



The Children's Country Day School

By Tanya Welsch, Star Tribune Sales and Marketing

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There's a little oasis on the border of St. Paul and Mendota Heights where children learn life lessons taught by animals and nature. Started in 1971, The Children's Country Day School (CCDS) literally began in an unfinished room of Phyllis and Ron Ettinger's home. It was quickly apparent that Phyllis' style and talent with preschool children warranted a much larger space than they could provide — but instead of building a traditional school building, they bought a house.

Six acres of paradise

When you walk into CCDS, you feel like you've walked into a typical split-level, walk-out home — with a few important exceptions. The school sits on a six-plus-acre piece of paradise overlooking the Mississippi River and has a bounty of farm and domestic animals who call this place "home." With roots in the Montessori method of education, the environment and these animals play an integral part in the enrichment programming provided to students between the ages of 16 months and six years.

CCDS fulfills many children's dreams — riding ponies, caring for a pack of llamas, a herd of goats and one sheep, a flock of chickens and a mother-daughter pair of donkeys. Inside the schoolhouse live several guinea pigs, rabbits, fish and Fluffy, a 2-year old corn snake. The Ettingers provide plenty of canine energy, thanks to their passion and commitment to Shih Tzu Rescue of Minnesota.

The animals at CCDS may not be the typical "pets" many children and parents consider having, and this uniqueness provides the extra incentive for students to get outside, interact, investigate and learn. Alarmingly, a 2003 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that for children six years and younger, almost equal time — 2 hours a day — was spent in front of some form of screen media and to being outside. Experts in the areas of child development, psychology, public health and education agree that exposure at a young age to ecological resources helps create resilient, creative and physically healthy children.

Kid-tested, mother-approved

"I'm much more particular about the environment than I am about the education," says Lanita McMahon, a mother of three and whose youngest two children are current students at CCDS. Compared to other children in a traditional daycare setting, McMahon believes her children show greater respect for all living things and are much more "in tune" with others around them.

Although aware of the risk any animal can bring to interactions, she does not have much of a concern because of how thorough school staff are with safety and teaching animal care and handling skills. “I can take them to the zoo, but there’s no petting, no feeding no interacting. When my kids come home, they’re excited, they’re turned on,” she adds.

Donkey teachers

So what can a donkey or chickens teach a child who is only 16 months old? According to teacher Seth Hayden, each child gets the opportunity to experience the animals in a developmentally appropriate fashion. The very young students help scoop grain out of a bin for the ponies. The older students help with moving the animals among pastures and caring for each animal’s living space. All of the children spend quality time grooming, petting, playing and loving these animals and see them as a part of their lives — as their pony, their goat, their snake.

Crowing, naying, baaing and laughter

Visiting CCDS today, one is initially aware of airplane and highway sounds, of the established neighborhood that has grown up around the farm, and of a popular bike path that hugs the southern boundary of pasture — and in a matter of minutes, these 21st century developments fade away. The ponies are the first to greet you with a nicker and this welcome is echoed throughout the farm with crowing, braying, baaing — and laughter.

This is a happy place, a safe place and a peaceful place. All too soon, these young children will face serious decisions and stressful times. All too soon, these young children will have to compete in our global economy and carve out their niche in the world. And as they become teenagers and adults, the lessons and experiences at CCDS will provide them with a type of “cellular memory”— a foundation and way of knowing that caring and respect for all living beings is critical, relevant and “the right thing to do.”

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Tanya Welsch is a licensed social worker and co-founder of the nonprofit MN LINC. MN LINC provides animal-assisted interactions for people by having them work with dogs, horses, sheep and chickens, and operates from a horse boarding facility, a private practice office or onsite with small groups at other locations.

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