Stewards of Earth

A young child peeks through a metal gate to see a woman turning on a hose and watering some plants on the other side.  “Hey” he shouts out, “What are you doing?” The woman turns her head to see a young child, no older than 3 speaking to her.  She smiles as she says “I’m watering the garden so the plants will grow”. The young child looks perplexed and says “what plants?” he asks.  The woman points to a medium sized plant and replies “Well this one is a tomato plant and it will soon have red juicy tomatoes growing from it.  This one over here is a cucumber plant and will grow cucumbers.” The little boy says “Oh, okay” and he turns around and runs off.  The woman continues to water the garden as the young boy runs off. Low and behold, a seed was planted, and an idea begins to grow.

I wish we could take all the credit for our Community Garden Project but as is in our school philosophy, the idea came from a child’s interest in what the woman on the other side of the gate was doing.  That woman was Mrs. Vicky and she was at the beginning stages of transforming an overgrown and somewhat forgotten garden into a Community Garden for residents of Long Beach to come and learn how to cultivate a garden.  Well, that young child had an idea too.  He knew he could help Mrs. Vicky water her garden if only he could go on the other side of that gate. He had a bucket and he filled it up with some water and began watering plants on his own side of the yard.  From this small encounter, a beautiful friendship began to develop.  Mrs. Vicky invited the children of Little Sunshine House to help water the garden twice a week when she wouldn’t be able to.  The children were very enthusiastic and on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the children would gather their water pails and fill then with water to water all the plants in the garden.  The children were invited to harvest tomatoes and cucumbers once they were ready.  The children were thrilled to bite into the fruits of their labor! The children were soon planting seeds, transplanting them into the garden beds, harvesting the food, washing and preparing to eat it!  It began to change the dialogue about where food comes from and we saw evidence in this in the children’s play.  While observing the dramatic play, we began to see that the mommy’s and/or daddy’s were not going to the market to purchase food, but rather going out to their garden to harvest the food and prepare it.  The community garden was helping the children form positive relationships with gardening and healthy eating habits.

Gardening with children has lifelong benefits and it also encourages healthy eating habits, provides sensory exploration, supports Science, Technology, Engineering, ART, Mathematics (STEAM) education, allows safe risk taking and provides a place to develop a community.

(healthy eating habits)

If you were to ask a young child in today where a vegetable or fruit comes from, the most common answer they will give is the grocery store. That is saying something about how we, as a community, are raising future generations.  For children to understand the importance of nutrition and healthy eating habits, they must first understand where food comes from.  When children are given the opportunity to grow their own plants or garden, they are more likely to eat the food that is produced from their work and labor.  When a child is exposed to the gardening process, they are more likely to choose healthy foods than those processed. We want to expose children to any and all fruits and vegetables we can get our hands on. The more exposure to a diverse garden harvest, the more likely the child will practice better eating habits and will have a healthier diet as they grow.  What better way to start a lifelong love of food and gardening than to allow young children to explore the possibilities of a garden.

 (next: sensory exploration)

Gardens are a fun and interactive place for children and adults to explore and learn about their senses and nature. A garden naturally appeals to all five senses: taste, touch, smell, hear, and sight. The visual stimulation of a garden full of colors appeals to the eyes. The smells of a freshly harvested orange or a lavender bush tickles our noses in pleasure. The taste of a radish on our tongues ignites our taste buds. The sound of a small hummingbird flying in to taste the nectar of our flowers. The touch and feel of kale leaves. A garden is full of sensory opportunities for young children and provides a great place for children to explore

(STEAM garden)

A garden is a full of possible learning experiences from planting a seed and watching it grow to finding a caterpillar and discovering how it will transform into a butterfly. A garden provides children with an opportunity to gain a strong foundation in the basic STEAM concepts. There is science everywhere in a garden as we study plants and insect life. As we use a wheelbarrow for the first time or a shovel to dig our hole, we are exploring different types of technologies accessible to use in the garden. Building or rebuilding a garden is great engineering and design practice. We cleared out the whole space that used to occupy the garden and then alongside a Garden Community Member, we designed the space. As the children harvested the radishes, they counted how many they had pulled and how many were still in the ground and not ready. We also charted when we tasted different types of carrots. Counting, sizing, shapes, charts are all ways mathematics can be incorporated into the garden. A garden is full of color and beautiful sites for painting inspirations. Gardening is a natural environment for art to occur.

(safe risk taking)

One benefit of gardening that many may not realize is that is has a huge impact on the development of safe risk taking. Children have an innate desire to take risks, physically, socially, and cognitively. The Community Garden allows for safe risk taking as we explore the different types of insects and bug we find in the garden. The children have spotted butterflies, caterpillars, hummingbirds, and spiders in the garden. We take care and investigate each bug we discover, making sure not to hurt the bug as well as keeping our bodies safe. The children also are asked to use real shovels and rakes to help tend to the garden. This is exercising not only their physical limitations but also supporting hand eye coordination as well. Or, how about harvesting a tomato, washing it off, and eating it right then in there! Something that seems very removed from the typical environment of where we find food as most children don’t associate food with being harvested from a garden but rather bought from the store.

(developing community)

We joined the garden because someone asked us to help and then proceeded to give us a space of our own in the garden. Through our involvement with the community Garden, we branched out and offered the Sanitation Truck Workers a taste of our carrot muffin. Some of our families attended the Community Garden’s Make and Take Event. They came with their families and learned how to plant seeds and care for their seedlings.