

MetLife Foundation

and
Association of Children's Museums

Promising
Practice

A W A R D

Long Island Children's Museum
Garden City, New York

OUR BACKYARD



In the See, Smell, Touch Multisensory Garden, visitors rub the leaves of herbs and other plants to experience their scents.

Staff members encourage children to touch, smell, take and eat herbs and vegetables from our garden. Many have noted the shock and surprise on parents' faces when they see their children eating peas, beans, lettuce or even radishes that they picked straight from the vegetable beds. Museum staff have found that when children pick, wash and cut a vegetable themselves, they are much more likely to try (and like) them.

The 2008 Promising Practice Award honors exhibits, programs and management practices that promote the importance of outdoor play and activity as a key component of healthy living.

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In 2004, the staff of the Long Island Children's Museum (LICM) combined their passion for the outdoor environment with the desire to beautify an unsightly alleyway that visitors passed on their way to one of the museum's two main entrances. The 3,600-square-foot alley was covered with old blacktop pavement and peppered with rocks, broken bricks from the adjacent building and trash blown in by our notorious Mitchel Field wind. An important goal was to enhance children's exposure to Long Island's natural environment by extending indoor exhibitions featuring familiar ecosystems of Long Island to the outdoors.

Using colorful plastic tubs filled with flowers, herbs and plants with interesting textures, scents and colors, we designed an appealing multi-sensory experience for our visitors on their way into the museum. Each tub was meant to inspire children to use different senses to explore the contents. Our staff observed visitors who lingered outdoors pointing out the plants they were familiar with to their family members as they walked by. Some came in for a closer look, commenting on plant color, shape, size or texture.

As our outdoor experiment continued to evolve, national buzz about *Last Child in the Woods* author Richard Louv's theory of nature deficit disorder was turning into a roar. Many of the museum's staff members were inspired by his keynote at InterActivity 2006 in Boston. Energized by the idea of children's museums becoming part of the nature-for-kids movement, and by the positive response to our "garden" space, a plan began to emerge for a more substantial outdoor exhibition with the goal of exposing or, in some cases, introducing children to the natural environment and encouraging them to use all five of their senses. An exhibition development team was formed, including a designer, a horticulturalist, an educator, a writer and a visitor advocate. The exhibit was titled "Our Backyard."

Plans for "Our Backyard" coincided beautifully with an opportunity for funding from New York State Senator Kemp Hannon (6th Senate District), as well as the museum's intent to significantly expand its outdoor offerings. In 2006 we tore up the blacktop, creating the beginnings of an entirely different aesthetic. It was decided early on that the exhibit would be bilingual (English/Spanish) and fully ADA-accessible. Over the next two years, the team worked to draw up plans and prototype components. Each season brought more and more families outdoors to explore.

Each area was designed to be inexpensively fabricated and easily maintained. Programs about gardening in small spaces and then sampling vegetables from the exhibit were implemented. Collaborations with educators and professionals from Cornell Cooperative Extension, local nurseries and landscapers, who donated time, expertise and materials, were critical.

As work on the exhibit progressed, the museum's relationships with funders and community organizations led to LICM's role as a founding member of LINCK (Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids). LINCK is a coalition whose goal is to give Long Island's children increased opportunities to explore and learn from nature by creating outdoor classrooms in parks, preserves and community hubs. Due to LINCK, the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation named Long Island a national demonstration site for nature educators. Working with LINCK and the local cooperative gardening extension has helped the museum create engaging outdoor programs for kids, including a multi-session junior gardening club, a parenting workshop on sharing nature with children and a nature explore workshop series.

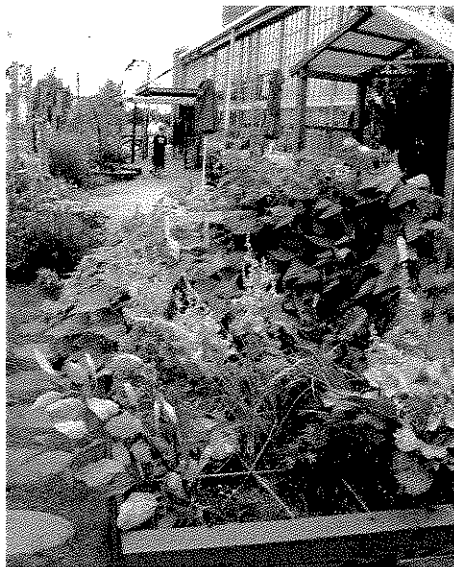
"Our Backyard" now includes areas for exploration of herb, vegetable and ornamental gardens, space for reading, opportunities to create art and music, chances to investigate and learn about animals, stations for weather forecasting and an area for creative water play. Careful research was done to find materials that would be weather-resistant and environmentally low-impact. Decking made of recycled plastic, real working compost bins and clever plantings made of reused materials such as the Flower Bed inside an old bed frame, and plants used to make bath products planted in an old bathtub, make "Our Backyard" a truly eco-friendly exhibit.

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Spaces for gross motor activity have been placed throughout the exhibit to enhance the backyard feel and to encourage children to use their whole bodies to explore. Children can slide down a hill, hide in the branches of

a weeping mulberry, shovel or rake gravel and build towers with wood "tree blocks." Spaces for active digging and planting are adjacent to contemplative areas featuring books, art and poetry. Poems, lyrics and verses are placed in clever spaces throughout the exhibit. A large area is devoted to meteorology with barometers, an anemometer, a sundial and thermometers. Children paint on slate with water to combine art and science as they watch their paintings evaporate into the air. A large sail catches the wind in a boat-shaped deck where imaginative, pretend play happens naturally.

Animals are welcomed in "Our Backyard." Plants that attract bees, butterflies and other insects are strategically placed along with places for spiders to weave their webs. There is even an area where children can use binoculars to observe birds. Each year, we follow the life cycle of the swallowtail butterflies that land and lay eggs on our parsley, grow into voracious caterpillars and, with luck, create their chrysalises in the garden to emerge as beautiful adults. A large basket-shaped metal frame welcomes children to weave ribbons, natural fibers and rope to create their own birds nest, and an adjacent component invites them to weave a web like



LICM

A former trash-strewn alleyway has been transformed into a family-friendly outdoor exhibit with natural stone walkways, garden benches and raised beds full of edible vegetables, scented herbs, local plants and colorful flowers.

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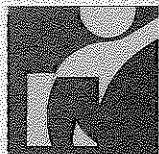
a spider. Hand lenses are available for children to take a closer look, and staff members point out things like ant hills, butterfly eggs and worms in the compost bin.

In the spring of 2008, an area was added for water play where children can create a waterfall, explore a stream, race boats or fish, fill, pour, pump, splash and play in several adjacent spaces, connected by a stream bed with words such as "Gurgle," "Dribble" and "Lap" imbedded in the stepping stones. This fun area not only helps us to better discuss the water cycle with families, but also gets the "air conditioner crowd" outdoors to explore the gallery in the summer.

Parents are less likely than ever to take or send their children outdoors for fear of things as varied as strangers, disease, animals and the sun; children are growing up increasingly indoors and without connections to the natural world. Having a content-rich outdoor space in a children's museum plants (no pun intended) the idea that outdoor exploration is a necessary part of every child's learning.



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hand to hand

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