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Day Care Goes Green

What's Good for Kids is Good for the World

by Avery Mack

With children especially susceptible to germs, chemical sensitivities and allergens, it makes sense to ensure that the child-friendliness of day care facilities extends to their ecological integrity.

When Denise Adusei, of New York City, was unable to find a preschool that included all the criteria she sought, she decided to create and direct Peartree Preschool, a year-round day care facility for 2-to-5-year-olds. "An eco-friendly day care environment is more than nontoxic paint, organic food and unscented soaps. It's what you don't see, as well," says Adusei.

"We first looked for a building with lots of natural light near Central Park. Manhattan has a high rate of allergens, so we went ahead with a thorough environmental inspection on what looked like an ideal building," recalls Adusei. Inspectors pulled tiles from the floor, opened walls to check for mold and collected samples. "When they discovered signs of an old oil spill in the basement, we knew it was an unsafe place for children. We kept looking until we found the right building with large windows, near the park and environmentally safe," she says, noting that her own kids now attend Peartree.

Workplace coach Paul E. McGinniss, who also blogs at *NewYorkGreenAdvocate.com*, says, "Creating a garden on-site and connecting with local farmers or CSAs [community supported agriculture] to provide healthy, fresh foods is a great way to educate kids via a learning activity. New York's Hudson Valley, where I live, has a farm to school move-

ment. Everyone should know where their food comes from," he says, echoing another day care cornerstone.

In Madison, Connecticut, Tina Pascoe, a registered nurse, attorney and health consultant, co-founded Nurses for Day Care, a nationwide program. The staff finds that many children are sensitive to dye additives in mustard or ketchup, certain oils in soap, paint or cleaning fumes and fire-retardant chemicals embedded in new rugs and carpeting.

"We push for the whole school to go green, not just the classroom, with the sensitive or allergic child in mind," she says. "We're willing to do whatever it takes, like providing special menus, banning perfumes and smoking, and only using disinfectant wipes or bleach during nighttime cleaning." Pascoe personally works with about 80 facilities throughout the state.

The Cottages at Michaels Learning Center, in Sarasota, is Florida's first school to earn a Level Three Green School and green infant care certification from the National Green School Coalition and operates the city's only certified green infant care program. Children from 6 weeks through kindergarten benefit. The school even conducts regular radon testing.

Owner and Director Michelle Ireland assesses, "It's cause and effect. One of the things we teach the children is how our actions have an impact on the world."

Mark Stedelbauer, vice president of marketing at eWater Advantage, in Raleigh, North Carolina, strives to inform day care administrators about the value of using electrolyzed water instead of cleansers. An electrical current that runs through a blend of ordinary tap water and minerals changes the basic nature of water. A lower pH creates a disinfecting solution; a higher pH results in a degreaser. Both solutions clean and kill germs without fumes, residue or allergy triggers.

"Often, the combined cost of the electricity, water and mineral supplements used is less than what would be spent on multiple cleaning products," Stedelbauer points out. It can be created by the half-gallon in a toaster-sized unit onsite and has been approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture (for use on meat) and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (for use on produce). Also, electrolyzed water won't harm skin or clothing.

Creative Minds Learning Centers' six locations are recognized by the Oregon Program of Quality as among the top 25 schools in the state. They buy renewable energy from wind, solar and biomass sources. At the school, they compost, plant sustainable gardens, collect rainwater and recycle.

Nature preschools in the U.S., nearly 30 sites and growing, use a community nature center as a regular part of their learning program (*Tinyurl.com/NaturePreschools*). Generally, the children are outdoors for 45 to 90 minutes per day, weather permitting, and flexible activities allow them to investigate their own interests safely. Daily explorations build valuable skills like observation, sorting and experimentation.

Children experiencing green day care see firsthand how healthy, environmentally sound choices can help make their present and future safe. Telling their parents about their school experiences is a natural bonus.

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