

At Raintree Learning Community, An Experience-Based Approach to Education



Brandi Cartwright is Dean of Raintree Learning Community, a new school for young children in West County. Raintree teaches young children complex ideas through practical experiences. West County Kids asked Cartwright to describe Raintree's unique approach to inspiring young children.

Why is hands-on, experience-based learning important? Not only does the research say it's essential, but parents, teachers, and children say so too. We've all experienced the boredom of flashcards and worksheets. We have also relished the thrill of digging into an exciting project with a team of friends – brainstorming, inventing, collaborating, discovering. In this way, learning was an adventure that was active and endless. During those learning experiences, we discovered our talents and developed passions that shaped the way we live our lives.

Understanding the need for young children to be immersed in joyful, purposeful lessons of school and life, Raintree Learning Community has

carefully crafted an approach to learning that celebrates the natural curiosities of children and their unique way of exploring the world. Every day at Raintree illuminates a world of learning bursting with mystery, delight, complexity, and wonder.

Many ideas are very abstract to young children. It is difficult for them to grasp and truly understand what they learn

in a meaningful way. Learning becomes meaningful not when a student can recite a memorized fact but when a child can take what they have learned and apply it in endless and creative ways in their lives. That is where genius is born!

The following is an example of a project you may see at Raintree: During a class discussion near the pond, Alec says, "Me and my dad saw a pond with fish in the park." This intrigues Matthew, and he gets a great idea, "I wish we had fish in our pond." A project is born!

The teacher, who is their guide on this learning adventure, suggests that maybe they could have fish in Raintree's pond, if "we work like scientists to learn what fish need to live and how we can take care of them." They go back inside their classroom, and the teacher allows her students to reflect on this opportunity for a few days. Then, during a class discussion, Matthew announces, "I think I'm ready to be a scientist so we can put fish in our pond."

With that, the young scientists conduct a survey to see who would like to add fish to the pond. The survey is created and conducted by the students. They make a chart to record data, ask peers questions, and mark their answers. The class interprets the results. Cheers erupt when the final tally is made – all students vote "yes" to adding fish to their pond.

The teacher then asks, "How will we get fish for the pond?" Brainstorming begins: buy them; borrow Jill's goldfish; go to a park with fish and ask to keep some.

Out of the imagination of these young minds, the project takes off. They consider their options, deliberate, and make plans of action. They decide to foster fish from a local pond. But first they must prove they are able to take care of fish. They read lots of books on fish, fiction and non-fiction. Veterinarians are invited to discuss the needs of fish, they study fish in their homes, and they visit local pet shops. A few small fish take up residence in the classroom for close and in depth study.

Now that they understand the needs of fish, they work to understand the conditions fish require in a pond. They invite pond experts to discuss how the pond needs to be cared for and maintained.

Equipped with cameras and sketch pads, the young scientists visit ponds at local parks, the St. Louis Zoo, the Missouri Botanical Garden, and the neighborhood to see how ponds are different. To further their investigations, students draw sketches of the ponds they see and make charts on the similarities and differences. Then they use what they've learned to re-design our Raintree pond. If a big re-design is in order, parents will be invited to help on Pond and Picnic Weekend. As always, the students are the experts and they will run the show.

Now that all preparations have been made, the class must write a letter to the park and ask permission to foster a few fish. This letter must be persuasive, explain their project, and show that they are capable of caring for the fish. When the park agrees, the class takes a field trip to collect the new members of the Raintree family.

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But it doesn't end there. The project has just begun. The fish, now in the pond, require monitoring. Now the real scientific work begins. Students measure the fish's growth, observe what they do and eat, learn to identify each one, create names for each fish, make a field guide for visitors to be able to identify them, and conduct experiments to better understand their underwater friends.

This one project, born from the simple idea of a child, designed and controlled by the community of children, teaches team work, measurement, research techniques, using community resources and knowledge, the scientific process, art as a means of representing ideas, comparing and contrasting, persuasion, design, the complexity of habitats and ecosystems, interdependence of species and the environment, literacy, and an infinity of other academic tools.

In this way, our students learn to live. The lessons they learn each day at Raintree give them the skills that they

will call upon in their lives, now and in the future.

Raintree Learning Community is creating the mindful classroom. What is a mindful classroom? It is place that fosters skills for life. It is a place where peace and peacefulness is taught and celebrated. In it, teachers are engaged in the most important task of education: helping children develop social, intellectual, and moral maturity and integrity. Children who have the rare opportunity to learn and grow in a mindful classroom enter the phases of their lives equipped with the tools, strategies, and know-how to cope with social and academic situations.

If we teach them well, these young children are sure to enjoy success, happiness, peace, enchantment, and inspiration. It is important that we empower them to direct the path of their learning as they practice the skills needed for achieving beauty and harmony in their lives.

Raintree Learning Community's commitment is to the education of children: heart, mind, and body. We don't stop when the school day ends. Our children deserve the best. They deserve dedication and expertise. Each month, Raintree offers in-services for teachers to expand their understanding of early childhood development and to discuss new trends and research in education. Families are invited to attend workshops from child CPR to potty training.

Raintree is a learning community – teachers, parents, and students dedicated to giving our children the gift of education, unbound. ■

Raintree Learning Community

Where: 265 Steamboat Lane, Ballwin

What: Early Childhood Education for children ages 3 to 6

When: Themed, four-week summer camp sessions will be held in June and July; school year begins in August.

Open Houses: May 19 & 20; August 1.

More information: (636) 386-0900

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