



## **DISCOVERING NATURE'S CLASSROOM**

*When Learning Comes Naturally* Premieres on Public Television

“Plants are like a superhero...because they help people breathe,” says Lawrence, (seven), a student at Seth Boyden Elementary School in New Jersey. Lawrence is part of the outdoor education program that his school has created to help children understand and experience the importance of nature. The discoveries made in this New Jersey program and in three other innovative schools in New York and California are documented in the public television documentary *When Learning Comes Naturally*, (national release date: September 1 – check local listings) the fourth special in the award-winning public television series, ***The Learning Child Series***.

Profiling outdoor education programs offered by these elementary schools, *When Learning Comes Naturally* shows how educators are reacquainting children with the natural world, and it explores the extraordinary benefits to young children of having ‘green’ experiences. At a time when so much of modern technology – through computers, video games and television – is drawing children indoors, the program documents how these schools are going outdoors, introducing to children – sometimes for the first time – the joy involved in exploring and learning from the natural world.

Integral to these nature programs are facilities that are not often seen in a standard schoolyard – gardens, small trails and outdoor “green adventure” areas. These may not take up much room at all, but as *When Learning Comes Naturally* observes, these natural spaces allow for the discoveries and choices that are vital to child development and learning. At Seth Boyden Elementary School, 2<sup>nd</sup> graders discover slugs in a scene that is as joyful as it is educational. Amidst her class’s whoops of happiness and excitement, the teacher, Mrs. Chanin says, “I think nature is a great teacher. [Students can] learn about slugs from a book or by filling in a blank on a worksheet; I don’t think they really learn that way.”

A child’s experience with nature can be very modest and still have great impact, declares Dr. Roger Hart, co-director of the Children’s Environments Research Group, and one of several child development experts who appear in *When Learning Comes Naturally*. “If children are given the chance to develop a deep affection for even one place, he says, “ (it) can last a lifetime.” In another location, at Lewisboro Elementary, in South Salem, New York, the program observes how the school’s decision to cultivate a tiny trail that is about a quarter the size of a football field have yielded impressive results. In this small area of woods and water with her 2<sup>nd</sup> grade English class, seven year-old Emma, reflecting on the sights and sounds around her, writes,

*Sticks crunching  
And leaves falling  
Who could ask for  
A better Thanksgiving?*

The school also uses the trail as an outdoor science laboratory where 4<sup>th</sup> grade students observe and document – by measuring with thermometers, extracting small samples and recording data – the natural processes of decomposition. In addition to the focus and determination these children bring to their “experiments,” the program observes something not often seen in a science class – the students are having fun.

“If we want kids to care about nature, they have to be in it, and they have to love it,” says their teacher, Mrs. Kopeinig. The connection that students make with the outdoor environment – as they explore, discover and create outdoors – has implications down the road. For as students grow, their love of nature grows with them, developing into their lives a sense of caring, even stewardship, for the earth.

At another location for *When Learning Comes Naturally*, in San Francisco, California, The San Francisco School has placed nature education at the center of its curriculum in a way designed to cultivate this sense of stewardship. A natural playground has been constructed where children can make all kinds of choices for play during their recess – playing, planting, constructing forts, even befriending the two ducks that have made this space their home. Here too, teachers use the green area as laboratory for science, English, art and even math projects.

But, as children connect with the outdoors here, they also are encouraged to master a more complicated idea – that the natural world, even this small space they have claimed as their own – is vulnerable and needs protection. So while younger, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students participate in conservation efforts by recycling lunchtime leftovers into a compost pile, the older students study the effects of global warming and engage in projects that examine its dangers. “Just because you’re thirteen,” says Lizzie, an eighth grade student, “it’s not like global warming won’t affect you. Everyone’s affected by it, and everyone has to work to fight it.”

Produced by Jonathan Diamond Associates with in association with the Child Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence College, **When Learning Comes Naturally** is the fourth program in *The Learning Child Series*. The Series has been created to assist parents and educators in guiding children to become motivated, thoughtful and lifelong learners.

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The Learning Child Series

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