

Plant green seed in kids

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Don't tell Jackson native Mitzi Cranmore one person can't help save the planet.

"I'm one person, and I just changed 650 kids' lives," says the mother of two and leader of EcoTribe, a group of students, parents and staff at Paragon Charter Academy invested in making the Jackson school green. When Cranmore discovered that 50 percent to 60 percent of the average school's waste is paper goods, she initiated buildingwide recycling. Integrating these and other sustainable habits is no longer solely about teaching Earth-friendly behavior, she says: Communities of the future will have no choice but to live sustainably.

In addition to the recycling and planning for an outdoor classroom, EcoTribe recently introduced Ray the Refrigerator, an assembly guest who demonstrates the importance of energy efficiency.

It's no secret kids who bond with the Earth are more likely to be environmental stewards as adults. Sure, pointing out the sandhill crane, for instance, gets kids "oohing" and "ahhing." But in addition to building an appreciation for the natural world, you might also be contributing to your little one's health.

At the Dahlem Environmental Education Center in Jackson, education director Randy Hill is quick to cite Richard Louv, author of "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder." This keystone text of the back-to-nature movement illustrates how children separated from nature run the risk of behavioral and health issues. Louv paints a clear picture of why we should worry about studies such as the February 2008 one from the National Academy of Sciences, which suggested a declining portion of the population is participating in hiking, fishing, camping and other outdoor activities.

For kids, such activities could translate into academic success — one University of Michigan study found proximity to nature can help improve concentration.

At Dahlem, Hill says he focuses on building personal connections between a conservation concept and the kids' lives. He'll often ask a group, for instance, "Do you know where your food comes from?" Once children understand where the farmer fits into the equation, he says, they have a better sense of how things fit together and how their actions affect the environment, even if the relationship is a complex one.

How to turn 'em green early

1. Get them participating. Nothing helps kids engage in recycling like sorting the bottles themselves. Teach them how to rinse plastics, separate materials and take them to the drop-off site. Or try switching from plastic bottles to refillable versions.
2. Cranmore says it best: "Kids love dirtiness." Get them outside and they'll learn to appreciate the beauty, diversity and wonder of nature early. Even if it's just in your backyard, Hill recommends turning up a log to explore the ecosystem underneath.
3. Send 'em away. Consider enrolling your child in one of Michigan's outdoor-oriented camps. Camp for Kids in Chelsea has been showing kids how to identify trees, shoot a bow and arrow and fish for more than 60 years. Bill Sullivan, a longtime camper who is now director, suggests moving usual family activities into the outdoors. Then there's always the time-tested Girl and Boy Scouts of America.
4. Pay a visit.

Consider visiting Whitmore Lake High School's new building. Principal Tom DeKeyser calls himself the resident tour guide (tom.dekeyser@wpls.net) and is proud that Whitmore Lake, the smallest district in Washtenaw County, has a LEED-certified building that uses geothermal heating, nontoxic building materials, waterless urinals and is thinking about a parking lot that will turn the sun's energy into electricity for the building.

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