



Kid Zone Early Learning Center

Teaching in the Garden and Growing a Garden Team

Site: Kid Zone Early Learning Center

Garden director: Jill Ohland, Food and Nutrition Director

Location: Hopkins, Minnesota

Type of garden: Raised beds, in-ground beds, orchard, berry patch

Size of garden: 20+ beds, fruit trees

Garden uses: Educational, community

Food grown: Cucumbers, zucchini, apples, pears, plums, peppers, sunflowers, bush beans, pole beans, soybeans, peas, cherry tomatoes, pumpkins, ground cherries, goji berries, aronia berries, gooseberries, strawberries, raspberries, dino kale, curly kale, chives, dill, basil, mint, rosemary, thyme, potatoes, carrots, radish, golden beets, rhubarb



Teaching in the Garden

At Kid Zone, kids participate in weekly, year-round nutrition and garden education through the “Here We Grow!” program, run by Kid Zone’s Food and Nutrition Director Jill Ohland. The program is centered around sensory and exploratory learning in the garden, and Jill leans into teaching through garden maintenance and unstructured exploration. She prioritizes open-ended, hands-on experiences in the garden while keeping lesson plans in the back of her mind and pulling tidbits from them whenever relevant.

Strategy in Action: When kids help with watering in the garden, they learn about plant roots. Jill will pull a plant out of the ground, show kids the roots, and explain how the roots are like little mouths – taking up food and water from the soil. Through this simple, short lesson, kids learn to water the soil surrounding the plant, rather than the leaves.

“I find it really important for kids to be exposed to a well-rounded interaction with food, and a big part of that at this age is just being exposed to different kinds of foods and teaching them how to talk about those foods.”

Jill Ohland, Food and Nutrition Director

In the winter, indoor lessons are focused on exploring food after harvest. Kids get to explore topics like food preparation and the nutrients found in food through hands-on activities like butter making and taste-testing. Much of the time, when kids are trying new foods, the goal is simply to give kids the language to describe the food they’re eating. These winter lessons help give kids a well-rounded experience with food and continue building their connection to the food system even when the garden is bare.

Strategy in Action: Using a figurine named “Organ Annie,” Jill teaches kids about their intestines and the benefits of probiotics and fermented foods. To accompany this lesson, kids get to try foods like kimchi and kefir.

Growing a Garden Team

Kids and their families make up the majority of Kid Zone’s garden team, since Jill is the only hired staff that cares for the garden. Families are always looking for fun, unique, and free experiences that get them out of the house, and many Kid Zone parents are eager to become more involved in the Kid Zone community. Jill uses these motivations to her advantage as she recruits help from families.



Recruitment Strategies for Growing a Garden Team

- ▶ A “Weekend Weeding and Watering Warriors” sign-up sheet, shared via the monthly Kid Zone newsletter and passed around at Kid Zone garden events.
- ▶ Hosting monthly garden events, featuring crafts, sensory activities, a food and drink station, and garden maintenance.
- ▶ Opening up the garden to families during pickup time and on weekends for informal garden maintenance opportunities.
- ▶ Offering available harvest to families as an incentive for helping with maintenance.

Tips from Kid Zone

- ▶ **Find passionate people in your community.** People who are passionate about gardens and garden education can offer important – and often needed – support for your program.
- ▶ **Mini lessons are better than no lessons.** With limited resources and time, it can be hard to take on full, elaborate garden lessons. But any time spent in the garden, no matter how short, can have an impact on kids.
- ▶ **Save money on garden materials by reaching out to local companies.** Kid Zone sourced logs from a local tree company to build raised beds – saving money for Jill and the tree company, who no longer had to pay to dispose of them.

▶ Advocate for yourself and your garden program.

Share the benefits of your program with your site’s leadership team and don’t be afraid to ask for what you need – whether that be funding, additional staff support, or something else.

The Successes and Benefits

- ▶ **Increased willingness to try foods.** Kids are much more willing to try new or unfamiliar foods in the garden. For example, kids usually refuse to eat kale when it’s offered at home or in the classroom. They do, however, love snacking on it in the garden.
- ▶ **Exposure to new, unique foods.** Kids get the opportunity to try new foods – like gooseberries – that are less common and harder to find in most grocery stores.
- ▶ **Bringing the garden home.** When kids return home after their day at Kid Zone, they share stories and lessons from their time in the garden. Many families have started their own gardens at home because of how much their kids love gardening at Kid Zone.

“At this age, I want their experience in the garden to be sensory. I want them to be able to feel the dirt, and I want them to understand where our food is coming from.”

Jill Ohland, Food and Nutrition Director