

May 18, 2009

Hi Everybody,

In case you haven't already heard, we wanted to let you know about some `visitors' in our classroom. A couple of weeks ago, teachers brought in some crickets in a tank, for kids to observe. At first, the clear plastic tank was empty except for the crickets and a small piece of egg carton which they liked to hide under and crawl around.

At group time teachers showed the tank with the crickets, and explained that these were living creatures, and that we could watch them, but we would have to take care not to disturb them. We reminded kids that loud noises might bother the crickets, and that we should be careful not to bang on or lift their tank.

Kids were excited to huddle around the tank and watch. We offered magnifying glasses and gradually began to change their habitat. The first things we added were some apple slices, and a cotton ball soaked in water, to provide food and a water source. Children wondered what else the crickets needed, and we found some information online and from books at the library

We learned that crickets like to crawl on and dig in damp sand, so some kids helped get sand wet and teachers added that to the tank. A few kids noticed that they liked crawling on the egg carton and suggested we put in some other things to crawl in and on. We added a couple toilet paper tubes, and later some sticks, rocks, leaves, and branches. It was fascinating to watch the crickets come out of hiding to crawl around in the dirt. Later that week, we let the crickets go outside.

Then, we got a shipment from Insect Lore, and our classroom was swarming with critters again. This time, a bunch of ladybug larvae and some fuzzy caterpillars captured kids' interest. The ladybugs in their larval form resembled tiny alligators, and their clear-dome habitat allowed us to watch as they crawled around and ate the food provided with the kit.

Again, the books from the library aided us in finding out more about what to expect as they developed. Kids were surprised to see they were not red and that their spots were hard to see without a magnifying glass. Teachers as well as kids found out that they also go through a transformation, attaching themselves to the inside of the dome when they are ready to go into their pupal stage, where they rest for 5 or 6 days, before emerging as the more-familiar red-with-black-spots adults. We now have a few adults and some pupas still attached to the dome. There is less we can do to change the ladybugs' habit, but we did add a couple raisins soaked in water to provide food. Soon, we'll let those go, too.

The most exciting insects we've had come to visit are the caterpillars. They arrived with their own food, and tiny cups to live in until they formed their chrysalises. We talked at a couple of group times about their metamorphosis, and showed pictures of the process. Most kids had some idea that they would be turning into butterflies. Showing pictures about the stages, from egg to caterpillar, to forming a j-shape with their bodies, then making a chrysalis, helped kids visualize the process. Even more interesting was actually watching it take place. We cautioned kids not to bump or touch the cups, and described how interfering with the process could mean they wouldn't complete their transformation. Although kids couldn't touch, they were interested in observing every day. They reminded each other to be gentle, and to not even touch the table.

Once the caterpillars formed their chrysalises teachers placed them in two nets in our classroom. Again, we had many reminders for each other about not touching the20nets, and being careful around them. We have been waiting since last week to greet the butterflies. A poster in our room shows many different types, including the Painted Ladies ours will grow to be. While we wait, we have offered kids the chance to paint and draw their own designs on precut butterfly shapes, and to use butterfly shaped stencils. Many have incorporated their own butterfly designs into their pictures. Others traced the stages of growth with tracing paper. When the butterflies emerge, they'll feed on orange slices and flowers dipped in sugar water. After a few days, we'll let them go too.

So if you're hearing words like pupa and chrysalis, frazz (the caterpillar's poop!) or probiscus, now you know where it's coming from. Watching the life (and sometimes, death) cycles of these insects has been an interesting journey. If you get the chance, stop in to see the chrysalises, or in a few days, butterflies, who've been visiting our classroom.

\*Update - We have butterflies!? All the chrysalises have emerged! We've been watching them fly around their nets, and expect to let them go today or tomorrow. Look for them in the neighborhood while you're out and about!

Anita and Kerstin