

Little Moccasins embarks on new program
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Silk curtains soften the glare of fluorescent lights, while two children sit chatting on a rug in a little teepee.

They soon come running to the tiny tables set for lunch and begin serving themselves, pouring milk for one another, plucking grapes from a bowl using the tongs or spoon provided.

Before the meal some children could be found using knives to help cut up the fruit. It all looks pretty normal until you realize these children are all under age five and most of their parents likely wouldn't be comfortable with them using knives or pouring milk from a jug by themselves.

But at Little Moccasins pre-school, involving the children in cooking and serving is just one way the school is making a big move to a more natural educational format this year.

This move has involved removing many traditional toys and replacing them with simple toys and materials which challenge the children's imaginations, say program coordinator Sheena Rogers and family involvement worker Ana Rawlek.

"Research shows that children learn better in a natural environment so instead of providing a lot of toys that do everything for them, we are providing the children with materials such as wood and other materials that they can create with," Rawlek says.



Kiauna Pigeon (left) and Jalil Myers have a chat in the little teepee at Little Moccasins preschool.
Gaeil Farrar photo

There are also no specific directions given on exactly how to use the materials, adds Rogers, who attended a workshop at the University of British Columbia this summer on the natural learning strategy.

“There is no right or wrong way to use the materials,” Rogers says. For instance providing a set of tongs and a spoon for students to serve halved grapes with provides the student with an opportunity to make a choice, and, whichever choice is made it helps to develop fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination.

Pouring milk for themselves and their tablemates and working with the other students to make their own pizzas, peel hard boiled eggs and do other chores helps to develop physical and social skills as well as build confidence in the ability of the children to make choices on their own.

“We are trying to empower them to make their own choices and follow through with those choices,” Rawlek says.

Part of creating a more natural learning environment has included draping silky fabric over fluorescent lights to create a more cozy and less glaring setting, using more environmentally friendly toys and play stations made of wood and recyclable materials, and creating a small tee-pee replica to play in. They have also built a little room with silk fabric walls and a carpet where kids can go when they need a little quiet time.

There are centres for dramatic play, kitchen play, a car play mat, science table, puzzles, plus activities including circle time reading and story telling, visits from elders who share their skills and language, science, art, outside play, free play, yard work, and more.

The students also participate in field trips such as picking berries and visiting sites such as the Horsefly spawning channel and replica pit houses.

Parents are also encouraged to volunteer at the centre six hours per month and they try to have an elder involved in the program each day.

“Elders are an important part of the program serving as both advisors for planning and helpers in the classroom,” Rogers says.

Little Moccasins has been operated by the Cariboo Friendship Society in Williams Lake since 2004 and provides activities for children Monday to Thursday. Three year olds meet from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. and four year olds meet from 1 to 3:30 p.m. They have seven staff and volunteers, all with criminal record checks to care for a full house of 20 children in each group.

The program has six required basic components, culture and language, school readiness, parental and family involvement, nutrition, and health promotion.

The morning group gets breakfast and the afternoon group gets lunch. Both groups are sent home with a nutritious snack. The aboriginal food guide is used in conjunction with the Canada food guide, Rawlek says.

“Meals are homemade and parents often ask for the recipes so about three times a year they will hold a cooking workshop for parents,” Rawlek says. “Help with budgeting and menu planning is also available.”

She says they also have community health care providers come to the pre-school to provide immunization for children, speech and occupational therapy and dental checkups and fluoride treatments to prevent cavities.

“We bring the services here instead of the families having to go everywhere for the services,” Rawlek says.

Transportation is also provided if needed. Rawlek says 30 of the 40 children in the program use the bus service at least part time.

Rogers says they also have a beautiful junk program where families can share things they no longer need. “If we can’t use it we will find a family who can use it,” Rogers says.