration and even grades.

A study published this month in the journal *Pediatrics* studied the links between recess and classroom behavior among about 11,000 children age 8 and 9. Those who had more than 15 minutes of recess a day showed better behavior in class than those who had little or none. Although disadvantaged children were more likely to be denied recess, the association between better behavior and recess time held up even after researchers controlled for a number of variables, including sex, ethnicity, public or private school and class size.

The lead researcher, Dr. Romina M. Barros, a pediatrician and an assistant clinical professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, said the findings were important because many schools did not view recess as essential to education. "Sometimes you need data published for people at the educational level to start believing it has an impact," she said. "We should understand that kids need that break because the brain needs that break."

And many children are not getting that break. In the *Pediatrics* study, 30 percent were found to have little or no daily recess. Another report, from a children's advocacy group, found that 40 percent of schools surveyed had cut back at least one daily recess period.

Also, teachers often punish children by taking away recess privileges. That strikes Dr. Barros as illogical. "Recess should be part of the curriculum," she said. "You don't punish a kid by having them miss math class, so kids shouldn't be punished by not getting recess."

Last month, Harvard researchers reported in *The Journal of School Health* that the more physical fitness tests children passed, the better they did on academic tests. The study, of 1,800 middle school students, suggests that children can benefit academically from physical activity during gym class and recess.

A small study of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder last year found that walks outdoors appeared to improve scores on tests of attention and concentration. Notably, children who took walks in natural settings did better than those who walked in urban areas, according to the report, pub-

lished online in August in *The Journal of Attention Disorders*. The researchers found that a dose of nature worked as well as a dose of medication to improve concentration, or even better. Andrea Faber Taylor, a child environment and behavior researcher at the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory at the University of Illinois, says other research suggests that all children, not just those with attention problems, can benefit from spending time in nature during the school day. In another study of children who live in public housing, girls who had access to green courtyards scored better on concentration tests than those who did not.

The reason may be that the brain uses two forms of attention. "Directed" attention allows us to concentrate on work, reading and tests, while "involuntary" attention takes over when we're distracted by things like running water, crying babies, a beautiful view or a pet that crawls onto our lap.

Directed attention is a limited resource. Long hours in front of a computer or studying for a test can leave us feeling fatigued. But spending time in natural settings appears to activate involuntary attention, giving the brain's directed attention time to rest. "It's pretty clear that all human beings experience attentional fatigue," Dr. Faber Taylor said. "Our attention has to be restored from that fatigue, and there is a growing body of research evidence that nature is one way that seems particularly effective at doing it."

"People who play as children learn to handle life in a much more resilient and vital way"

Playtime and nature time are important not only for learning but also for health and development. Young rats denied opportunities for rough-and-tumble play develop numerous social problems in adulthood. They fail to recognize social cues and the nuances of rat hierarchy; they aren't able to mate. By the same token, people who play as children "learn to handle life in a much more resilient and vital way," said Dr. Stuart Brown, the author of the new book "Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul" (Avery).

Dr. Brown, a psychiatrist in Carmel Valley, Calif., has collected more than 6,000 "play histories" from human subjects. The founder of the National Institute for Play, he works with educators and legislators to promote the importance of preserving playtime in schools. He calls play "a fundamental biological process." "From my viewpoint, it's a major public health issue," he said. "Teachers feel like they're under huge pressures to get academic excellence to the exclusion of having much fun in the classroom. But playful learning leads to better academic success than the skills-and-drills approach." ■

New Food Allergy Laws

By Theresa Bond, 3/4s, Purchasing Chair

”FOOD ALLERGIES AND RESTAURANTS (S 2701) — Requires all restaurants to prominently display a poster about food allergy awareness in the staff area and to include on all menus a notice of the customer’s obligation to inform the server about any food allergies. Another provision requires the Department of Public Health (DPH) to develop a voluntary program that allows restaurants to be designated as “Food Allergy Friendly” by the DPH and be listed on the agency’s website. The guidelines that restaurants would have to meet for the designation would be developed by the DPH and would include a requirement that a restaurant maintain on the premises a master list of all the ingredients used in the preparation of each food item on the menu.” Ming Tsai, People.

It’s a start and I hope CA will jump on the bandwagon, NH, NY, CT, are already reviewing it. I’m writing to my congressman tomorrow. Perhaps this will grow to really help our future generations.

Related Links:

<http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/seslaw08/sl080527.htm>

<http://www.foodallergy.org/Advocacy/restaurants.html>

Restaurants in Massachusetts to:

- Display a food allergy awareness poster in the restaurant staff area
- Place a notice on menus of the customer’s obligation to inform the server about any food allergies
- Train food protection managers and persons in charge of restaurants on food allergy issues

The Massachusetts legislation also allows restaurants to earn a “Food Allergy Friendly” designation from the Department of Public Health. ■



More About Play

By Jane Krejci, Director

I am encouraged to see more and more articles about the importance of play. The latest one is by Melinda Wenner who writes, "Free, imaginative play is crucial for normal social, emotional and cognitive development. It makes us better adjusted, smarter and less stressed."

At Mt. School we talk about supporting the "whole child" - his/her physical, social, cognitive and emotional development. Play is crucial to healthy growth and development in all of these areas. Following are the highlights from the Wenner article. (If you want to read the entire article it is in Scientific American Mind, January 28, 2009 issue.)

Free Play is Important

Free play challenges the developing brain to be creative. It allows children to take the initiative and use their imagination, try out different roles and experience new activities. There is no predetermined goal. Play evolves - it is the process that is important. In contrast, organized sports and games have set rules that have to be followed and don't allow for any flexibility, even though they might be fun and develop some physical and social skills.

Social Skills Develop

Children want to play - and usually with other children. Play develops strong social skills. Children need to figure out what to play, how to continue and expand their activities. It involves learning to take turns, share, negotiate, problem solve. Research has shown that children use much more complicated language when playing with other children than when playing with adults. Studies of both children and animals find that play deprivation leads to poor social skills.

Emotional Health

Studies have shown that play helps children work through anxiety and stress. Play can have a very calming effect by letting children imagine an alternative to difficult situations. It is an escape and a way for them to create and choose other options. They learn to experiment with and manage their emotions.

Cognitive Growth

Wenner sites some interesting studies about how play fosters creative thinking. Hands-on experiences with objects and nature affects the way children observe variables, learn about materials and come to an understanding of how things work. Play involves trial and error and develops problem solving skills.

"Play is a way in which children learn, and in the absence of play, children miss learning experiences. Curiosity, imagination and creativity are like muscles; if you don't use them, you lose them." David Elkind. ■

No-Peanut, Gluten-Free Peanut Butter Cookies

By Mike Wille, 3/4s

Makes about 33 cookies

This recipe is a hybrid of a chocolate chip masa cookie we've made before and a peanut butter cookie recipe we found online. The recipe was created out of necessity, as Séamus refused to eat the jars of safflower butter that were piling up in the larder, preferring almond butter instead.

Since it is against Mt. School law to bring any type of nuts or flour products to the school this recipe came about - safflower in place of the peanuts, masa in place of the flour. I'm sure there would have been retaliation if chocolate chips were added for the schoolhouse although that might be the sinful pleasure added at home to put this recipe over the top.

Ingredients:

1 1/2 cups masa flour, sifted
1/2 tsp salt
1 tsp baking powder
1/4 cup shortening
1/4 cup butter
1/2 cup safflower butter
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar
1 egg
1/2 tsp vanilla



Method:

Sift together the masa flour, salt and baking powder, set aside. Cream the shortening, butter and sugars. Add the safflower butter, egg and vanilla. Add sifted masa flour mix and beat until blended.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Shape mixture into 3/4-inch balls and place on silpat-lined tray. Flatten each cookie just a little with the tines of a fork. Bake cookies for 10 minutes, just before they begin to brown. Allow to cool until warm to the touch and eat with copious amounts of milk. ■

Kindergarten Cram

By PEGGY ORENSTEIN/The New York Times; Published April 29, 2009; Submitted by Annette Rau

About a year ago, I made the circuit of kindergartens in my town. At each stop, after the pitch by the principal and the obligatory exhibit of art projects only a mother (the student's own) could love, I asked the same question: "What is your policy on homework?"

Skip to next paragraph And always, whether from the apple-cheeked teacher in the public school or the earnest administrator of the "child centered" private one, I was met with an eager nod. Oh, yes, each would explain: kindergartners are assigned homework every day. Bzzzzzt. Wrong answer.

When I was a child, in the increasingly olden days, kindergarten was a place to play. We danced the hokey-pokey, swooned in suspense over Duck, Duck, Gray Duck (that's what Minnesotans stubbornly call Duck, Duck, Goose) and napped on our mats until the Wake-Up Fairy set us free. No more. Instead of digging in sandboxes, today's kindergartners prepare for a life of multiple-choice boxes by plowing through standardized tests with cuddly names like Dibels (pronounced "dibbles"), a series of early-literacy measures administered to millions of kids; or toiling over reading curricula like Open Court — which features assessments every six weeks.

According to "Crisis in the Kindergarten," a report recently released by the Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit research and advocacy group, all that testing is wasted: it neither predicts nor improves young children's educational outcomes. More disturbing, along with other academic demands, like assigning homework to 5-year-olds, it is crowding out the one thing that truly is vital to their future success: play.

A survey of 254 teachers in New York and Los Angeles the group commissioned found that kindergartners spent two to three hours a day being instructed and tested in reading and math. They spent less than 30 minutes playing. "Play at age 5 is of great importance not just to intellectual but emotional, psychological social and spiritual development," says Edward Miller, the report's co-author. Play — especially the let's-pretend, dramatic sort — is how kids develop higher-level thinking, hone their language and social skills, cultivate empathy. It also reduces stress, and that's a word that should not have to be used in the same sentence as "kindergartner" in the first place. I came late to motherhood, so I had plenty of time to ponder friends' mania for souped-up childhood learning. How was it that the same couples who piously proclaimed that 3½-year-old Junior was not "developmentally ready" to use the potty were drilling him on flashcards? What was the rush? Did that better prepare kids to learn? How did 5 become the new 7, anyway?

There's no single reason. The No Child Left Behind Act, with its insistence that what cannot be quantified cannot be improved, plays a role. But so do parents who want to build a

better child. There is also what marketers refer to as KGOY — Kids Getting Older Younger — their explanation for why 3-year-olds now play with toys that were initially intended for middle-schoolers. (Since adults are staying younger older — 50 is the new 30! — our children may soon surpass us in age.)

Regardless of the cause, Miller says, accelerating kindergarten is unnecessary: any early advantage fades by fourth grade. "It makes a parent proud to see a child learn to read at age 4, but in terms of what's really best for the kid, it makes no difference." For at-risk kids, pushing too soon may backfire. The longitudinal High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study followed 68 such children, who were divided between instruction- and play-based classrooms. While everyone's I.Q. scores initially rose, by age 15, the former group's academic achievement plummeted. They were more likely to exhibit emotional problems and spent more time in special education. "Drill and kill," indeed.

Thinkers like Daniel Pink have proposed that this country's continued viability hinges on what is known as the "imagination economy": qualities like versatility, creativity, vision — and playfulness — that cannot be outsourced. It's a compelling argument to apply here, though a bit disheartening too: must we append the word "economy" to everything to legitimize it? Isn't cultivating imagination an inherent good? I would hate to see children's creativity subject to the same parental anxiety that has stoked the sales of Baby Einstein DVDs.

Jean Piaget famously referred to "the American question," which arose when he lectured in this country: how, his audiences wanted to know, could a child's development be sped up? The better question may be: Why are we so hellbent on doing so?

Maybe the current economic retrenchment will trigger a new perspective on early education, something similar to the movement toward local, sustainable, organic food. Call it Slow Schools. After all, part of what got us into this mess was valuing achievement, speed and results over ethics, thoughtfulness and responsibility. Then again, parents may glean the opposite lesson, believing their kids need to be pushed even harder in order to stay competitive in a shrinking job market.

I wonder how far I'm willing to go in my commitment to the cause: would I embrace the example of Finland — whose students consistently come out on top in international assessments — and delay formal reading instruction until age 7? Could I stick with that position when other second graders were gobbling up "War and Peace" — or at least the third Harry Potter book?

In the end, the school I found for my daughter holds off on homework until fourth grade. (Though a flotilla of research shows homework confers no benefit — enhancing neither retention nor study habits — until middle school.) It's a start. A few days ago, though, I caught her concocting a pretend math worksheet. "All the other kids have homework," she complained with a sigh. "I wish I could have some, too." ■

Eliminating Lice:

A Simple Solution that Works

By Jen Clark, 3/4s

Dear Mountain School Families,

If any of you have had the misfortune to deal with lice, you probably know those pesky little varmints have a strong will to live! We just had our first lice experience and I wanted to share our process and the solution that finally worked. <http://www.nuvoforheadlice.com/>

We found live lice on both our daughters, ages 4 and 6 on a weekend morning. They are TINY. We had to pull a few off and put them in a baggie and then under a microscope to confirm that is what we had. We then went online and found many different suggestions on ways to deal with lice and decided to go with Nix shampoo and nit-picking eggs out of our daughter's hair. We spent all day doing laundry, washing and treating hair and combing both girls' nits out. After all that work we were dumbfounded to find live lice in the girls' hair after the pesticidal treatment (which was expensive!).

The Nix is not a worthy product in my opinion. It kills many lice, but you need to kill ALL of them to win this battle. I came across many online stories of families that had to do multiple Nix treatments, which is scary since that is a poison you are sticking on your kids' heads. Who wants to do that again and again? Plus, you're not done after the treatment. That's just the beginning as you must spend a great deal of time nit-picking as well.

My sister is a pediatric nurse and she said their pediatric practice doesn't recommend Rid or Nix because they are so harsh and they have led to resistant strains of lice... which must be the kind we encountered.

The Palo Alto Medical Foundation practice where she works recommends Cetaphil Gentle Cleanser and a blowdry. This course of action is 96% effective with three treatments and 100% effective with 4 treatments. Cetaphil is gentle, safe, non-toxic and you can buy big bottles of it at Costco. For \$16 you can get enough for 5-6 treatments. The best part is no nit-picking. Hooray! That nit-picking takes HOURS and even after spending insane periods of time on it and squinting until your vision goes blurry, you're still always unsure if you got them all. Those eggs are teeny, tiny and we have thick hair in our family. My husband and I had backaches from all the time spent crouched over the girls' heads. Plus the girls were miserable.

Here is more info on the Nuvo method with Cetaphil and if you know anyone with lice I'd say tell them about this because they will be assured success and a lot less stress and cost. They also have really good advice for what you need to do in your

household, it's simpler than you might think. It's good to get the straight scoop with so many crazy suggestions online (like treating your pets and bug bombing the house – not needed). Which is great for peace of mind... whew.

<http://www.nuvoforheadlice.com/>

Hope you can all remain lice-free! ■



Nature: Deficit or Overexposure?

By Amber Shaw, Teacher W2s

Nature Deficit Disorder is a term coined by Richard Louv in his book *Last Child In the Woods*. Mr. Louv writes about how children are spending less time outdoors and this results in a wide range of behavioral problems.

When my children exhibit behavioral problems, I often deal with the problem by sending them outside. I learned this essential parenting skill from my mother who would routinely throw us girls outside and tell us she didn't want to see us until lunch (or dinner as the case may be). Some of my fondest memories of being a child are spending time outside, although much of it is fogged over by severe allergies.

“When my children exhibit behavioral problems, I often deal with the problem by sending them outside.”

I am fortunate to live on a large, relatively wild piece of property where there are lots of areas to explore. There's a creek, mature oak trees, a hill to slide down, room to throw rocks, a place to play basketball. Twenty years ago, long before we built our house on this property, the neighborhood children built a tree house in one of the large oak trees. There was even a rope to swing on. We had to remove the few remaining boards and the frayed and decaying rope when we moved in, but the fact that there was once a tree house there has fascinated my boys for the last few years. They stare up at this large and daunting tree, imagining how cool it would be to have their own space up there. They have tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to climb the tree. Every once in a while, with team work and sheer will one of them manages to shimmy up part way, but this tree is not an easy one to climb. About a year ago they made a ladder out of scrap wood to help get up in the tree. They found a piece of chain and a rope and installed them to repel up the tree. Recently, the idea of a zip line between this tree and another large oak nearby has captured their interest. There has been planning, exploring, climbing, surveying going on. These trees are on a steep slope so the other day they decided to make a sort of path/stairway to more easily get to the trees in question. They used the only tool they could find at the moment, a hammer, to hack at the earth. They did make a path that looks pretty cool. Plus, it kept them outdoors and busy for hours. All good, right? No nature deficit disorder around here!

My children went to a preschool (the Mtn School) that emphasizes outdoor education and play. When I see them working on this kind of outside activities I often think back to their preschool experiences and how they helped shape the way my boys play. Unfortunately my middle son, who is in 5th grade

and almost 11 years old, forgot one very important lesson he learned in preschool.

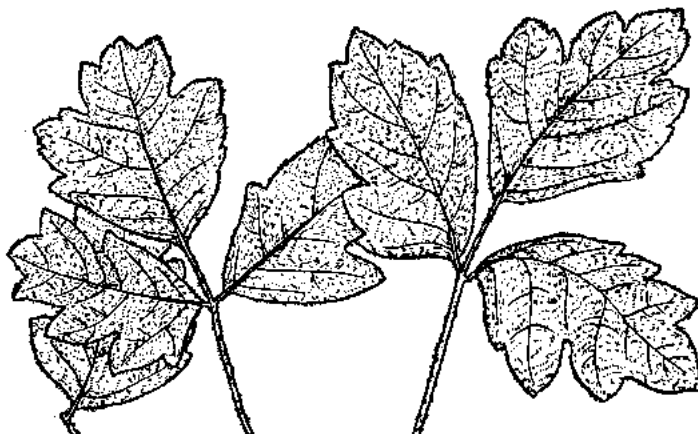
“Mom I think I have poison oak.”

Skip forward two days from the path-creating activity. I am watching my sons play in a Little League game, my middle son is pitching and doing great. The game ends, he comes off the field, walks directly over to me, and says in a slightly panicked voice, “Mom I think I have poison oak.” This does not surprise me, our property is full of poison oak. At dinner after the game I see that he is visibly uncomfortable. When we get home, he undresses and I see that his body is one red swelling rash and that rash is everywhere. Yes, EVERYWHERE. He's a boy; he puts his hands down his pants on a regular basis.

Holy cow, he doesn't have Nature Deficit, he has Nature Overexposure.

As we talk about where he could possibly have gotten such a nasty case of poison oak, he admits he has forgotten what poison oak looks like. He learned this in preschool! He knows better than to be in poison oak with shorts and a t-shirt on! Then it dawns on him. Maybe that small oak tree that was in the way of the path they were building, the one he chopped down with the hammer, was actually a poison oak bush. Judging by the way he looked, I had to agree that was certainly a likely scenario.

After missing school, a trip to the doctor, a lot of medication, and a fair amount of suffering, I think he has learned something. Know what poison oak looks like, and think twice about putting your hands down your pants when you've been playing outside. ■



“Leaves of three, let them be!”

Natural Happiness

By PAUL BLOOM/The New York Times; Published April 15, 2009; Submitted by Annette Rau

Why should we care about nature? Should we care about it for its own sake — or for our sake, because it happens to make us happy or healthy? These might not seem like the brightest questions. Few people need convincing that the destruction of rain forests, the mass extinction of species and the melting of the ice sheets in Greenland would all be very bad things. Do we really need to list the reasons?

We do. After all, in many regards our species has already kissed nature goodbye, and we are better off for it. Technology has come to be more diverse than the biosphere. In 1867, Karl Marx observed that there were 500 types of hammer made in Birmingham, England. In 1988, Donald Norman, a cognitive scientist at the University of California, San Diego, suggested that the average American encounters 20,000 different kinds of artifacts in everyday life, which would be more than the number of animals and plants that we can distinguish. And right now, there are about 1.5 million identified species on Earth — impressive, but nothing compared to the more than 7 million United States patents.

This is mostly good news. No sane person would give up anti-biotics and anesthesia, farming and the written word. Our constructed environments shield us from heat and cold and protect us from predators. We have access to food and drink and drugs that have been devised to stimulate our nervous systems in magnificent ways. We sleep in soft beds and have immediate access to virtual experiences from pornography to classical symphonies. If a family of hunter-gatherers were dropped into this life, they would think of it as a literal heaven.

Or maybe not. There is a considerable mismatch between the world in which our minds evolved and our current existence. Our species has spent almost all of its existence on the African savanna. While there is debate over the details, we know for sure that our minds were not adapted to cope with a world of billions of people. The life of a modern city dweller, surrounded by strangers, is an evolutionary novelty. Thousands of years ago, there was no television or Internet, no McDonald's, birth-control pills, Viagra, plastic surgery, alarm clocks, artificial lighting or paternity tests. Instead, there was plenty of nature. We lived surrounded by trees and water and animals and sky.

This history has left its mark on our minds. Children are irrepressible taxonomizers, placing the world of distinct individuals into categories based on their appearance, their patterns of movement and their presumed deeper natures, and some psychologists have argued that the hard-wired capacity to organize and structure the world is specially adapted to na-

ture: we are natural-born zoologists and botanists. We may also have evolved to get pleasure from certain aspects of the natural world. About 25 years ago, the Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson popularized the “biophilia” hypothesis: the idea that our evolutionary history has blessed us with an innate affinity for living things. We thrive in the presence of nature and suffer in its absence.

Our hunger for the natural is everywhere. It is reflected in art: the philosopher Denis Dutton, in his book “The Art Instinct,” suggests that popular taste in landscape painting has been shaped by preferences that evolved for the African savanna. The appeal of the natural is also reflected in where we most want to live. People like to be close to oceans, mountains and trees. Even in the most urban environments, it is reflected in real estate prices: if you want a view of the trees of Central Park, it'll cost you. Office buildings have atriums and plants; we give flowers to the sick and the beloved and return home to watch Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel. We keep pets, which are a weird combination of constructed things (cats and dogs were bred for human companionship), surrogate people and conduits to the natural world. And many of us seek to escape our manufactured environments whenever we can — to hike, camp, canoe or hunt.

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Wilson emphasizes the spiritual and moral benefits of an attachment to nature, warning that we “descend farther from heaven’s air if we forget how much the natural world means to us.” But there are more tangible benefits as well. Many studies show that even a limited dose of nature, like a chance to look at the outside world through a window, is good for your health. Hospitalized patients heal more quickly; prisoners get sick less often. Being in the wild reduces stress; spending time with a pet enhances the lives of everyone from autistic children to Alzheimer’s patients. The author Richard Louv argues that modern children suffer from “nature-deficit disorder” because they have been shut out from the physical and psychic benefits of unstructured physical contact with the natural world.

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So the preservation of the natural world should be important to us. But how important? The psychologist Philip Tetlock has pointed out that many people talk about the environment as a “sacred value,” protected from utilitarian trade-offs — when the Exxon Valdez spilled nearly 11 million gallons of crude oil, 80 percent of the respondents in one poll said that we should pursue greater environmental protection “regardless of cost.” But he also points to the need to balance environmental concerns with social and political and personal priorities. (Few of these respondents would be willing to hand over their pensions for a more efficient cleanup of the Alaskan shoreline.)

And even if we did value nature above everything else, we would still have to decide which aspects of nature we care about the most. You can see this in the debate over the creation of giant wind farms in the ocean or on hillsides.

Proponents are enthusiastic about the cheap, green energy; critics worry about the loss of natural beauty and the yearly filleting of thousands of songbirds and ducks.

In the end, an indiscriminate biophilia makes little sense. Natural selection shaped the human brain to be drawn toward aspects of nature that enhance our survival and reproduction, like verdant landscapes and docile creatures. There is no payoff to getting the warm fuzzies in the presence of rats, snakes, mosquitoes, cockroaches, herpes simplex and the rabies virus. Some of the natural world is appealing, some of it is terrifying and some of it grosses us out. Modern people don't want to be dropped naked into a swamp. We want to tour Yosemite with our water bottles and G.P.S. devices. The natural world is a source of happiness and fulfillment, but only when prescribed in the right doses.

You might think that technology could provide a simulacrum of nature with all the bad parts scrubbed out. But attempts to do so have turned out to be interesting failures. There is a fortune to be made, for instance, by building a robot that children would respond to as if it were an animal. There have been many attempts, but they don't evoke anywhere near the same re-

sponses as puppies, kittens or even hamsters. They are toys, not companions. Or consider a recent study by the University of Washington psychologist Peter H. Kahn Jr. and his colleagues. They put 50-inch high-definition televisions in the windowless offices of faculty and staff members to provide a live view of a natural scene. People liked this, but in another study that measured heart-rate recovery from stress, the HDTVs were shown to be worthless, no better than staring at a blank wall. What did help with stress was giving people an actual plate-glass window looking out upon actual greenery.



All of this provides a different sort of argument for the preservation of nature. Put aside for the moment practical considerations like the need for clean air and water, and ignore as well spiritual worries about the sanctity of Mother Earth or religious claims that we are the stewards of creation. Look at it from the coldblooded standpoint of the enhancement of the happiness of our everyday lives. Real natural habitats provide significant sources of pleasure for modern humans. We intuitively grasp this, and this knowledge underlies the anxiety that we feel about nature's loss. It might be that one day we will be able to replace the experience of nature with “Star Trek” holodecks and robotic animals. But until then, this basic fact about human pleasure is an excellent argument for keeping the real thing. (Paul Bloom is a professor of psychology at Yale.) ■

Sandbox

By Alis Whitman, 3/4s

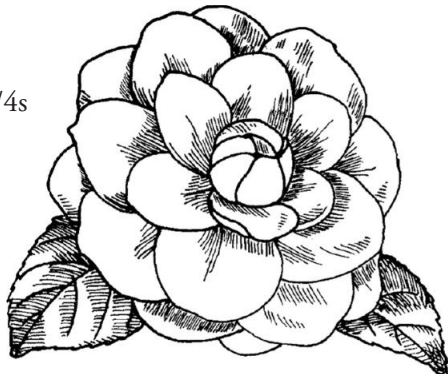
At some point this week Seth told me that he has two favorite colors pink and red.

Pink is his primary favorite color, and red is his secondary favorite color. This more or less resonated with the Seth I have known from spirit to flesh. Seth's energy has always seemed red to me sometimes even magenta, pink fits neatly in that spectrum. After all, if he was always red then he would never vary from his basic mold. Add a little white and you get shades of pink, a glimpse of character and self-definition.

Pink is all around us here in our California February. For all intents and purposes it is spring here. It is not the spring fever spring that overcomes the cloistered New Englander after mud season. It is the "oh if you insist" spring, coaxed by temperate zones who can't be bothered with the cold. These are the zones that endure the long dry tedious summer in exchange for the miraculous few green months with winter relegated to absentia. I've been to parties festooned with pink camellias. I've idly observed the kids busy in the cradle of green grass and oxalis. Gradually I've been toying with revisiting a memory. If it were "wicked cold" here maybe the urgency of writing this would escalate. Is it possible that flowers as lazy as camellias and banal as oxalis could provide insight into the core meaning of my life?

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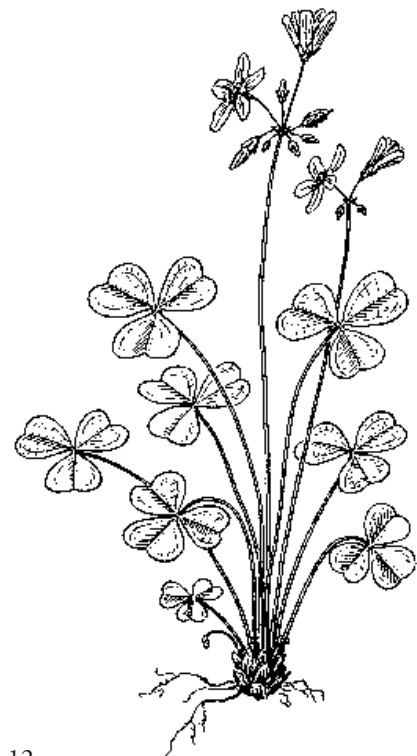
On a sunny February day at approximately one o'clock in the afternoon I sat down to play in the sandbox on our back patio. I remember feeling weary of the humans that I was forced to endure in Kindergarten, how my mornings of stimulus gave way to the blessed, quiet afternoons at home. The light was bright as it reflected off the bits of mint green paint that still clung to the 1950s cement. I ran water from the hose and marveled at the crystalline nature of the substance. I gathered camellia flowers and the impossibly yellow oxalis blooms. After much organizing, the sand box transformed into a landscape of rivers, punctuated by floating flowers and constructed beauty.



Perhaps this process was the same as the many repetitions that came before it. It may have taken many hundreds of hours in the sand box to get to this day but there it was, my first "ah-ha" moment. People often refer to the "ah-ha" moment where a design is just right, just as it is - effortlessly absolute. Well this was it for me, my first taste of creative satisfaction. My first understanding that materials can be architected to bring about an aesthetic that mirrors exactly the vision the creator had in mind. For an artist this cognitive realization is a moment that shapes our entire lives, we strive for it always. Wither we are conscious of it or not "ah-ha" drives us toward meaning.

In the process of raising a child I have born witness to the hot bed of cognitive development that is the sandbox. Although Seth consistently has an agenda I wonder if someday soon he will have his "ah-ha" moment. Or perhaps his mind works at a different pace. He seems to have hourly "ah-ha" moments where he pops up in joy and shouts something like, "Ya concrete! That's what I'm talkin' about." Perhaps he is just more social than I ever was, and his creative play develops mitigated by interaction with others. My own ideas and self-awareness were only reflected by nature. Our sand box experiences may shape us to become very different people.

Seth won't have the same experience as I did. I've been reconciled to that from conception. However, I can wish Seth the joy of "ah-ha" moments. I can studiously make note that he refers to oxalis blossoms as "bell flowers", and I can quietly indulge his love of the color pink. I try to encourage Seth in his explorations of pink. It may get beaten out of him later, but today he is standing his ground and keeping pink as his muse, his chromatic guide to the world of beauty and joy. It sounds something like this ~ Ah-ha mommy! I know...we should paint it...PINK! ■



Kids Getting Too Much Praise?

By RUBY WASHINGTON/The New York Times; Published October 29, 2007; Submitted by Annette Rau

An excess of praise may be doing kids more harm than good.

A cover story in this month's Scholastic Instructor magazine asks whether kids today are "overpraised." The concern is that by focusing on self-esteem and confidence building, parents and teachers may be giving real goals and achievement short shrift. The article cites a recent study in which eighth graders in Korea and the United States were asked whether they were good at math. Among the American students, 39 percent said they were excellent at math, compared to just 6 percent of the Korean eighth graders. But the reality was somewhat different. The Korean kids scored far better in math than the over-confident American students.

"Self-esteem is based on real accomplishments"

The notion that you can praise a kid too much is heresy to parents and teachers who have long believed that building self-esteem should be the cornerstone of education. If kids believe in themselves, the thinking goes, achievement will naturally follow. But confidence doesn't always produce better students. Scholastic cites a 2006 report on education from the Brookings Institution's Brown Center that found that countries in which families and schools emphasize self-esteem for students lag behind cultures where self-esteem isn't a major focus.

The problem with this "rah-rah mentality," as the magazine describes it, is that it can take away the sense of satisfaction that comes from genuine achievement. "Self-esteem is based on real accomplishments," Robert Brooks, faculty psychologist at Harvard Medical School, told the magazine. "It's all about letting kids shine in a realistic way."

The downside of too much praise is that kids may start to focus on the reward rather than what they are learning. Worse, failure can be devastating and confusing for a student whose confidence is based on an inflated ego, rather than his or her actual abilities, the magazine notes. This doesn't mean we shouldn't praise our kids or that teachers shouldn't try to engender self-confidence. But self-esteem should be the result of good grades and achievement, not false accomplishments.

Last month, Cognitive Daily reported that parents and teachers should be specific rather than general when they dispense praise. An example of general praise is telling a child, "You're smart." Specific praise would be to say, "You did a good job reading," or "You did great on your math test." Kids who re-

ceive general praise about their abilities are more likely to exhibit "helpless" behavior when they encounter problems with learning, compared with kids who receive specific praise about their achievement on a task. The reason: a child who knows she's a smart girl feels defeated if she has trouble reading a sentence. But a child who has been told she is a good reader is more likely to have confidence in that specific ability and work a little harder to tackle a more difficult book. ■



Pumpkin Pancakes

By Alis Whitman, 3/4s

We brought Pumpkin Pancakes for cooking time today and they were a huge success. Sovin and Seth came over to watch me cook. Sovin immediately started in on Pat-a-Cake which seemed so appropriate for the little sizzling cakes. He then proceeded to stay for 10 extra minutes to tell me politely about how much he disliked the taste of pumpkin. At cooking time he ate four!

These are gluten free, and apparently a really popular cooking event.

- 1 Pumpkin
- 1 Onion
- 8 Tablespoons Rice Flour
- 1 Teaspoon Salt
- 7 Eggs
- 1 Teaspoon to 1 Tablespoon Lemon
- Dill to taste

1. Cut up the pumpkin and remove the seeds. It is easiest to cut it into smaller pieces so you can slice off the skin.
2. Cut the onion into 4 parts
3. Use the grating attachment on the Cuisinart. Process the onion and the pumpkin.
4. Making sure to get the onion transfer 8 fairly heaping cups of the onion/pumpkin to a large mixing bowl
5. In a smaller mixing bowl crack and whisk the eggs.
6. Add the rice flour, salt and continue whisking till smooth.
7. Add the lemon juice. Enough to make the concoction more liquid.
8. Add dill to taste.
9. Mix the egg mixture into the pumpkin and stir till evenly mixed.

Put olive oil in a pan or griddle and cook the pancakes over medium or low heat depending on the stove. Use a regular spoon to spoon the batter into the pan, because that is about the right amount to use for a kid size pancake. ■

Editor's Notes

by Annette Rau,
Newsletter Editor & Publisher, 2008-2010



As you'll notice in this issue, we are fortunate to have several fantastic writers in our midst. I highly recommend checking out the informative, poetic, humorous, kid-centric blogs of the wonderful writers Alis Whitman and Amber Shaw:

Alis <http://www.bellespring.com/blog/>

Amber <http://blueberrybasil.blogspot.com/>

Feel free to send me articles during the summer, to be included in next school year's first issue sometime in the early Fall. Email your Word doc attachment with the subject heading "Newsletter" to annette.rau@hotmail.com.

In July and August, Gabriel, Daphne and I plan to frequent three of our favorite places, Wilder Ranch, Henry Cowell Redwoods, and Sunset Beach, as often as possible. On a hot day, there is nothing more refreshing than splashing along the shady banks of the San Lorenzo river, a short hike from the HC Redwood loop. Visit these places if you haven't yet; I hope to see some of you there!

Have a lovely Summer! ■

