

# PEOPLE

Places, Profiles, Family News

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The Missourian  
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## B



Shaw Nature Reserve's new Nature Explore Classroom, designed for kids ages 2 to 10, features an old hollow sycamore tree to crawl through, tree trunks to walk across like balance beams, sand boxes to dig in, an area with small logs that can be used as blocks, a place to do art, a music stage and more. The facility officially opens next Saturday, March 29, the same day as the SNR's Tale Traveler event which is being held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Missourian Photos.

# Release Your Child's Natural Explorer

By Karen Cernich, *Missourian* Features Editor

Seven-year-old Alex Treis, Union, was creating something with a set of small logs in the "build it" area of Shaw Nature Reserve's new Nature Explore Classroom when a spider crawled across his path. "Hey, look!" he yelled. Other children gathered around to get a peek at the teeny arachnid.

After a moment's inspection, the kids were scrambling off in all directions — crawling through giant tree trunks, building forts with bamboo stalks, inching their way across balance beams made from tree trunks.

It didn't take any of them long to discover a variety of ways to use the natural items here for their own creations, and that's exactly the point.

"There's a huge movement now to get kids reconnected to the outdoors," said Lydia Toth, senior manager of education at Shaw Nature Reserve (SNR).

"Children today, and even their parents to a certain extent, have become disconnected with nature for a number of reasons — neighborhood design, some

schools are discontinuing recess, or even if they have recess it's on an asphalt surface with plastic playground equipment," said Toth.

The increasing popularity of TV, video games, the Internet and other tech devices have no doubt played a role with keeping kids indoors. Parents' natural instinct to protect their kids — from injury or predators — also is a contributing factor.

For more and more kids today, time outdoors is primarily limited to structured activities like soccer practice, where they take part in specific exercises rather than using their imagination or discovering something on their own.

The result is a generation of children who have a fear of the outdoors or "biophobia," said Toth.

"Kids hear about things like (Hurricane) Katrina or the (2004 Asian) tsunami, and they see them over and over again on TV, but they don't realize that they're not happening again and again, that it was just that one time, and they connect the fear they have of those things with all nature, and they begin to see all nature as bad or something to be afraid of," she explained.

Journalist

Richard Louv coined the term "Nature Deficit Disorder" in his 2005 book, "Last Child in the Woods," to explain the current phenomenon of kids who are out of touch with nature.

The new Nature Explore Classroom at SNR is one of the first play areas of its kind in the country that are being built to provide children a safe, imaginative place to experience the outdoors. Toth said the SNR facility will serve as a model for others in the Midwest.

SNR will hold a ribbon cutting for the Nature Explore Classroom next Saturday, March 29, at 9:30 a.m. just before the Tale Travelers event gets under way at 10 a.m.

A dozen different story-tellers will be stationed in and around the Pinetum Lake perimeter, in the Whitmire Wildflower Garden and at the Bascom House to share stories with visitors as they hike around the property. Visitors will also have an opportunity to do activities or crafts related to the stories.

### Learning "Rooms"

SNR staff worked with a landscape architect to design the 1 1/2-acre Nature Explore Classroom, which includes separate learning areas — for art, building, messy play, crawling/climbing and music. There also is a gathering area that sits



Lauren Dickhut, Washington, holds her arms out to keep her balance as she walks across one of the balance beams in the crawling/climbing area of the Nature Explore Classroom.

up higher than the learning "rooms" so parents can sit and relax, but at the same time still see their children playing.

"The gathering area also will be a place for groups like Parents as Teachers or preschool programs to do activities or workshops," said Toth.

And each of the learning "rooms" has been laid out to promote natural exploring. For example, the art area includes tables and chairs made of old tree trunks with pinecones and seed pods for kids to manipulate and use in their creations.

"These are things that will help kids with classification and organization or sorting," said Toth. "They also will be able to build a three-dimensional art project in this space and then come over here and draw it into a two-dimensional design."

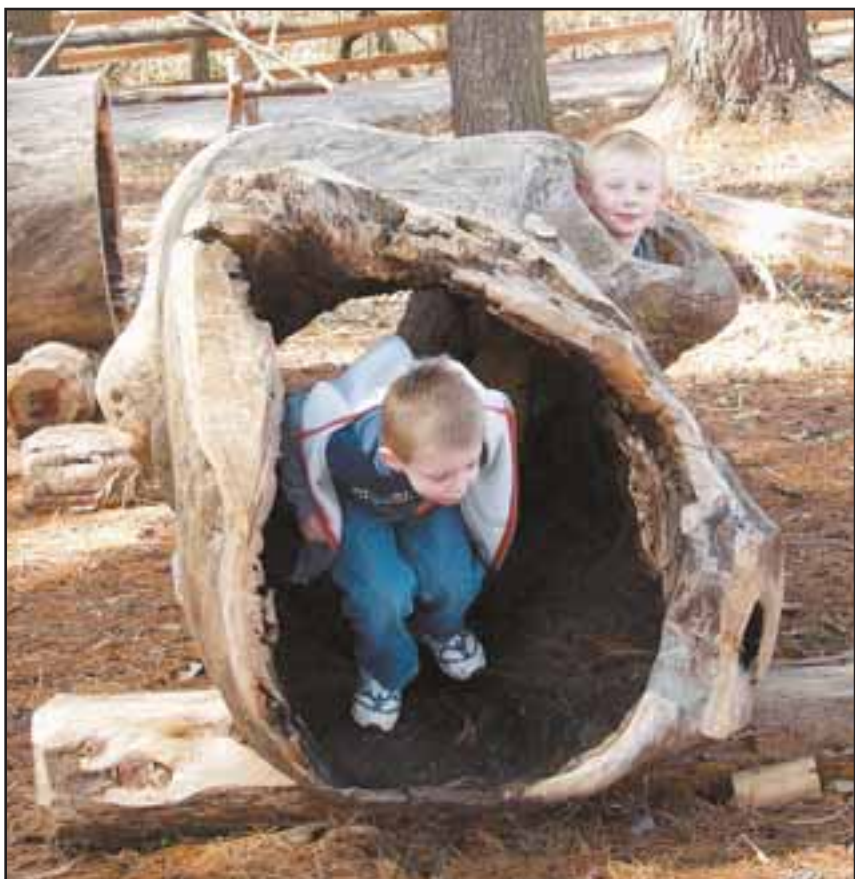
"That's an incredible brain exercise for kids," she remarked.

The music "room," includes a stage and marimbas (similar to a xylophone) for kids to play. The build-it "room" has blocks and tree branches ready to be stacked and constructed in any number of combinations. And the crawling/climbing area includes a series of tree trunks in varying heights for kids to walk across and a canopy of curvy branches that kids can tie scarves on to create something — maybe a hammock, Toth suggested, but that's just one idea.

"We're just providing the materials," she remarked. "We want kids to be creative and think of all sorts of ways to play here."

That's not to say that the Nature Explore Classroom is the only place where kids can experience this kind of activity, Toth stressed.

"Even playing in the backyard is •See Nature Explore Classroom 4B



This hollowed out sycamore tree found by SNR staff near the gravel bar at the Meramec River sparks a variety of imaginative play as kids crawl through it, climb on top of it and poke their heads out the side.



Alex Treis, Union, stacks a grouping of small tree trunk blocks in the build it area of the Nature Explore Classroom.