



Why We Love

Teaching at the Zoo



Kristin Ziarnik leads a Little Love Bugs class.

“Where else can you talk about a jaguar and then actually see one?” says Heather Thomack. Her enthusiasm for teaching at the Milwaukee County Zoo reflects that of all the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM) instructors. They love it here. The animals are close by, sometimes even in the classroom. Instructors write curriculum and create colorful classrooms that immerse children in topics from rabbits to animal healthcare. They don’t have to issue grades. They let children choose some of their own activities and learn at their own pace. Parents or grandparents can come to classes for younger children. “The parents often are surprised,” says James Mills, director of the ZSM’s Conservation Education Department. “Our classes surpass their expectations. They say they would have started taking classes earlier, if they had only known. Parent and grandparents can’t wait for a younger child to reach age 2 so that they can attend several more years of programming.” ZSM classes range from age 2 to 14. Classes develop a child’s natural curiosity about animals into an “ecological understanding,” says Mills, of how animals, plants and humans are interdependent. Adds instructor Chris Uitz: “Classes at the Zoo put children in a place where their imagination and curiosity come pouring out.” Read on for fun examples of how we teach and how children learn here at the Zoo. **If you want to get in on the fun, check our Web site: zoosociety.education. Zoological Society classes or summer camps are held nearly year-round.**

Fun in learning

I remember overhearing a girl say to her parent after class, “We had a thousand pieces of fun today!” It always reminds me of how important it is to make each educational moment fun. We constantly challenge ourselves to improve our classes and make activities that are hands-on and interactive. The child didn’t even realize she was learning at the same time she was “playing.”

– instructor *MaryLynn Conter Strack*

How kids learn

When teaching nearly 300 children each month, I am lucky to be a part of many “eye-opening” moments. A favorite example: I was teaching the concept of mammals in an Apes and Monkeys class for 3-year-olds. A simple way to classify mammals is to say they are animals that have hair or fur on their body. We identify apes and monkeys as mammals. Then we ask the children: Are you a mammal? We mess up the hair on the top of our head while saying, “I’m a mammal.” One boy said his dad was *not* a mammal. Why not? “Because he is bald,” he said. Taking this opportunity as a teachable moment, we immediately checked to see if he could find hair anywhere else on his dad; there was hair on his legs and arms. So we could classify Dad as a mammal, too! It was great to witness the thought process that went through the boy’s head at only 3 years old, connecting what he learned to his everyday life.

– instructor *Kristin Ziarnik*

How ZSM classes teach problem-solving

We encompass the whole child when teaching classes and writing curricula, and I think that is the reason we make such strong connections to children. One of my favorite experiences has been watching a child work through a difficult moment and seeing how proud he or she was of the achievement. I teach animal-related art classes. When children envision the art they want to create and make a mistake related to their artwork, their first reaction is to be emotional and upset. Before a project, we point out that a mistake is an opportunity to create something new in their artwork. If you make a mistake, we tell them to stop, step back, look at their project and decide how to turn the mistake into a part of their picture.

I have watched children do this hundreds of times, and it is amazing to see them learn how to take an emotion, feel it and then constructively express a way to problem-solve. – *Patty Trinko, assistant director of the ZSM Conservation Education Department*

How ZSM classes teach 2-year-olds

People would ask me, “What can a 2-year-old learn about animals?” It’s actually quite amazing what a young child can learn. She learns what a frog eats because she remembers jumping for “flies” while wearing a frog costume. He learns that milk comes from cows because he “milked” a fake cow. They learn that birds hatch out of eggs because they sat in a giant nest and pretended to do just that. – *MaryLynn Conter Strack*

How ZSM classes inspire

I hire interns to work in our summer camps program. During an interview last year an intern applicant said that she had attended Zoo classes since she was 3 years old, which influenced what she wanted to do for a living. She wanted to be a zookeeper. It was amazing to hear someone who was now in her early 20s remember how inspired she was by something we had taught her years ago. – *Patty Trinko*

How classes “awaken” something within

There is a time during many classes for ages 2 and 3 when the children and their adults make an animal costume together. It is fun to watch them. Afterward, we bring out a special full-length mirror so the children can see themselves as the animal. It’s so interesting to witness their reaction to that first glance at their reflection, everything from smiles and laughter to quiet amazement.

– *instructor Molly Del Vecchio*

Teaching 3-year-olds

A grandmother told me about how her granddaughter taught her Sunday school class everything she had learned in my bat class here at the Zoo for 3-year-olds (with an adult). She picked up Stellaluna (a plush-toy bat from a children’s story) and started to teach about the body

parts of the bat. She explained how bats have four fingers and a thumb (bones in the bat’s wing), along with what they ate, when they hunted for food and that they were mammals. The grandmother said the girl practically repeated my entire introduction about bats. It was at that moment that the grandmother saw how much her granddaughter had learned. The grandmother continued bringing her to class every month for several years. – *Patty Trinko*

Why teaching at the Zoo is different

- A unique difference for me is teaching children alongside their grown-ups. – *Kristin Ziarnik*
- I feel that students who tend to struggle in a school classroom setting tend to excel in our Zoo classroom. – *instructor Rynanne Lee*

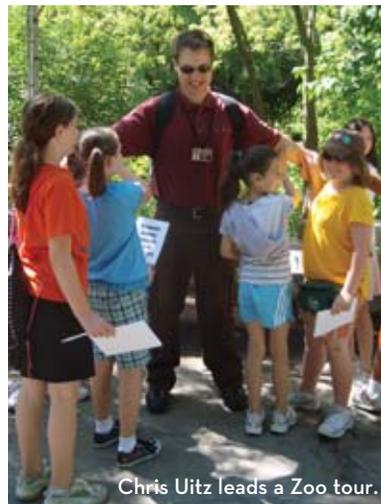


Heather Thomack shows a live turtle to students.



James Mills

- Classes at the Zoo give a child an opportunity to learn about animals and related science topics in a hands-on environment. If there is something we can't bring to the class, we have the whole Zoo to use as a resource. – *instructor Michelle Bublitz*
- By working in an informal education setting, I am not required to place the same emphasis on assessment. That allows students to engage in their learning in a different way. – *Kristin Ziarnik*



Chris Uitz leads a Zoo tour.

Challenges of Zoo classes

One of the biggest challenges is breaking through the perception that we can bring any animal in the Zoo to our classrooms or to schools. We have many programs that we take into schools. I often joke with children that I can't bring an elephant to school because an elephant can't buckle its seat belt in the car. We don't have the capability of bringing rare or large animals into schools. For safety reasons, we use only the Zoo's “education animals,” such as hedgehogs, chinchillas, rabbits, fruit bats, snakes and small owls. Children are excited about the animals we bring.

– *instructor Chris Uitz*



Sue Weis with a turtle artifact

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Favorite Topic to Teach

I like teaching something new or different. Examples: Until people come to turkey class, they have no idea that turkeys can fly at more than 55 miles per hour or that a turkey chick is called a “poult.” Until they see a bat up close, they may not realize it has fur. Until they touch a turtle, they don’t know it has 13 scutes on its back. – *instructor Emily Artin*

Conquering a fear of animals

One mom was afraid of bats and did not want to pass on her fear to her 3-year-old daughter. So she decided to take the girl to my bats class at the Zoo. She told me in advance that her own mom was afraid of bats and never took her into the Zoo’s Small Mammals Building, which houses bats. When I saw her at the door, I talked to her about what was going to happen in the class and how to handle it so she did not pass on her fear to her daughter. Near the end of class, we went behind the scenes to see a fruit bat close up. I let the mom stand with me at the back. Mom held her composure even though she was terrified. After dismissing the class, I asked the zookeeper if she would let this mom see the bat again so she could work on her fear. The zookeeper agreed and spent some time gently acclimating the mom to the fruit bat. It was impressive to see the mom slowly open herself to this animal. At the end, her daughter thought that bats were “the best animals ever.” The mom thanked me over and over. It was a truly beautiful moment to see a parent care so much for her daughter that she was willing to face her own fear. I loved helping her move through fear into a place of acceptance. – *Patty Trinko*

Conquering fear of class

While teaching the Turtles class to 2-year-olds, I saw a dad and son who were at Zoo class for the first time and were nervous. The boy was hiding behind his father’s legs. Our classes have a variety of learning stations, and I told them they could choose any activity

that interested them. This also gave them the chance to observe what others were doing and to slowly, and on their own terms, warm up to the class. Soon they were at the painting station and then playing with others at the sand/water table. When it was time for the movement portion of the class, I was amazed to see them both *fully* participating with the group, pretending to be turtles tucking in and out of their shells while smiling and laughing at each other! It left quite an impression on me that within an hour’s time this reluctant parent/child duo had not only learned something about turtles, but also had worked through their own doubts together – and were having fun! – *Molly Del Vecchio*

Using animal artifacts

The education department has plenty of animal skulls, fur, mounted fish, bones and other animal artifacts. These make great teaching aids because they show children the structures of an animal. – *instructor Sue Weis*

Bringing life experience

Having traveled to Africa, I am able to add personal experiences to classes. Also, I have worked in several nature-center education programs with a wide array of animals, including wolves and raptors. – *Ryanne Lee*

Unexpected lessons

Sometimes it’s the things we don’t even know we’re teaching that make a big impression. In our child-only classes before going on tour in the Zoo, we always review with the children what to do if they get lost. We tell them to “super-glue” their feet to the ground and stay there until the teacher comes to get them. A parent told us this story about her boy who had attended our classes: On a family vacation to Disney World, the boy got separated from the parents. The frantic parents re-traced their steps and found the boy exactly where they last saw him. They hugged him and asked, “How did you know to stay here?” He said, “I super-glued my feet, like at Zoo class.” – *MaryLynn Conter Strack*



Patty Trinko teaches an art class.

In a class for 2-year-olds, MaryLynn Conter Strack shows a rabbit.