

OUTDOOR CLASSROOM PROJECT® NETWORK: Demonstration Site Center Spotlight St. Margaret's Early Childhood Development Center



Photo Credit: St. Margaret's Episcopal School

St. Margaret's Early Childhood Development Center was the first Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration Site in Orange County, CA and was certified in 2013. It is located in San Juan Capistrano between Los Angeles and San Diego. The preschool's practices and philosophy continue to embrace the qualities and standards of the Outdoor Classroom Project and we are pleased to spotlight this wonderful center. Their Outdoor Classroom provides opportunities for the children to build core strength on motor courses, tricycles, and swings. Children paint and draw in the art studio. They play out stories in the dramatic area, enjoy the sinking and floating of items in the water table, and yet still find quiet corners to read or spend time with friends.

The St. Margaret's Outdoor Classroom has led to a multitude of projects. Educators watch the children's self-chosen play and bring the play into discussions among the preschoolers. For example, observing a group of children building a bicycle ramp with blocks and then seeing their frustration from the movement of blocks

every time a tricycle drove over it, one teacher took her class through a well-orchestrated student-led project on the building of a sturdy and portable tricycle ramp that was constructed by a licensed carpenter with the assistance of three and four-year olds. In this three-month study and building of the ramp, the children were motivated, engaged, and happy. Another teacher discovered children in the outdoor art studio creating kites from various pieces of scrap paper and yarn. From this child-initiated activity, children took charge of their own learning about kites, flight, and the cultural art depicted on kites. Teachers provided children with books and models of kites in the Outdoor Classroom and the children were drawn to the kite provocations. These provocations led to children wanting to find out more about kite play and the construction of kites. Not all play in the Outdoor Classroom leads to projects but they do lead to the possibilities of a study. Some moments are left for children to discover on their own or with a friend.

All the spaces are special in the Outdoor Classroom but in the springtime, the preschoolers are drawn to the lush greens of vegetation and the growth of flowers around the fairy garden. The children gather eggs from the chickens, find overflowing nasturtiums and carrots, discover colonies of ants and aphids, find scores of milkweed for caterpillars, and sort beads from rocks in dirt piles. Their natural surroundings in the garden provide opportunities of challenge and wonder. They watch for the changing weather and seasons that affect their crops. They use strength to carry water buckets, pull deep rooted weeds, or use speed to catch up with the chickens. St Margaret's preschoolers are given the opportunity to explore and become familiar with math and science concepts as they gather fruit, herbs, and seeds to weigh, sort, and count. Teachers meet the children where they are in their learning, whether it be experiencing a harvest for the first time or learning about the intricacies of the patterns on a leaf or a spider web. When learners explore and experience nature, they interact with their peers and naturally build social skills.

St. Margaret's Early Childhood Development Center will undergo a renovation with changes to the classrooms and outdoor area. The renovations will take place during the summer months of 2019 and will not only include updated classrooms but an addition of a demonstration lab where children can cook using the herbs and vegetation from the garden or make cookies for a special snack. A dedicated tinker-lab space will include woodworking and loose parts to support creativity and problem solving. A library will open up into the Outdoor Classroom for children to choose from hundreds of books. The Outdoor Classroom art studio will continue to draw children in with its openness and inviting environment. The Outdoor Classroom at St. Margaret's Early Childhood Development Center is a place of wonder where children and adults experience a world of unexpected surprises.