

Preschool focuses on the outdoors ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

In Pamela Wallberg's classrooms, the curriculum for kids consists of classes like Puddle Jumping, Name That Bird Song and Animal Footprint ID.

But that's only natural when her classrooms are located in the great outdoors.

The outdoor education advocate is part of a preschool program opening in Port Coquitlam. Hazelwood Early Learning, located in Hazel Trembath Elementary School, is scheduled to open this month.

Wallberg says while they have space in the school, the real classrooms are outside in the neighbourhood's parks, trails and green spaces. Children will spend most of the time outside, rain or shine.

And unlike other preschool programs, Hazelwood isn't afraid of kids playing in mud puddles - in fact they're a big part of the learning experience.

"We say, 'Step in the mud puddle.' Our focus is on real learning and natural consequences," said Wallberg. "Children figure out the natural consequences of what happens if the puddle is deeper than their boots."

Outdoor learning is much more than simply throwing the kids outside and letting them play. Wallberg said the program delivers a curriculum that meets all the B.C. Early Learning Framework outcomes. The program at Hazelwood will feature 16 full-time and four part-time teachers.

"Kids learn how to live together - they are constantly voting on what to do," said Wallberg.

In the morning, children start off by holding a meeting to determine what their goals for the day will be. It can be as simple as measuring a mud puddle to the more complex challenge of building a leafy lean-to. Then the kids work as a team to achieve their goals.

Afternoons see the children going over what they did that morning, raising any problems they encountered and discussing ways to solve them. They also plan future work and draw their experiences in their journals.

And all that benefits the children when they enter more traditional classrooms.

"Outdoor-schooled students demonstrate reduced anxiety and increased ability to focus in regular classrooms," said Wallberg. "Their language development is higher. They're physically healthier and they're development is significantly higher. They're leaders in their schools."

Wallberg is part of the outdoor preschool program in Richmond, which has operated out of Alderwood House since 2008. She grew up on a farm in Richmond. Although she went to a traditional school herself, the second she was out of the classroom, Wallberg was into the great outdoors.

When it opens, the Hazelwood program will have room for 32 children from two-and-a-half to five years of age. Parents who want their preschool kids to experience the pedagogy of the puddle can get a free tour by contacting Wallberg at Hazelwood Early Learning or checking out the program's website at www.hazelwoodearlylearning.com ^[2].

-reprinted from Tri-Cities Now

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