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 an 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, so 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 Fior dalis, Early Explorer Educator at DICC, had the DICC kids clap, stamp, wriggle and blink on cue before introducing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm.” She asks, “Has anyone ever heard that song?”

“No,” they say. “We never heard that before,” as one girl belted out a verse. After a barnyard book, which ended with a crowd-pleasing, pitchfork-swinging farmer, the kids spread out for activities.

“This is where they’re at their best,” 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 kids.

Even adults joined in the fun. Kelly Barclay, a marketing specialist at Cornell, Finger Lakes Credit Union, immersed herself in the experience and her hands in the finger paint. FCUC 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., Fior dalis 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 flourer, a mixture of glue, water and liquid starch.

“Children 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 the research of Carol Thomas that found emphasis on direct instruction to be less effective for early learners, who have trouble approaching new problems because they aren’t used to creative thinking.

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