

# Designing Garden Programs for All

There's no doubt about it: gardens engage and inspire youth, allowing educators to reach students in fun, effective ways. There's something contagious about the feel of dirt under your fingernails and the excitement generated by watching a living thing sprout, grow, and bloom under your care. A special feature of a garden as an educational tool is the flexibility it offers to develop and implement activities and programs for learners of all ages and abilities.

*"The garden provides opportunities to reach students using all Multiple Intelligence learning styles [kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, linguistic, logical, and spatial],"* says educator Carrie Banks. Carrie directs the Brooklyn Public Libraries' Child's Place for Children with Special Needs, which has offered an inclusive garden program component since 1999. Carrie has witnessed the power of the garden to reach a diverse youth audience, both with and without disabilities.

*"Our garden program began when a library educator noticed an alley with some dirt at one of the libraries and suggested a couple of sessions to clean it up and plant in it. That was the spark that got things moving,"* Carrie explains. A decade later, the garden has become an integral part of the afterschool programming.

The main goal of the Child's Place is to *"make sure kids with special needs have the same opportunities as their typically developing peers, because so often special needs kids are turned away from out-of-school activities."* The program is open to children of all ages, with and without disabilities, including those with developmental delays, cerebral palsy, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), multiple disabilities, mental illness, on the autism spectrum, and who are deaf or blind. The garden component has provided a number of unique benefits to help in achieving success.

*"It's not always easy to spark conversation between kids who don't know each other, but the activity of gardening naturally inspires kids to talk to each other in an unforced way,"* says Carrie. *"One day we were working on a garden-related collage project. The leader was helping a young girl with cerebral palsy who had difficulty with motor skills place her pieces. Another child offered a suggestion for the collage, and within 10 minutes the two children were working together without the aid of the leader."*

*"Additionally,"* Carrie continues, *"because we work with urban youth, everyone is new to gardening so no one has an advantage. This is worth a lot. With some other activities, especially those on academic calendars, kids without disabilities may have more experience. But these are city kids, and no one knows anything about growing plants."*

Designing an accessible container garden and adapting tools for the children were an important part of the program's creation. Carrie believes that educational programs that encourage equal participation by all children *"are key to making inclusion work. If children who are blind or have poor gross motor skills shows up unexpectedly, it is important that you not need to scramble to adapt the program to their needs. Those children should fit seamlessly into the existing activities. When this happens, they know they are truly welcome."*

## **Carrie shares the following tips for designing flexible, accessible garden programs:**

- Work as a group or in pairs to promote cooperation and teamwork.
- Do not operate on a strict schedule and avoid time pressures. If you can't finish everything in the allotted time, let the kids take projects home.
- Recruit plenty of volunteers. Staff and volunteers should be available to work one-on-one with children to assist with comprehension or focus issues.
- Use the Pictorial Exchange Communication System (PECS) to provide structure to the program. This is helpful for everyone. At the Child's Place, Meyer Johnson symbols are incorporated into each activity to aid communication. The picture cards facilitate communication for children who do not speak or sign by allowing

them to point to the symbols on the cards to express themselves. The people with whom they are communicating likewise point to the appropriate cards as they speak.

- If you use interpreters, book them well in advance to assure availability. Before the session starts, discuss any jargon or proper nouns in your material with the interpreter. Adjust your reading rhythm so that you never run ahead of the interpreter. We've found it useful to interpret both what adult leaders say to children and what children say to each other. In this way, for example, the interpreter can facilitate communication between a child who speaks Cantonese, one who speaks English, and one who is deaf. Communication is the basic building block of inclusion.
- Post an outline of the day's events and make it visible from the beginning of the program. We highlight any words and themes that are frequently repeated.
- Safety is paramount. Make sure all the tools and plants you use are child safe and use only natural pest control methods. We conduct all outdoor gardening in enclosed spaces and closely supervise the children. They wear hats for sun protection and we provide latex-free garden gloves.

Participating in inclusive garden programs benefits all children involved. In addition to plantings, you sow seeds of understanding and acceptance that will last them a lifetime.