Bringing children close to nature

Forest walks offer sensorial experiences, contribute to kids' overall development

Photos: Bernama

WHILE most parents opt for playgrounds or shopping centres as weekend destinations, one kindergarten teacher has taken a different approach by introducing children to hiking and forest exploration activities.

Farah Zahira Zahari began organising the programme during school holidays last December after noticing growing interest among parents who wanted their children to gain experiences beyond the confines of the classroom.

She said activities such as nature walks, clay play and environmental observation were not merely recreational pursuits but also contributed to children's physical, emotional and social development.

The idea emerged after friends started asking Farah Zahira to include their children in activities that had initially involved only her own children and close acquaintances.

The mother-of-five said exposure to the natural environment was increasingly important as children were spending more time on digital devices.

"When they are in the forest, all their senses are engaged. They observe, listen, touch and move.

"This helps develop hand-eye coordination and stimulates their overall growth without them even realising it," she told Bernama after a programme called Toddlers Forest Exploration at Bukit Wawasan in Puchong, Selangor.

She said interacting with soil, mud and insects could also benefit children who had sensory sensitivities.

"Some children are initially afraid to touch soil, dislike getting dirty or feel squeamish around insects.

Farah Zahira: Exposure to the natural environment is increasingly important as children are spending more time on digital devices.

"However, when they are given the opportunity and encouragement to play freely with soil and mud, they gradually become more confident.

"For me, it is immensely rewarding to see children enjoy exploring nature and trying new things."

The programme is divided into two groups: children aged two to five participating alongside parents, and those aged six to 12 taking part in group activities.

Farah Zahira said the support of her husband, as well as her friend Nur Azura Sulb, a Selangor Forestry mountain guide, had been instrumental in ensuring the programme ran smoothly.

She said safety was the top priority, with organisers conducting preliminary site assessments to evaluate trail conditions, emergency access points and telecommunications coverage.

"The biggest challenge is parents' concerns about their children's safety.

"However, once we explain safety procedures and they see how the programme is conducted, most become much more at ease," she said, adding that the programme maintained a ratio of one teacher for every six to seven participants.

Seven-year-old Erhan Malique Mohammad Khairul Nizzam – who attended with sisters Hessa Eiliyah, five, and Elma Haneeyah, two – described the forest adventure as enjoyable.

"It was fun because I got to play with clay and climb trees.

"There are so many things to see in the forest, like mushrooms and insects," the boy said.

Siti Rohaya Aini Abdullah Najib, who attended with her children Muhammad Al Fateh, six, and Aaira Raihana, two, said: "We live in the city and in a high-rise property, so my children seldom have the chance to interact with nature.

"Activities like these allow them to explore new things and spend quality time with the family," said Siti Rohaya.

For single mother Siti Nuruljannah Abdul Rahman, the programme provided her only child, Muhammad Umar Raees, two, with valuable experiences.

"I was a little worried because he is still very young and he even had a brief tantrum when he became sleepy.

"However, I could see that the programme was well managed.

"My son seemed to enjoy himself throughout the activities," the software engineer said.

(Above) Participants learning about nature and the environment as Farah Zahira leads the Toddlers Forest Exploration event. (Below) Happy faces at Bukit Wawasan in Puchong.