Library's outdoor classroom

Middle Country's Explorium lets kids delve into outside environments

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In the summer heat, the "Splash It" section of the new Nature Explorium at the Middle Country Library's Centereach facility is easily the most popular. Several tubs of water, positioned at varying heights, employ fountains, stoppers and a water wheel to send water cascading from one tub to the next.

Matthew Stein, 5, takes the boat he's just constructed from a white Styrofoam food tray, red plastic cups, glue and duct tape and carefully places it in the highest tub.

"It floats!" he yells as he gives his mom, Carolyn, a high-five.

Middle Country is the first library in the country to build a Nature Explorium outdoor classroom, according to library director Sandy Feinberg. The 5,000-square-foot outdoor space can accommodate about 75 people and is designed to give children a place to play outside as they interact with the environment. "Splash It" is one of eight sections, which include "Dig It," where children can get dirty playing with earth and wheelbarrows; "Build It," scattered with wooden blocks; "Read It," with books; "Grow It," for planting; "Climb It," with wooden logs and ladders; "Play It," with a stage, and "Create It," an area with natural materials.

"It's meant to get them active and moving, and really to interact with the materials outside," Feinberg said. "It's real wooden logs they crawl through, they're touching dirt, climbing on stump stools.

A pathway of stones, some engraved with quotes and book titles chosen by the Explorium's donors, connects the eight sections. The library raised $150,000 for the project, Feinberg said, most in the form of donations from corporations, individuals, The Friends of the Middle Country Public Library and the Middle Country Library Foundation.

"It's been very touching, because books mean a lot to me," said Feinberg, who has worked for the Middle Country Public Library for 38 years and has been director since 1991. "I think there was something about getting kids outside and interacting with the environment that appealed" to the donors.

The Explorium is open only when the weather is accommodating and is not used in winter.

The library's "Go Outside" program has different themes each week, said Tracy Delgado-LaStella, coordinator of the library's youth services. Though the space is open to the public, the events and programs are limited to Middle Country residents who have a library card.

Hillary Olsen, director of the Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids, or LINCK, helped train many of the employees who work in the Explorium. "I train them on the principles of nature education and why it's important," said Olsen, one of the five founders of LINCK, a network of environmentalists, educators and health professionals who aim to reconnect children with the outdoors. She said 11 outdoor classrooms have been completed on Long Island, and an additional 17 are in progress, most are at nursery schools and day care centers.

Stein, 37, a substitute elementary schoolteacher, said she's often in the library with Matthew and her 8-year-old son, David, to borrow books and movies and for such children's classes as sign language. This was her first visit to the Explorium.

"I think it's beautiful," she said, adding that "there are so many nice things here, and this is just another."