Connecting Children to Nature

An outdoor project taking place at Catholic Charities - Treasure Island Child Development Center

September 2017
THE PROJECT

THE GOAL OF THE INFANT TODDLER OUTDOOR DESIGN PROJECT IS TO SUPPORT ECE PROGRAMS IN FINDING WAYS TO ENHANCE THEIR OUTDOOR SPACES, ADDING NATURAL ELEMENTS. FIRST 5 SAN FRANCISCO, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE CITY OF SAN FRANCISCO AND WESTED PROVIDED TEACHERS AND DIRECTORS WITH TRAINING, RESOURCES AND DESIGN COACHING.
THE SPACE
TREASURE ISLAND CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER

“When I met Lead Teacher Jodi Becker and Program Director Kathie Autumn I knew I was in the presence of educators who understand the needs of children, and who invest a great deal of energy, thought and love towards offering children and their families the best possible experiences. They immediately included me in their team, and shared their hopes for their outdoor space: more textures, additional climbing challenges, and opportunities for large motor play. Their knowledge of child development and their passion to better serve their children guided our vision and helped us use this project as a stepping-stone towards transforming their outdoor classroom. These images document the beginning of this journey, and celebrate the accomplishments of the past few months.”

Eliana Elias, Design Consultant
DEVELOPING A VISION

working on this project together provided our team time to reflect, listen to each other, and develop a vision together. As the educator who works with the children, Jodi was able to share what she had been learning from her observations in the classroom. She had noticed that the older children in the group were no longer finding the outdoor space physically challenging. --“They need to climb!” Jodi reminded us. “Toddlers need to constantly move, and challenge themselves physically. That is the way they build knowledge of the world and knowledge of their own bodies.” Added Jodi. She also brought to our attention the needs of the younger children, and the children who were presenting challenging behaviors. “I was constantly trying to reconcile the needs of younger and older children. We need to offer more sensory experiences.” As we looked at the yard together, we found very few opportunities for the activities. After our preliminary review of the space, we all attended a training facilitated by expert designer, Louis Tourelli, who offered suggestions, inspirational images and resources on designing spaces for toddlers. “Going to Tourelli’s training validated my ideas. I already had some of the same ideas. I loved researching natural spaces on Pinterest, and then thinking about my children... I know them so well!” With Jodi’s sketches and ideas, we were off to building up the space.

LEADERSHIP

For any change to occur, we need leaders who listen to the concerns of the community, and who are creative and resourceful. Creativity and resourcefulness are words that describe Kathie Autumn, Program Director Treasure Island Child Development Center (TICDC), well! Before the project even started, Kathie had to acknowledge Jodi’s observations, and seek out resources that would allow Jodi’s vision to flourish. When she heard of the Infant Toddler Design project, she applied for the grant, attended the informational meetings, and supported Jodi every step of the way.

"We did not have the financial resources to implement changes. Jodi would come to me and say that the kids needed this and that but I could not do much. When I heard about the First 5 Infant Toddler Outdoor space grant, I immediately applied. It is important to empower the teachers, who are great observers of children’s behavior."

Kathie Autumn, Director Catholic Charities - Treasure Island Children Development Center
EXPANDING THE TEAM

With our vision in mind, we proceeded to figure out how to implement our changes. Fortunately, Dan Stone, Property Manager of The Villages at Treasure Island, was willing to listen to Jodi’s vision. “The yards had not been updated for a while. With the resources offered and the vision articulated by Jodi, we were glad to support the changes!” Said Dan.

Dan proceeded to plan with us, and to buy the materials and to offer suggestions. Jose Tamayo, Contractor of Special Projects, also joined the team, quickly researching more about sensory experiences and brain development. Dan and Jose brought in additional resources and were quickly supporting improvements in the preschool play yard! Their expertise as builders and carpenters became enhanced by their growing knowledge of child development and “playground lingo” such as fall zones, transitional textures, etc.

Jodi and her co-teachers Jenny Tran and Patricia Campos continued to observe the children, document their interactions with the new play spaces, and joyfully participate with them in their play.
In his book, Last Child in the Woods, author Richard Louv expresses his concern about children’s lack of connection with the natural world. To express such concern, he even coined terminology that helps us understand the seriousness of the issue: Nature Deficit Syndrome. The antidote, he explains, for many of the issues currently effecting our children, including: anxiety, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and depression, lies in our ability to reconnect to nature, and to enjoy the healing power of the natural world. With this in mind, progressive educators throughout the world, strive to add natural elements to the classrooms, as a way to support children in reconnecting to nature, and to enjoy the complexities that its textures, colors, and aromas offer.

Connecting children to nature is also a way to invest in our planet. Louv elaborates: “If the nature experience continues to fade from the current generation of people, and the next, and the ones to follow, where will future stewards of the Earth come from?” We kept what Richard Louv wrote in our minds and hearts as the teachers, parents, children and consultants poured hours of work into the space at TICDC.

**REPURPOSING MATERIALS**

In this new approach to outdoor design, educators realize the importance of repurposing materials, and creating complex play spaces that resemble natural spaces. Jodi's vision for the yard, included a large sandbox, surrounded by tree stumps cut in different lengths to encourage children to develop balance, strength, depth perception, and resilience. "It was fortunate that Jodi's vision included repurposed materials, such as tree stumps, because we were able to use tree stumps cut from trees that had to be removed from Treasure Island...So we had the resources right here." said Dan. Jodi and Kathie both expressed enthusiasm towards being able to accomplish so much with repurposed materials.
As the plans unfolded, we realized that we also needed to increase the complexity of play possibilities in the outdoor space. Water play, “mud play” and pretend play could also be brought outdoors. Flexible materials, such as wooden tables, benches, water play systems, and “boxes” were purchased to increase possibilities for children. For our new beautiful arbor, we bought accessories which can be changed periodically (such as a hammock). As the vines grow, filtered light will be more soothing and cooler than the unprotected sunlight. The goal is to slowly add many more plants in the yard, and to help children interact with them.
I asked Jodi to document the children's reactions to the changes. What do you see when you look at these pictures? Do you notice Alexa's determination? Do you see her perseverance? In how many different ways will the children use these simple stumps?

ENGAGING IN SOCIAL PLAY

Simple, open-ended materials, such as wooden boxes and risers, will inspire children to think of many possibilities. When Jodi requested two of these benches, which also come with storage boxes underneath, she already knew the children would make use of them in multiple ways. What do you think this joyful play teaches the children? How do the materials support the children's learning? How do the materials facilitate children's growing social skills? How do these materials support children's physical development?
Maria Montessori, way back in the early 1900’s already knew that children learn through their senses. Current Early Childhood Theorists confirm Montessori’s belief, highlighting sensory experiences as opportunities for children to also develop self-regulation. Through these pictures, you can see how the children are using this small patch of natural grass, and get a sense of the importance of offering such textures.
AFTER

Sand area before

Sand area after
Adding opportunities for learning...

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, Italy, have been teaching us about the importance of creating environments worthy of our children. This project gave us a small window into how partner agencies, community members and professionals can take steps towards enriching our ECE environments, thus positively impacting our children’s learning, development and wellbeing. This small step has already started to spark inspiration in other classrooms here at Catholic Charities Treasure Island CDC. I hope this inspiration will spread to reflect our commitment to our children.

"The environment should act as a kind of aquarium which reflects the ideas, ethics, attitudes and cultures of the people who live in it." - Loris Malaguzzi