The Nature Explorium...

By Tracy Delgado-LaStella and Sandra Feinberg

To engage children and families in the out of doors, the Middle Country Public Library (Centereach) recently opened the Nature Explorium (www.natureexplorium.org), the first nature explore library-based "classroom" in the country. This 5,000 square foot fenced-in area follows basic guidelines developed by Dimensions Educational Research Foundation and the Arbor Day Foundation and includes a climbing and crawling area (Climb It), messy materials area (Dig It), building area (Build It), nature art area (Create It), music and performance area (Play It), planting area (Grow It), gathering and conversation and reading area (Read It), and water feature (Splash It). The Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids (LINCK), organized by the Early Years Institute, provides education and training workshops directed to staff who will be working with children in the Explorium.

Both group oriented (formal) and self-directed (informal) programs that focus on preschool and elementary age children and their parents are offered in the Nature Explorium. Though activities are devised to entice the child, an eye toward the adult caregiver is considered in the design of the activity. Programs include "Fun in the Sun" with lawn darts and horseshoes, tie-dye and spin art; "Haiku Hike," a walk on the book path inspires participants to write a short poem and illustrate it on a homemade scroll; Sport Fishing Education Center's "Stormwater Superheroes" focuses on the Island's waterways and marine life; and "Let's Salsa" combines growing vegetables that make up a good salsa mix with an opportunity to "salsa" onstage. Nature journaling, planting and growing, outdoor storytimes, balancing on the ABC trail, navigating the crawl-through logs and just plain digging in dirt are ongoing activities.
Naming and identification and regional significance of materials used are essential ingredients that were integrated within the design. To "mesh" the Explorium with the library setting, we identified certain features that were "localized" and "institutionally significant." Instead of a traditional brick path (listing donor names), our Book Path features donors' favorite children's books and quotes. The Friends Bench (sponsored by our Friends group) displays Long Island land and sea animals. "Read" plaques, hung creatively around the space, provide donors' favorite quotes about reading, exploration, adventure and discovery. Donors' names are exhibited in the entryway, a specially created transition space that directs visitors through the Library into the Explorium. Some of our most generous donors include New York Community Bank Foundation, HSBC Bank USA, Astoria Federal Savings Bank, National Grid Foundation, the Rauch Foundation, the Amy and Horace Hagedorn Fund, LICF and the MCL Foundation.

Access to educationally appropriate outdoor environments and activities during the early years is critical to developing a nature literate and, in the long run, sustainable community. Through hands-on outdoor learning activities, children and their families become engaged in and knowledgeable about nature and their surroundings, and are introduced to the importance of individual and community responsibility for the environment. This type of learning leads to an understanding of and appreciation for nature and links developmental concepts that underlie early education to sustainability of our natural resources.

The Nature Explorium provides a local community place for children to learn about and use plants, trees, and other natural materials for fun and play, storytelling and social interaction. It serves as a model for public libraries and other organizations on Long Island and around the country that may be interested in integrating nature education into their existing services. It offers a unique way to connect literacy, learning and an appreciation for nature as a regular part of the library visit.

Sandra Feinberg is the director of the Middle Country Public Library, the largest public library on Long Island, and has overseen the creation of many innovative projects including Family Place Libraries, the Community Resource Database of LI (now 211 LI), the Miller Business Resource Center and the library's recent initiative, the Nature Explorium. Ms. Feinberg is the author of 8 books and many articles on libraries.

Tracy Delgado-LaStella is the coordinator of Youth Services and Museum Corner at Middle Country Public Library. Ms. Delgado-LaStella is a member of the steering committee of the Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids (LINCK) and coordinated the development of the Nature Explorium.