



# Learning That Sticks

The kitchen classroom—educating for a healthy future at The Children's House

By Bob Butz

Sometimes the best way into a child's head is through their stomach. If you ask Trish Van Dusen, Director of Kitchen Classroom at The Children's House of Traverse City, that simple fact makes the kitchen one of the best learning environments around.

"So many lessons—from why do we wash our hands and where does food really come from—are made more real for children in the kitchen," says Van Dusen.

Initiated in 2005, in part, by all the statistics showing an alarming spike in the number of obese children in the United States—and thanks to a \$50,000 grant from The Allen Foundation—The Children's House successfully launched the first garden-to-table learning program of its kind in northern Michigan.

Now under the direction of Van Dusen, a one-time café and catering service owner from Northport, the kitchen at The Children's House is more than just a place where lunch is made.

"Children are exposed to working in the kitchen and the campus garden frequently," says Van Dusen, adding that classes are small and constantly rotating. After learning first about kitchen safety and proper use of utensils and appliances, six- through 12-year-old students all participate in growing, harvesting, and processing campus-grown produce before moving into the fundamentals of food preparation.

Van Dusen sees the kitchen as the perfect place for any child of any age to feel accomplishment and success. Lessons on grace, courtesy, and the importance of community are as much fundamental building blocks to the Montessori education philosophy as reading, writing, math, and learning how to follow directions—all important skills easily developed in the kitchen through reading recipes, measuring ingredients, and basic food preparation. Simple questions—What country do kiwis come from?...Is an avocado really a vegetable or a fruit?—can lead to lessons on geography and science. And while peeling a pile of potatoes or doubling a lunch recipe for friends might seem like menial, time-consuming tasks to adults, to children it's all fun with a purpose—real work with a real reward.

"Last fall two of our projects involved making apple sauce and cider," recalls Van Dusen.

"We learned it takes about thirty-six apples to make a single gallon of cider. And for the sauce we used Paula red apples from a local grower and the children were amazed by the sweetness and natural pink color of the finished product—the fact that you could make something look and taste like that without sugar or dyes."

Homemade gazpacho and cream of broccoli soup, carrot and zucchini quick breads, pasta made from scratch, and sauce from student-grown tomatoes handpicked from the vine—these are just a few examples of the delicious and creative food items on the lunch menu every day at The Children's House.

Incorporating homegrown produce into the school snack and lunch program has always been the primary goal of Van Dusen and The Children's House. But that's not all the classroom kitchen program is about.

Complimenting their "edible schoolyard" fresh produce items not easily obtained at the school gardens and greenhouse are bought from local farmers and food cooperatives. Regular guest speakers and field trips to area orchards and farms that supply The Children's House with everything from apples to organic beef not only teach students about good nutrition and how healthy foods are harvested and prepared before they get to our table, they also teach students about the important role local food producers play in our community.

Van Dusen tells a story about when she started the classroom kitchen three years ago. Back then there was a fun program then in summer months called "Friday Snack." Students would help prepare something nutritious but always simple and sweet for their classmates—think hand-turned ice cream and berry smoothies. The routine was a lot of fun.

"But it took a while to show them the kitchen and the food we prepare here is not only about sweets," says Van Dusen. Now the kitchen at The Children's House is a working classroom where knowledge finds real-world application. There's enthusiasm for getting hands dirty in the gardens and learning all that goes into preparing a meal. There's appreciation for natural food and the people in our community who provide it—not to mention a constantly running dialogue about good nutrition and what making healthy choices actually means.