

Summer Nature Centre

2009 Report

Purpose:

The purpose of the B.L.E.S.S. summer nature centre is to educate youth on the importance of nature and to provide children with some activities with which to fill their summer break. Hopefully, the children gain not only knowledge of their environment, but a respect for it as well.

Summer Themes

Week 1: It's Easy Being Green

This theme was about easy ways to be environmentally friendly, and hopefully made the children a little more aware of their impact on the planet.

Activities

Crafts:

Oh Deer

- The children made deer out of toilet paper rolls and construction paper.
- Kids enjoyed this craft at all ages

Something's Fishy

- The kids made fish by stuffing paper bags with old newspapers and painting them.
- Very popular!

Indoor:

Matching

- Match environmentally friendly techniques to their pictures
- Not very popular, but very educational

Water word search

- Quiet children enjoyed this activity, parents often helped the kids find words

Memory game

- Kids try to find matches in this classic card game
- Very popular, even with young children

Outdoor:

Pollutant Knockout

- Kids try to knock down signs that have bad pictures on them while keeping the good signs up.
- Extremely popular! Definitely a hit!

Scavenger Hunt

- Not as relevant as I had hoped, but it was successful at keeping the interest high.
- Very popular, but I recommend making a more theme-relevant hunt.

Theme Analysis

This theme is very important for this generation to understand. The information provided is good, but it can be very difficult to make this topic fun. In addition, global warming can be a touchy subject for some parents, so it is wise to choose your words carefully. (Use climate change and greenhouse effect rather than global warming.)

Overall, this theme needs revising. More engaging activities are needed and they must be simple enough for pre-school children to enjoy. If that is not possible in the time available, then replace the theme with something of equal importance (i.e. conservation).

Week 2: Birds and Wildlife around Us

This week's theme introduced the children to the local wildlife.

Activities:

Crafts:

Paper pond

- Kids decorated a paper plate and then cut out animals and plants to glue on it.
- This was difficult for younger kids because they had to trace shapes
- Despite the difficulty, it was quite popular

Pet rock

- Kids painted a rock to look like their favorite animal
- Very few kids painted it like an animal, but it was extremely popular

Indoor:

Eye Spy

- Locate animals from a list on the poster
- Popular, but we need a better variety of posters

Mystery Mammal

- Nine animal puzzles to be solved and identified
- Very educational for both parents and children
- Popular for all ages

Footprint Match-up

- Match the footprint to the animal that made it.
- Very difficult, kids relied on me for answers; make a new poster with footprints on it for the answers.

Animal Parts

- Guess which parts belonged to which animal
- Very educational, and most kids had no problem with handling body parts.

Outdoor:

Frog Toss

- Bean bag toss game
- Extremely popular!

Theme Analysis

This week was a success! There were a fair amount of activities for the kids to do, and they were all fun. There is a plethora of props available for the children, so I recommend making full use of them. The only problem with this theme is that there is a lot of information packed into one week. Consider splitting into two themes, local birds and local wildlife, if time permits.

Week 3: Plants n' Trees

This week's activities were based around plants and different factors which affect plant growth.

Activities:

Crafts:

Garden collage

- Children were to draw a picture of a forest or garden and decorate it with tissue paper
- Not very popular, but that may have been due to a lack of sample craft
- Try making it more structured by giving them a picture to decorate

Color of Nature

- Coloring activities were always very popular, but you will go through them too quickly.
- Pictures with animals in them are more popular than others.

Indoor:

Leaf Rubbings

- Children were to go collect leaves and make their own rubbings
- Wildly popular, even for adults!

Plant facts

- Despite the fact that it seemed boring, this was actually popular! Kids learned a lot about plants with this activity.

How old am I?

- A birch log with labels is on display and the children need to count the rings.
- Not very exciting, but very educational.
- Try collecting multiple logs of varying ages for the kids to compare instead.

Word Unscramble

- Very difficult for young kids, but popular with elementary students
- Ask the children what the word has to do with plants. For example, Bees pollinate flowers.

Outdoor:

Scavenger Hunt

- Classic scavenger hunt
- Could be more relevant if they had to find certain kinds of trees/ plants
- Field guide is needed

Butterfly to Flower

- Bean bag toss! Always very popular, but not very educational. The children must understand what insects do for the flowers.

Theme Analysis:

This week was not very busy, but I am unsure as to the cause. Perhaps plants don't seem that exciting to parents reading the newspaper, or perhaps the weather wasn't warm enough that week. In terms of the quality of information given, it definitely could have been better. Include easy topics such as coniferous trees versus deciduous trees and what the main species are in the area.

Week 4: Creepy Crawlers

This week focused on insects and other small creatures that inhabit the area.

Activities:

Crafts:

Bug Magnets

- Children glued pompoms onto clothes pins and attached magnetic strips to the back.
- Definitely a hit, but the white glue did not work well. Perhaps hot glue would work better, but not for this age group.
- Magnets ran out quickly, we could either buy more next time or just make clips as opposed to fridge magnets

Butterfly Masks

- Kids trace a butterfly mask onto a piece of card stock and then decorate and add strings
- Children loved this craft! Often the parents had to do the cutting, but they really enjoyed decorating them.

Indoor:

Memory game

- Toy bugs underneath plastic cups
- One hard game with 15 pairs to find and one easy game with only 7 pairs.
- Definitely a hit!

Bug exhibit

- I brought my personal bug collection and found some bugs in the back area of the cabin.
- There were a lot of bugs these kids had not seen before, so common names are very important to have labeled.

Colorful Bugs

- Very popular, but there was a lot of photocopying to do! I went through approximately 75 -80 coloring sheets in one week!

Outdoor:

Water bug Identification

- Children had to try to identify the bugs in the water based on an illustrated guide I drew up.
- Get them to identify the creature as a bug or not
- Children of all ages loved doing this!

Bug Hunt

- Wildly popular!
- The young children rarely caught anything, so be sure to occasionally go out with them and catch a few for them to see.

Theme Analysis

This week was by far our busiest and the most enjoyable! I feel that it was too focused on aquatic insects due to my specialty, so try to get an equal representation of terrestrial and aquatic. This is definitely the kids' favorite theme.

Week 5: Out of the Blue

This week involved learning about animals that live in lakes and rivers. It overlapped with bug week a little, but the children didn't mind.

Activities:

Crafts:

Build a Duck

- Children colored and assembled a paper duck of their choice.
- This craft could be challenged by making a specific species of duck.
- It was very popular, but I strongly recommend cutting the strips containing the duck pieces out. Kids had a hard time figuring out that they only had to make one duck, not 4. A lot of paper was wasted this way.

Fish Clips

- Kids painted a clothespin and glued paper fins on to make it look like a fish.
- Very popular!

Indoor:

Pond life Crossword

- Not very popular, probably because it was difficult. It reminded the children of school, which is not good for a summer break activity.

Color of Nature

- As always, coloring is very popular.

Professor Noggin's Trivia

- My personal card game. Children had to answer trivia questions about the topic; in this case, freshwater life. It has two difficulty levels, which was very helpful for the age groups we get in the nature centre.

Eye Spy

- Children must find animals from a list on the poster of a wetland. Same poster as week 2, so it was a bit of a cop-out.

Outdoor:

Pin the Fish on the Heron

- Quite popular with young children, but the older kids did not enjoy it as much

Scavenger Hunt in a bucket

- Children had to find as many pond creatures as they could in the buckets provided.

Theme Analysis:

This theme seemed a little ham-handed. The theme has the potential to be very successful, not to say that it failed. The children enjoyed it thoroughly and learned a lot; however, it was not very creative, nor was it very carefully planned. I recommend revising it to include more information on wetland diversity and conservation.

Week 7: Who's Eating Who?

This theme was about food chains and what animals need to eat in order to survive. Some topics included carnivores, herbivores and omnivores and the balance between them all.

Activities:

Crafts:

Paper Bag Puppet

- Extremely popular and very fun for me too! I had several comments on the quality of the demos convincing children to try the craft.
- It is extremely relevant if you ask the child what their puppet eats
- Very inexpensive and easy for all ages; I strongly recommend doing it again.

Food Chain

- Children had to draw a food chain with carnivores and herbivores with arrows indicating who eats who.
- Too difficult for young children; try asking them to draw one animal and what they would eat beside it.

Indoor:

Crossword

- More popular than the last one, probably due to a lack of water bug buckets...
- The answers were on posters on the walls, which made it significantly easier for the children.

Mealtime Match-Up

- Kids had to match pictures of animals to scrambled names and categorize them as omnivores, carnivores or herbivores. Some answers were very surprising! Flag the answers in the field guides and tell them to check once they are done.

Mystery Mammal

- Same puzzle as week 2, but still popular. I recommend making more puzzles like that for several themes. Children really enjoy puzzles!

Outdoor

Pin the Fish on the Heron

- Still popular, but more games are needed.

Frog Toss

- Beginning to get old; make more throwing games!

Theme Analysis:

This was a very educational theme, but it needs more material. Better posters are needed and more original games must be created. Originally, there was going to be a game called predator – prey, but I quickly realized that it wouldn't work. Group games are fun, but you will rarely have large groups come in together, so all outdoor games must be able to be played with two people. Overall, this theme has a lot of potential.

Week 7: The Cycle of Life

This week's theme was about life cycles and metamorphosis. There is no shortage of animals that undergo metamorphosis, so there is a lot of variety.

Activities:

Crafts:

Tadpole Bowl

- The children made tadpoles from pompoms and tissue paper and suspended them in clear plastic cups.
- This was a fun activity, but it was harder than anticipated. The kids often needed help tying knots in the fishing line and hanging the tadpole.

Watch me Grow

- This was a puzzle of the frog's life cycle that the children had to color and assemble. The kids really enjoyed it and it was extremely educational.

Indoor:

Amphibian Facts

- A True/ False game where children test their knowledge of amphibians. Some questions are difficult, some are not as hard.
- The kids really seemed to like it! Plus, it's a 50/50 chance of getting the right answer.

Go Fish

- A picture card game where the kids have to match the pictures.
- Two ways to play: Find matching pictures or find a larva/ adult set.
- Very popular with all ages, many people could play together!

Word Search

- Word searches are far more popular than crossword puzzles, but you require a program to make them. There are free programs on the internet if you choose to make new ones.
- Some children can't read, so it was difficult for them, but they had parental help

Color of Nature

- As always, very popular. We had two pictures this week, one of a frog's life cycle and one of a dragonfly's. The frog picture was definitely more popular, so I ran out of them.

Outdoor:

Frog Toss

- Same old bean bag toss game; I really need to invent some new ones.

Theme Analysis:

This week was extremely educational because many children think they know all about life cycles, but there is always more to learn. Kids are always surprised to learn what kinds of animals go through metamorphosis! More original games are always needed, but overall, this week was a success.

Notable Events

This summer, we had the misfortune of getting broken into once again. The only damage was to the door, which they kicked in. Once they were in, they threw my invertebrate collection all over the floor and ate a sub. A police report was filed, but there were no suspects and no witnesses.

Near the beginning of the summer, I saw that we no longer had a downspout on the north side of the building, so I asked the Summer Drainage Inspection team to stop by to assess our grade and replace the downspout. The following week, they came with a new downspout. Unfortunately, it was destroyed the following weekend, so they came once more to replace it.

Mid-way through the summer, I spoke with the City of St. Albert parks foreman, Kevin Veenstra. He noticed that there was no place for my patrons to lock their bikes, so he brought us an old bike rack which now sits on the east side of the building.

In the last few weeks of the program, Kevin Ma from the St. Albert Gazette asked if we would be willing to host an air monitor near the nature centre. Of course the answer was yes, as there was no maintenance or responsibility involved. He came to remove it Sunday, August 16.

Repairs Needed:

At this time, there is little that is needed immediately for repairs. A new glass cover for the screen door would be very helpful, as the screen keeps breaking from daily use. An alternative solution would be to move the screen to the top half of the door, if possible. The wooden door could also use some replacing, as it was damaged in the break-in. The braces on it will hold, but aesthetically speaking, it is not very appealing. One of the windows on the north side of the building no longer opens, so it needs fine-tuning.

Observations and Recommendations:

Ages of Participating Children:

When I first began, I was not sure as to the age of the kids that would be attending the nature centre, which caused a little stress once I realized that many of my games and activities for the next few weeks were too difficult for most of the children attending. Be warned: You will see children from the age of 2 to 12. Most of the patrons are in early elementary (Grades K-4), pre-school age is in second place and thirdly, we have a few older elementary children and negligible numbers of junior high students. Even though there are not many older kids, it is still very important for them to have a good time when they come, so make sure there is challenging information for all ages.

Games:

Certain types of games were always popular, and some were hit or miss. Any game where the children had an opportunity to throw something was an instant success. Bean bag tosses were popular, but we do not have many. I recommend creating varying types of toss games. Competitive games were also popular, especially if there is a score attached to the victory. Having "high score boards" was a good way to encourage friendly competition while giving the solo kids goals to strive for.

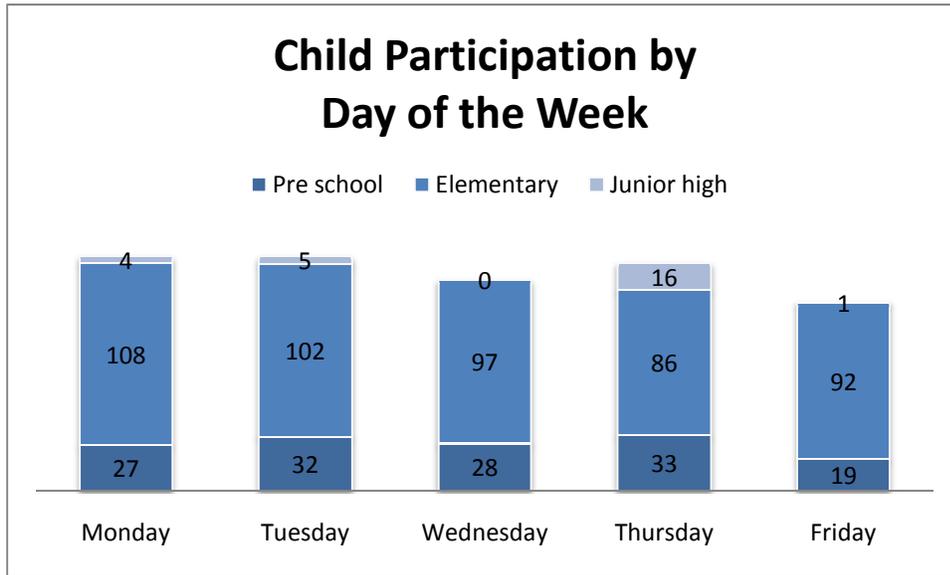
Crafts:

Crafts must be in varying difficulties; for example, a three-year-old and an eleven-year-old must be able to do the craft without getting frustrated or bored. A good way to do this is by having fewer highly structured crafts, and having more crafts depending on creativity. Try to have at least two crafts per week so that the children have a choice. When choosing a craft, you must consider the size of supplies and the amount of cutting required. If there are small things that must be glued on or worse; small things that need to be cut out and glued on, you may want to choose another craft. Pompoms will be all over the floor; just imagine what would happen with glitter. Maximize fun while minimizing the clean-up.

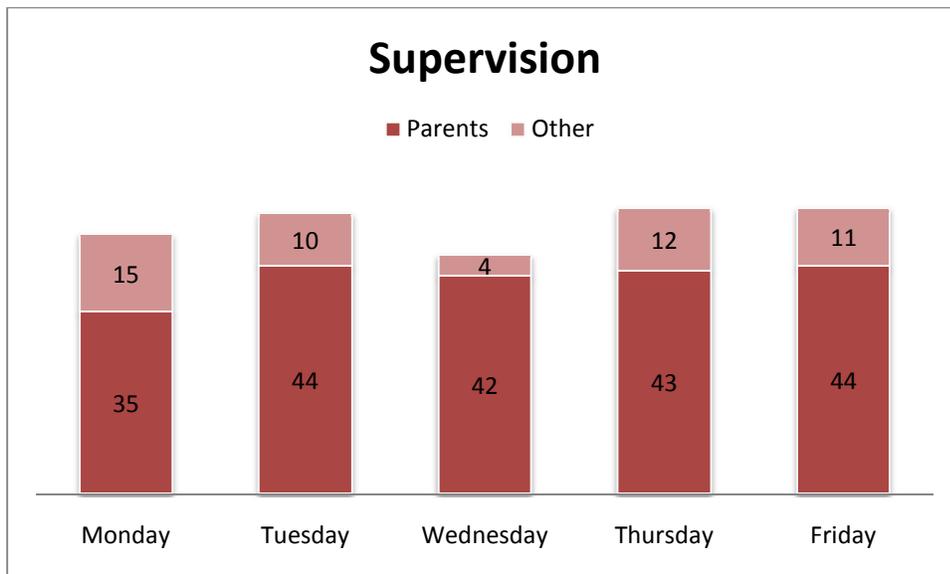
Other Activities:

Activities should be educational without reminding the children of school. Anything that requires writing is not recommended, but reading seems to be ok. Research may be necessary, but try to find information that is not very commonly known; this will peak the children's interest.

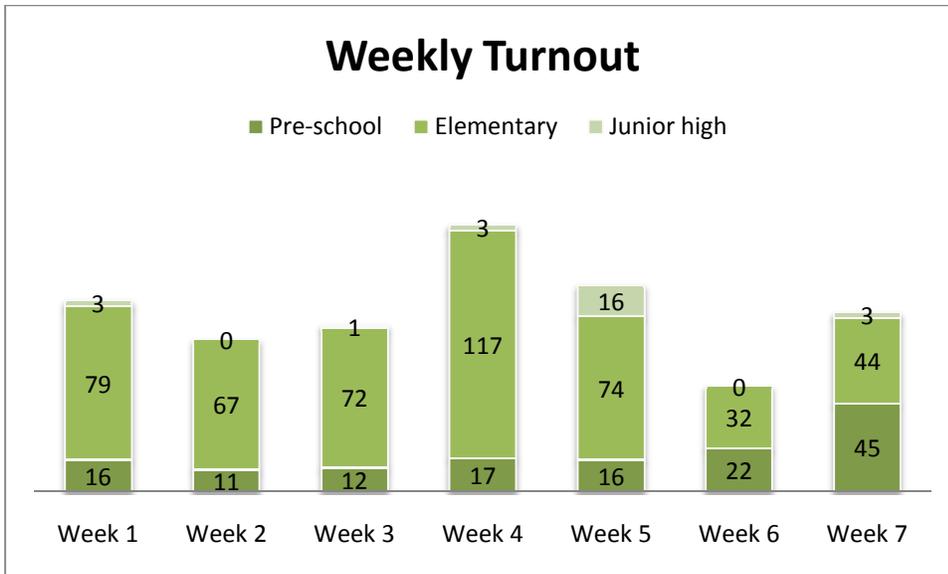
Statistics:



As you can see, the days of the week were approximately equal in the average turnout. Keep in mind that the Nature Centre was closed for one Wednesday and one Monday, so the data is not 100% accurate.



Where supervision is concerned, most of the adult supervision was by parents, but there was the occasional grandparent or babysitter. Comparing the two graphs above, you can see that the average ratio of children to supervisors is 2.5:1, not including me, which would make the ratio 2.5:2. Occasionally there was a daycare group which skews the ratio a little, but for the most part it was very well supervised.



There are many factors that influence the visitor turnout, including the theme, the weather and the presence of other activities in the Edmonton area such as Taste of Edmonton or Capital Ex.