

Program aims to inspire greener habits at daycares ^[1]

Introduction of 27 new environmental programs or changes, such as a composting program, more environmental and nature-oriented themes within the curriculum, and reducing or eliminating paper notices.

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Three Off-Island childcare centres have signed on to a made-in-Montreal program that challenges daycare educators to systematically eliminate waste and implement environmentally-minded programs.

The Centres de la petite enfance durable program, developed by the environmental youth advocacy organization ENvironment JEUnesse (ENJEU), provides a framework for childcare centres to follow to become more environmentally sustainable.

The program, now in its third year, was adapted from a similar ENJEU program created in 2004 for CEGEPs and colleges. There are now 24 participating daycare centres within the Montreal area, including three Off-Island: La Claire Fontaine in Pincourt, L'Île aux Trésors in Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot and La Relève in Vaudreuil-Dorion.

ENJEU Executive Director Catherine Gauthier said the program guides educators through the process of creating an environment committee, developing a sustainability policy, and identifying specific changes that can be made to reduce the environmental impact of childcare centres. ENJEU also provides telephone support for educators and two training sessions each year on topics such as increasing children's contact with nature and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

"We provide support and communication tools to make sure we help educators communicate effectively," said Gauthier. "We have to make sure parents and employees know what is being done in the daycare centre. it is the key to sustaining these actions over time."

In the last year, program participants have collectively introduced 27 new environmental programs or changes, such as introducing a composting program, replacing paper napkins with reusable cloth, introducing more environmental and nature-oriented themes within the curriculum, buying staples such as organic flour and oils in bulk, and reducing or eliminating paper notices by switching to electronic methods of communication.

At La Claire Fontaine, changes also included updating the playground to include more natural and recycled materials, and giving children more time to play outside. Children climb, jump and crawl through old tractor tires, scramble through a hardwood log course and invent imaginary games on a little wooden bridge in the playground. Plants were added to the classrooms, to improve indoor air quality. Educators and parents also created a school garden so the children can see how carrots and other vegetables grow.

"Connecting with nature provides a tremendous sense of well-being," said daycare director Isabelle Lalonde.

Lalonde said it is important for parents and educators to make environmentally responsible choices because young children learn by example. When they see the adults in their life drink from a water fountain instead of a plastic bottle, recycle paper and plastic containers, or compost food scraps instead of tossing them in the garbage, it can create greener lifelong habits.

"The children of today are the adults of tomorrow," said Lalonde. "They must learn from an early age to protect the planet and make ecological choices."

More information on the sustainable childcare centres program is available online at enjeu.qc.ca ^[3].

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