

Young Children Explore the World: Seriously Amazing Experiences at the Smithsonian

Background

The mission of the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center (SEEC) is two-fold: to provide a high-quality educational program for young children and to advance educational opportunities for all children by sharing SEEC's expertise on a national level, thereby furthering the education mandate of the Smithsonian Institution (SI).

SEEC opened in 1988 with one center located in the National Museum of American History. In 1991, SEEC added programming for infants and, in 1998, a licensed kindergarten was added. Today, SEEC has two sites serving 135 children with 52 staff and a budget of over \$2.5 million. In addition, SEEC now gives out over \$150,000 in scholarship funds every year.

SEEC is a model lab school with a museum-based curriculum; it addresses the SI mandate for sharing knowledge. At SEEC, children are encouraged to be extraordinary, to wonder, and to explore the world around them. Children are given the time and space to see the results of their curiosity and to think richly and deeply about things. Through a combination of hands-on exploration, learning through collections and exhibits, and play, children are able to experience the world in ways that are developmentally appropriate and engaging. Supporting the latest neuroscience research on brain development and learning in young children, SEEC invites children to share and explore their own ideas.

SEEC believes that children learn by having multiple experiences that allow them to build upon past knowledge and experience. At SEEC, teachers help young children make meaningful connections between objects that are familiar and those that are unknown. The children at SEEC learn about their world in an educational setting that is unparalleled. They are introduced to new ideas through personal conversations with scientists, artists, and cultural historians who share their passion for learning in concrete, engaging ways. SEEC children learn about the era of dinosaurs through personal encounters with paleontologists, where they are able to see the tools used to examine the past. Kindergartners become scientists in a visit to the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, where they explore nature intimately, make observations, test hypotheses, and discuss ideas with an entomologist. Throughout the year, SEEC children become familiar with people and cultures from around the world through the wondrous collections in nearby museums.

As an organization, SEEC is a leader in the field of museum-based education and influences practice within museums and schools. SEEC educators apply best practices recognized in the early childhood field and enrich the children's learning through an object-based approach to teaching, sharing the rich stories associated with these objects in ways that make the curriculum deeper and richer. Museum educators within the program build on the practice established by the classroom educators within the SEEC model, serving as content experts on the museums and blending theory and practice as a basis for outside consulting and professional development.

Potential Applications

The Center for Excellence in Early Learning is the outreach arm of SEEC. Professional development for early childhood and museum educators on a wide variety of teaching and learning ideas that form the basis for work at SEEC is provided through SEEC. In addition, custom consulting is provided to these audiences to assist them in ways that are designed specifically for their organizations or communities. SEEC also has several publications and teaching kits available for purchase. Finally, a completely revised version of an in-depth resource manual that can be used to design and operate early learning programs in schools or museums will be available in 2014.

For More Information

SEEC website: <http://www.si.edu/SEEC> (SEEC outreach work at <http://www.si.edu/seec/educators>)

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