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Westminster Preschool Puts Kids on Path to Living Green

Program aims to make children environmentally aware

By Michael Hines
Staff Writer

The nature of light may have eluded the kids at Westminster Presbyterian Preschool last week, but nature itself is something they had a firm grasp on.

During a recent lesson, the kids shook special flashlights that contained no batteries. The gizmos produced electricity by having a magnet slide against copper wire as the 4- and 5-year-olds jostled the cylinders. The beams were candlelight faint, but that still seemed to brighten the kids' day.

"Catch my light! Catch my light!" the girls said to each other, racing to snatch at the luminesce on the wall.

Their teacher, Stacy Clark, hopes to build on that enthusiasm.

"At first glance, a lot of people would conclude they're too young to learn" such lessons, she said. "Kids this age are the perfect age. They're so intuitive. They're so pragmatic."

As Earth Day rolls around next week, there will be plenty of people showing their environmental conscience. Such an awareness is a driving force behind an enrichment program at Westminster.

Clark started the "Nature and the Environment" program last year, which was her first year as a teacher after having spent some time at the preschool as an assistant. The course goes deeper into ideas that children get a taste of in her regular class. There, kids have learned about ideas such as recycling by having more than half of the art activities involve items collected in the classroom's recycling center.

"I'm trying to give them enough understanding so they see how they fit in the larger world," she said of her students. "I'm trying to lay a simple foundation that they are part of a larger system called Earth."

The program is also in line with the school's overall increasingly "green" focus, with teachers incorporating a green activity into each month's lesson plans as well as having all children recycle things such as used paper and snack boxes.

"Keep the TV off when I go out of town," student Rachel Trevino said as the class reviewed some past lessons concerning topics such as energy conservation and litter.

"We have to make sure we don't throw dirty things in the duck's home," said her classmate, Emily Bailey.

Of course, staying on task takes a little energy itself.

"I was going to tell everyone how to spell my name," Caroline Stewart said after raising her hand.

Just imparting the eco-awareness is the name of the game for Christine Watson, director of the school.

"It's hands-on and what we felt was very relevant for children who are 4, 5, and 6," she said. "We've already seen that they're getting a great deal out of it."

Clark certainly has the background for such a program. She holds an environmental geology degree from Skidmore College and has worked as a youth editor for *E: The Environmental Magazine*.

Clark, who got to study endangered sea otters in California last year through an Earthwatch Institute fellowship, became interested in teaching during her time as a full-time mom.

"It's so much fun," she said. "It's the kind of environment that I feel I can do what I feel is good for the students. There's a lot of freedom here."

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Courtesy Photo
Billy Smith tends to a garden as part of a 'Nature and Environment' course at Westminster Presbyterian Preschool.

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