



Students sprout love of outdoors through summer program

By Stephanie Grinnell | Aug 29, 2015

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Courtesy of: Jill Barnes

Students in the Unity Sprouts program took to the woods, and greenhouse and fields, this summer, including Levi, who is building a fort of branches.

UNITY — About a dozen children ages 3 and 4 spent their summer outside, establishing a garden, playing music, jumping, tracking wildlife, playing with water — and learning.

The children were part of a new Broadreach program called Unity Sprouts, which used time typically spent in a classroom to instead be outdoors.



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Head teacher Jill Barnes said the only weather that kept students inside was thunder, for safety reasons. The remainder of the days — rain or shine — students were outside. The program has long been a dream for Barnes.

“There's been a group of us at Broadreach, it's been our passion,” she said. “This is our chance to pilot and start out small. ... Even though we live in a rural area, children aren't always outside. ... For me, it was a wonderful six-week voyage with the children, definitely something we want to continue.”

Barnes said a typical day during the program began with breakfast — provided through a USDA grant — before children, teachers and specialists adjourned outside for morning meeting in the gazebo behind the former Unity Elementary School. Throughout the program, children in need of specific therapies also were treated outside — a change for the therapy providers as well, Barnes noted.

“It was fantastic for the staff as well as the children,” she said.

Education goals were met in a variety of ways, from counting the number of buckets of dirt to fill a portion of the garden, to writing labels for plants, to exploring the lives and habits of ants and bees and experimenting with water and unconventional music makers. Behavior changes seen in many of the children was nothing less than amazing, Barnes said.

“Some had significant behavior issues but outside were much more successful; there was so much progress with all of the children,” she said. “... It was phenomenal to see the growth.”

Barnes pointed out a nearby playground area with commercial equipment and noted the children spent less than 10 percent of the time there, instead opting to use the natural materials available. Some children at first were scared of bees and feared being hurt until teachers explained the job of pollination. Barnes said the children were fascinated by watching the insects go about their business.

Another day was spent constructing a course for water from donated gutters and PVC pipes; children later experimented with rolling apples through the course as well, Barnes said. She said the children figured out on their own that removing the apple stem led to better progress through the course.

“It was amazing to see,” Barnes said.

Having access to outside provided a broad range of sensory stimuli in addition to the student-led curriculum. The children learned communication and teamwork while using provided tree branches to construct a fort, but also were allotted quiet individual time as needed, with some choosing to nestle among the trees — named The Forest by the students — where they were “hidden” but still in sight of adults, Barnes said.

One of her favorite outcomes of the program was when a young boy planted radishes. Once the vegetables had grown, he was able to harvest them and share them with his family, Barnes said.

She said she hopes to continue the program next summer.

For more information about Broadreach, go online to broadreachmaine.org.