



***Explorar!* A Summer Bridge Program at the Morris Arboretum**

Overview

Explorar! A Summer Bridge Program at the Morris Arboretum was created through a collaboration between the ACLAMO Family Center and the Morris Arboretum. The program, first launched in 2016, was designed to provide wide-ranging outdoor learning experiences at the Arboretum for English language learner (ELL) children in the Norristown Area School District who are:

- considered at-risk for underachievement or academic failure due to complex language, educational, and socio-economic barriers, and are
- currently enrolled in the ACLAMO Family Center program in Norristown, Pennsylvania.

Each summer, ***Explorar!*** program staff—with representatives from both the Morris Arboretum and ACLAMO—utilize an educational approach with lessons that creatively integrate Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Math (STEAM) to motivate and inspire young learners from the ACLAMO Family Center program. This cross-disciplinary approach is widely recognized as being key to providing young people with the skills needed to be successful - as students and as future members of the workforce. In addition, the *Explorar* program staff incorporate daily outdoor team-building exercises, physical activities, journaling, crafts, and a nutritious breakfast and lunch for the young participants.

The program runs for six weeks, with each week exploring a different nature-based theme. Throughout the six weeks, the children are encouraged to act as “citizen scientists” —exploring, observing, engaging, and inquiring about the natural environment. Each participant collects specimens, records his or her observations, and is encouraged to share their findings with their group. There is also a career exploration component each week, where the children have a chance to meet and learn from experts in the themes that they are exploring that week.



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In 2018, a Counselor-in-Training (CIT) component was added to the *Explorar!* program, specifically designed for ACLAMO teenagers who have “aged out” of the *Explorar!* program but are interested in experiential education and in securing job skills. Each year, the CITs are involved in program planning. They receive significant training before shadowing and assisting staff throughout the six-week program. They are also monitored by a Work Force Development Supervisor at ACLAMO and receive a stipend for their work.

The program traditionally culminates with a family day, where parents and siblings can join the *Explorar!* participants to share in their children’s summer learning experiences and enjoy a day out at the Arboretum together.

Program Value

As the population of English language learner (ELL) children in regional public schools continues to grow, so too does the depth and complexity of the educational needs of these children. Currently, there are over 2,500 ELL children enrolled in the Norristown Area School District, from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Research shows that ELL children can do well with appropriate instruction and supportive services and can build a foundation in English for school success. However, children who do not have these supports are at much higher risk of underachievement, school failure, and disinvestment in school, leading to higher drop-out rates.

Research also shows that children often experience academic gains or losses over the summer months. Not surprisingly, children from low-income areas are more likely to lose what they have learned during the school year than children from middle- and upper-class areas, who are often involved in well-resourced summer camps and enrichment programs. Because the foundation for learning and success in school is formed in the early grades, building bridges of learning support through summer activities and programs can make a significant difference in the lives of children from underserved communities.

The Morris Arboretum and the ACLAMO Family Center in Norristown continue to be committed to exploring ways in which to work together to strengthen educational outcomes among at-risk children in Montgomery County. *Explorar!* was designed and launched to address this critically important issue. Through engaging and interactive experiences at the Morris Arboretum, children from the Norristown community’s ACLAMO Family Center enjoy hands-on learning experiences that supplement their in-school education.

Ongoing Assessment

In 2017 the project team began administering both pre-lesson surveys and post-lesson reflections on a weekly basis in order to track attitudinal and behavioral changes among participants throughout the summer season. These surveys are brief, including both closed and open-ended questions. The project staff analyzes the data upon the close of the season in order to assess programmatic successes and weaknesses.

In addition, ACLAMO maintains its own data sets related to student achievement throughout the school year. Test scores may be considered – to some degree - in assessing the program’s value, but it must be noted that there is no research basis at this time to determine a causal relationship between the program and test scores.