

Early Explorers Celebrated at Sciencenter

By Clara MacCarald

Last Tuesday, the Sciencenter in Ithaca began the Week of the Young Child with activities that included the creation of a banner for the Sciencenter's entrance decorated with an enthusiastic spray of finger paint by the target age group. "It's exciting to have an event like this because we focus so much on education and empowering youth," says Amy Gaulke, Sciencenter spokesperson.

The Sciencenter has recently seen a small increase in visitors overall but a large increase in visitors under age five, according to Monika Collins, director of development and community relations. Experiences in early childhood play a key role in future success, yet not every child has the same opportunities for enrichment from a young age. The Week of the Young Child was begun by the National Association for the Education of Young Children to bring awareness to the needs of this special age group.

A group of three- and four-year-olds from the Downtown Ithaca Children's Center (DICC) were herded over to the Sciencenter to attend the opening event. Victoria Fiordalis, Early Explorer Educator at the Sciencenter, had the DICC kids clap, stomp, wriggle and blink on cue before introducing "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." She asks, "Has anyone ever heard that song?" Michelle Kortenaar, director of education, jokes, "No, they've never heard that one before," as one girl belted out a verse. After a barnyard book, which ended with a crowd-pleasing, pitchfork-toting farmer, the kids spread out for activities.

"This is where they're at their best," says Emily Greene, a teacher at DICC, over the din of children rattling, shaking and banging musical instruments. She says that it was her third or fourth trip with them to the Sciencenter. They love playing at the water table in the Curiosity Corner, the special area just for the four-and-under crowd.

Even adults joined in the fun. Kelly Barclay, a marketing specialist at Cornell FingerLakes Credit Union, immersed herself in the experience and her hands in the finger paint. CFCU has been a corporate sponsor of the Sciencenter for several years, so it made sense when the Sciencenter approached them to sponsor Week of the Young Child. "It's nice to see first-hand the

impact," says Barclay. It was her first time visiting. "I felt like a kid walking through this stuff," she says.

Although Barclay isn't a parent or teacher, engaging caregivers is an important element of improving learning in kids under five. The Sciencenter does a number of early childhood programs in the community, such as at DICC. Recently they partnered with Head Start and Early Head Start for a program called Science From the Start, which provides science education tools to educators.

Programming has also expanded for young children at the Sciencenter itself. On Wednesdays and Saturdays at 10:30 a.m., Fiordalis shares research-based tips with parents of toddlers while leading activities at Science Together. Every Tuesday and Friday at 10:30 a.m. there is a preschool story time and activity at Curiosity Corner. Week of the Young Child had animal feedings and extra story times with chances for kids to interact with exotic substances like kinetic sand and flubber, a mixture of glue, water and liquid starch.

Young kids are natural scientists, always ready to investigate the world. "A lot of what we do here is not necessarily direct instruction, but really letting kids flex their creative muscles," says Collins. Children need to explore and test their own hypotheses. She cites recent research that found an emphasis on direct instruction to be less effective for early learners, who then have trouble approaching new problems because they aren't used to creative thinking.

Exhibits and programs at the Sciencenter not only engage kids, Collins says, they demystify science both for kids and for parents who don't have a background in science. The shared experiences can reinforce the important parent-child bond, although sometimes exhibits are a little too engaging. Collins says it's fun to watch parents get so interested they almost elbow their children out of the way because they want a turn.

That's okay. It can be hard to handle one's excitement. Collins has seen many a screaming child being taken away from the Sciencenter,



Photo by Clara MacCarald

Hadley Bond, 2, checks out the corn snake during live animal feedings, part of the opening events of Week of the Young Child at the Sciencenter.

and even three different children who sat on the floor in an attempt to stay longer.

The Week of the Young Child opening event ended with live animal feedings. Hadley Bond, two, of Trumansburg was excited to watch. Her father, Brandon held his daughter Vera in a baby carrier while Hadley skipped around the different

exhibits. "Come here, come here!" Hadley called to Sciencenter staff. Brandon says the family visits a lot, being Sciencenter members, and that Hadley likes different things each time she comes. "As a parent you're looking for places to distract your kid," says Brandon, "and if it's also educational, great."

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