



Forest Preschool Parent Handbook

We're excited that you and your child are joining the Forest Preschool community at North Branch Nature Center! This handbook is designed for you to learn more about our school and the Center. Forest Preschool closely follows the regular school year and is directed by Mary Zentara. If you have any questions about Forest Preschool after reading, please contact Mary at mary@northbranchnaturecenter or (802) 229-6206.

NBNC MISSION STATEMENT

We're a small preserve with a big heart at a gentle bend in the North Branch of the Winooski River. For more than a decade, North Branch Nature Center has put people in touch with the sights, sounds and sensations of the wild within our capital. North Branch is firefly light sparkling in a child's eye. It is a lecture hall where we learn the secrets of warblers and willows and weather. And it is a quiet place to walk or ski, swim or sit, or simply to do nothing beside the river. We seek to impart a sense of wonder and curiosity about the natural world and share exquisite educational experiences with early learners.

NBNC FOREST PRESCHOOL PHILOSOPHY

Forest Preschool is guided by the idea that children are naturally drawn to nature, need nature to thrive, and learn with enthusiasm and a sense of wonder when they spend ample time in natural spaces. The forest and fields offer an ideal setting for children to learn about themselves, each other, and the world. Our program, Vermont's first nature center-embedded preschool, is modeled on the European styled forest kindergarten in which children spend their days immersed in nature, playing and learning outdoors, except in extreme weather conditions. A balance of structured and open-ended programming, free play, and discovery in a natural environment supports the development of the whole child and inspires relevant, meaningful learning. We empower children to be active in their own learning process by encouraging and supporting each child's innate curiosity with emergent curriculum and paying careful attention to personal interest in the context of what nature presents us each day. FPS supports all learning styles with mindfulness of the 8 Intelligences. Children learn about their world in a personal, meaningful fashion, developing a sense of agency and self-efficacy, as well as a lifelong love of learning. All the while, we encourage respect and gentle caring for nature, ourselves, and one another. With an eye towards the future, our place-based educational model supports children as they develop and explore their sense of belonging and relationship to the earth and to those around them. We nurture a sense of community and a wide circle of caring that is deeply rooted in place.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

THE LANDSCAPE OF OUR PROGRAM

Forest Preschool enrolls children ages 3.5 – 6 years old. Our learning community and budding naturalists and spends their time outdoors among abundant wild wonders playing, exploring, and learning. We learn through play not only in nature, but with nature and engage all of our senses in order to connect with nature more deeply. Play and learning with nature may take the form of concocting culinary delights out of mud (all the while developing foundational math science, and literacy skills), building animal homes out of sticks, or perhaps making marks, letters, or numbers on log rounds with charcoal. We also provide opportunities for children to learn how to use real tools including hammers, whittling peelers and saws that promote fine motor skill development, a sense of agency, and a positive self-concept

Each day and throughout the seasons, we use a gentle daily rhythm. Our rhythm includes free play, creating with nature, movement, circle time, songs, storytelling, exploration, discovery, free play again, and reflection. We use songs and storytelling to assist in developing foundational literacy skills. Foundational math is explored intentionally and as opportunities in nature present themselves.

We offer children an assortment of natural material and props that inspire play, exploration, learning, and direct connection with nature upon their arrival. We call these offerings of rocks, log rounds, sticks, pots and pans, etc., “Loose Parts.” Loose Parts aim to encourage spontaneous, imaginative play, creativity, exploration, cooperation, problem solving, and critical thinking. Lessons emerge daily and generous space is provided for learning to flow from personal interest, discoveries, and what nature offers throughout the seasons. We supplement the learning process with emergent curriculum to support interests and feed curiosity.

Because learning and risk-taking often go hand in hand, we also support children’s exploration of healthy risk-taking. This may take the form of climbing a rock, small tree, balancing on a log, etc. In taking healthy risks, children develop confidence and the ability to assess and calculate risk for themselves.

Through all that we do, careful attention is paid to cooperation and the development of social skills that enhance one’s self-concept and nurture caring and gratitude for our human and natural communities.

We use abundant opportunities in the natural world to encourage:

- Imaginative play
- Creativity
- Cooperation
- Empathy and emotional intelligence
- Healthy risk taking
- Cognitive development
- Fine and gross motor skill development
- Stewardship for the environment and one’s own health and wellbeing

FPS AND PARENT/FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

Forest Preschool establishes positive, reciprocal relationships of mutual trust and respect with families, recognizing that shared goals benefit the child and their education. FPS views parents as the experts on their child/ren, understands the importance of links, consistency, and support between home and school, and invites parents to be involved in the Forest Preschool program. Overall, FPS views teachers and parents as essential partners in providing the best educational experience for the child.

PARENT/FAMILY COMMUNICATION

FPS offers a respectful, inclusive, open-door communication policy with all parents and caregivers. Forms of communication include:

- Registration intake form: family goals for child/ren, areas of child interest, areas of potential child support, prior school and outdoor experience
- Academic calendar
- Daily verbal and written communication with parents
- Information board
- Weekly email communication with parents
- Monthly Newsletters
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Monthly blogs

Personal information such as a child not eating breakfast in the morning, having a “melt-down”, staying up very late the night before, having a runny nose, etc. is important for us to know and is best communicated verbally at the start of the morning. If a major event occurs in your child’s life (such as divorce, death in the family, etc.), please try to contact us the day before school. The best way to reach Mary is via email: mary@northbranchnaturecenter.org or on her cell phone at (802) 595-4255.

PARENT/FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Forest Preschool encourages parent and family involvement in our program. We invite involvement in several forms including:

- Welcome potluck
- Exchange of ideas
- Sharing a skill, craft, story, song, or music, cooking experience; sharing about a particular topic of interest with the children; preparing a special food, etc.
- Holiday and special celebrations
- Special school day events
- Special NBNC events
- Family nights
- Parent Information Night
- Open House
- End of the year celebration
- Parent/family feedback and ideas for involvement

SCHEDULE OF THE DAY

Each day is structured with a familiar pattern to support children as they engage with play and learning, the natural world, and one another. Thoughtful attention is paid in creating gentle transitions from one portion of the morning to the next.

8:30 am: The morning begins with an offering of natural “Loose Parts” material to inspire learning and personal growth through spontaneous play and exploration. In addition, this is often a time to explore an open-ended, nature-inspired art project or prompts related to the seasons and early childhood developmental markers.

9:15 am: Clean up and bathroom break.

9:30 am: Time for moving observation, discovery, and trail games.

9:50 am: We come together for circle time to share songs, oral stories, finger play, or puppet shows.

10:00 am: Snack time. This is also a time for children to share personal stories and observations.

10:30 am: Children become active again, following their curiosity, engage in flow-learning, all the while supported by emergent curriculum. Children may choose to become “chefs” in the mud kitchen, weave natural material into an outdoor loom, explore, engineer with sticks and rocks, look under logs, initiate imaginative play, watch a bird, build a mouse house, create, follow animal tracks, balance on a log, experiment, discover, etc.

11:45 am: We come together again for an end of the morning circle to sing and share gratitude, discoveries and/or observations.

12:00 pm: Lunch time.

12:30 pm: Morning session pick-up.

12:45 pm: Rest time.

2:00 pm: The afternoon begins with “Loose Parts” play as children transition from nap/rest time. Depending on interest and time, options will be available for continued emergent learning, focused projects, wander on the land, or group documentation of learning.

3:20 pm: Closing circle.

3:30 pm: Time to go home.

ACTIVITES AND BENEFITS

Activity Developmental Benefits

Activity	Developmental Benefit
Spending time outdoors for an extended period in rain, sun, or snow	Development of self-care skills, resilience, and confidence
Playing imaginative games using whatever natural resources and ideas that come to mind	This helps the child explore their own thoughts, develop their imagination and problem solving skills
Role play	Shared imagination, drama, team work, recollection of models of behavior, empathy
Building shelters or other structures from branches, with the help of other children and adults	This requires goal definition, planning, engineering, teamwork, and perseverance
Counting objects to looking for mathematical patterns	Mathematics, visual recognition
Sorting items using naturally available objects	Early mathematics skills, naming objects
Listening to stories; singing songs and rhymes	Literacy, art, drama, concentration
Arranging items to make a picture, or building a toy	Spatial awareness, art, problem solving
Writing letters, names in the dirt or snow	Literacy, fine motor skill development
Climbing trees, rocks, steep hills and exploring the forest and fields	Improves strength, balance, physical awareness, risk assessment, positive self-image
Real tool use	Builds confidence, tunes fine motor skills, and develops important life connections
Playing hide-and-seek (camouflage) with others	Develops children's theory of mind by rewarding accurate anticipation of the thoughts and actions of others
Walking to the forest from the building	Improves strength and stamina, develops sensory awareness
Exploring or reflecting alone	Self-awareness, character development, connection to place
Putting on and taking off clothing layers, wearing a backpack, repacking after snack	Dexterity, self-care, spatial awareness, independence, and confidence

Forest Kindergartens (ages 3-6) have been well established in Germany since 1993. Numerous studies abroad were conducted to determine how students benefit from such programs. We invite you to explore the Forest Kindergarten Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_kindergarten for more information and research statistics.

LOGISTICAL INFORMATION

CALENDAR

Forest Preschool runs from September to June, Monday - Friday from 8:30 am to 3:30 pm and Fridays 8:30 to 12:30. You may enroll your child for half or full days up to 5 days. We closely follow the Montpelier school system calendar. FPS is a drop-off program.

CANCELLATION

In the case of extreme weather, we may need to cancel Forest Preschool. **If local area public schools have canceled for the day, we will follow their lead and do the same.** We will notify you in two ways: by email and by telephone.

We are not able to reimburse for missed days during the school year.

TUITION

A \$200 deposit is required to secure your child's spot in the program. Once your on-line and paper registration forms and deposit have been received, our Registration Coordinator will confirm with you that your child is officially registered.

Tuition payments are due monthly. We encourage families to enroll in our monthly auto-pay program.

LATE PAYMENT POLICY

If a monthly payment is not received by the start of 3rd week of any month, your child will not be able to attend class until the payment is received.

After Forest Preschool has begun, the initial deposit and first month's tuition payment is not refundable.

POLICIES & PROCEDURES

CHILD SAFETY IN THE FIELD

Child safety is at forefront of all we do at NBNC. Forest Preschool has helped develop and follows clear national safety protocols and best practices each and every day.

FPS teachers embed safety protocol and best practices regularly into the daily rhythm at FPS so that children learn how to be safe in multiple scenarios and learn the language necessary to support and facilitate their own safe behavior. In doing so, we cultivate a sense of accountability within our class that creates a culture of caring and awareness.

Please refer to the Safety for Outdoor Learning packet for detailed protocols including, FPS Emergency Protocols and Peeler Safety.

We encourage you to talk about and practice these protocols with your children at home. Consistency at home and school will help strengthen your child's awareness, ability to calculate risk, and will set a strong foundation for self-care.

Children will learn to:

- Think critically about cause and effect
- Communicate clearly with teachers around play and exploration
- Assess their own abilities - take part in responsibility for their own safety
- Calculate healthy risks

EXTREME WEATHER

In the case of extreme weather, we may have to decrease or eliminate our outside time.

HANDWASHING and BATHROOM PROCEDURES

Please assist your children with washing their hands upon arrival and departure. This is a very effective way to limit the transmission of the germs that make us sick and will ensure that we provide a safe environment. We start all our days outside, so please have your child use the bathroom before hand washing and dropping them off to us.

DROP-OFF & PICK-UP PROCEDURE

Drop-off is at 8:30 am. Pick-up is at 12:30 pm or 3:30 pm outside at the education barn. Routines are important to children, so we will be working on a smooth start & end. ***A punctual drop-off and pick-up enables a smooth transition for your child.*** Please do not drop off or pick up a child without signing in or out. **Please remind extended family members and friends to sign in & out.**

Process: Upon arrival, please follow hand-wash/bathroom routine above, put any extra clothes inside child's backpack, sign child in on the sign-in sheet indoors, and deliver children to us.

Please pick-up your child promptly at 12:30 pm or 3:30 pm.

Sometimes late pick-ups are unavoidable - life happens. **However, please keep in mind that late pick-ups can be stressful for children.** Please contact NBNC if you are going to be late.

Late Pick-Up Fee: Families who establish a habitual pattern of late pick-ups may be subject to late fees and will be notified in advance. Fees are \$5.00 plus \$1.00 for every minute after closing time. Any expenses accrued will be added on to and collected with the following tuition bill.

PICK-UP AUTHORIZATION

Children can only go home with people who are listed on the "Identification and Emergency Information" form. In the event of an emergency, people will be contacted in the order in which you list them on the form. If you need to add someone to the pick-up and drop authorization list, please amend it in writing.

REST TIME

FPS will supply a rest mat for each child. The parents are responsible for a blanket, pillow, and comfort item. All bedding must be washed weekly and returned on the first day of the week.

SUPPORTING SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL LEARNING

We have a series of practices that create a supportive learning environment at Forest Preschool. Every day, we:

- Attend to the social, emotional, physical, and mental needs of each child through holistic programming.
- Treat each child with compassion, respect, and dignity.
- Engage in supportive, open communication with children and their families.

- Practice mindful awareness of our bodies, our actions and our communication.
- Utilize seasonal, emergent curriculum that empowers students to be active in their own learning process.
- Utilize positive forms of social and emotional guidance including re-direction and respectful peer communication. All measures will be shared with families, discussed openly, and approached as a communal effort.
- Assess the hazards and risks present in the setting and make decisions related to the risk/benefit analysis.
- Assure that all activities are developmentally appropriate.

GUIDANCE

Guidance at FPS is positive and supportive. We utilize modeling and careful observation of children's behavior to encourage and support positive behavior. Keeping children engaged in age-appropriate activities and offering choices, especially outdoors, tends to bring out the best in them. Clear and consistent expectations help guide our student's behavior, learning, and development. Redirection is an effective technique we utilize as well as and positive reinforcement. Both work wonders in our classroom. We will support children in the practice of solving their own problems as long as it is safe.

If children need assistance around conflict resolution with peers, we support them by using caring, "I" statement oriented communication, providing opportunity to express ideas and feelings. This may take the form of pausing play, guiding each individual to express what she/he would like to other to know, and encouraging problem solving with the information she/he just learned. Redirection and validating feelings are additional tools used to guide children.

If a situation arises where a child is unable to regulate behavior regardless of teacher support, she/he will be asked to take a break and invited back to the group when ready to take care of her/himself, others, and the natural world.

BEHAVIOR POLICY

If dis-regulated behavior is persistent, we will invite parents, teacher, and director to work together to address behavior/s and create a plan.

Our policy is as follows:

- Unprovoked hurting of another child and /or using objects as weapons to injure staff or children leads to a call to the parent(s).
- Serious injury of a child or staff member, or habitual behavior that compromises the safety of the children, may lead to termination of enrollment.

Every effort will be made to help parents and children resolve difficulties that may arise in the program.

Steps toward resolution include:

- Scheduling a parent/teacher conference
- Developing a plan of action agreed upon by parent and teacher.
- Possible withdraw of the child if a behavioral problem is so severe that no positive solution can be found.

WHAT'S BEST FOR YOUR CHILD

In some cases, Forest Preschool may not be the most appropriate or suitable early care environment for your child. On occasion, we will implement a one-month adjustment period after which a determination

will be made about continuing enrollment. After thoughtful discussion between staff, parents, and the director, a family may be asked to make other arrangements for their child.

FOR ENROLLED FAMILIES

CLOTHING

This is an outdoor-based program. It is imperative that your child be dressed in proper clothing to ensure that she/he is protected from the elements. We will spend the majority of our time outside, rain or shine, except in the case of extreme cold or lightening. The Swallow's Nest will be used in such cases. If your child is warm, she/he will be happy and able to participate in the fun! There is no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing!

The following list of clothing is necessary for your child to have:

- Rain pants
- Rain jacket with a hood
- Long-underwear bottoms and top (moisture wicking)
- Wool sweater or fleece top
- Snow pants (insulated with bibs and snow-skirts around the ankles)
- Snow jacket (must be insulated and water resistant)
- Socks (wool or fleece, **NO COTTON** please)
- Boots (rain boots for the wet seasons/ insulated boots for snow season)
- Hat (wool or fleece)
- Mittens (water proof or water resistant) 2 pairs
- Neck warmer

LAYERING is key to your child comfort at FPS. Children will be very active outdoors at times but during others, will not. Layers will routinely be taken off and often put back on. Whatever a child is not wearing will be stored in her/his backpack. Long underwear (i.e.; poly-propylene or capilene, fleece, or wool) is essential - it wicks moisture off of the body. Hats are required in cold weather. When thinking about boots, we suggest getting a pair that is one size larger than your child's foot. This will create "dead-air space" to assist with insulating the foot. The best insulation for the feet is two pairs of wool socks with water-proof boots that have some wiggle room.

There are natural consequences if a child chooses to not to wear proper clothing. She/he will get wet, cold, tired, and very unhappy! **However, to ensure a positive experience for everyone involved, all children are required to wear the proper clothing.** If you need help with some of the above items, please ask. We often have extras or can help you locate items.

BEFORE LEAVING YOUR CHILD

Before you may leave your child with us, we must have the following:

- Enrollment form
- Tuition for the first month
- Immunization/exemption forms
- Emergency/medical form
- Tool permission slip if you would like your child to participate in curriculum that involves the safe use real tools such as hammers, whittling peelers, and saws.

CONFERENCES

Parent teacher conferences will be held twice a year, once in the fall and once in the spring.

YOUR CHILD'S FIRST DAY

ADJUSTMENT TO FOREST PRESCHOOL

Starting preschool is a big step for most kids. Some children are excited to participate and they easily acclimate to class. Other children are nervous at first but quickly “warm up” as they get engaged in activities. Still others may have a longer adjustment period as they gradually become comfortable with the new environment and expectations. There is no right way for a child to “adjust” to preschool. Our expectations are open-ended and we understand your child will acclimate in her/his own unique way.

SAYING GOODBYE

Figuring out the best way to support your child at drop-off can be an anxiety-inducing process for parents as well as children. If a child does not know when the parent or caregiver is leaving, a child may experience stress while waiting for that moment and he/she may never fully settle. If you or your child is concerned about saying goodbye, we are more than happy to work with you to make a plan prior to the first day of school.

We suggest parents create and communicate a clear plan detailing exactly what will happen and then follow through decisively. Planning and practicing a routine beforehand can be comforting. It may be difficult to walk away on the first day of school, but in doing so, you will assure your child that it is alright for them to do the same and join in with their peers. A quick, direct exit from the classroom will provide secure boundaries for your child and signal to them that you are confident they are going to be safe and happy.

GETTING DIRTY

We will send home wet, muddy children often! Mud play is core to the natural experience of children exploring nature. Please use old clothes and let your child know that at forest preschool they CAN GET DIRTY and you don't mind! Packing a plastic bag/s for bringing home muddy clothes is helpful. A tarp or old sheet for your backseat is also a good idea. Please keep a full change of clothes in your child's daypack in a zip-locked bag. You know your child - if they love water & mud, please bring a second change of clothes in a zip-locked bag with child's name on it and it will be kept here at the center.

WATER

Each child should have a water bottle that will not drip when on its side. A bottle with a flip or leak proof spout is ideal. Water bottles with twist caps are difficult for small hand to manage. Staying hydrated in all types of weather is important for regulating body temperature. Only water in the water bottle please!

HEALTHY FOOD

We ask that your child comes prepared to be outside by bringing a healthy snack for midmorning and lunch to be eaten at noon. A snack and lunch with a component of protein helps keep little bodies warm. Sugary snacks and juices deplete our abilities to maintain a healthy core body temperature. Soup in a thermos really helps keep a body going! Please try to send zero waste snacks (washable containers instead of heavy packaging on individual items.) Any waste coming to school with child will go home with your child.

POTTY TRAINING

We require that children are potty-trained and comfortable using the toilet away from home. We will make bathroom runs (bringing groups inside to use toilet) and assist your child with gentle reminders, routines, & expectations. On occasion, students might be in the field and too far from indoor toilets. In

those situations, they will be guided about relieving themselves outside. If your child is not familiar with urinating outside, please practice at home before school starts.

STAYING HEALTHY

CHILD SICKNESS

If your child is ill or not feeling themselves, please keep them at home. If your child requires a fever reducer to function, this is a sign that he or she should stay home. This is for both their own and other children's safety. If children become ill while in our care and need to be sent home, we will attempt to call parents/guardians first, followed by emergency contacts.

Parents will be asked to pick their children up from preschool or keep them home under the following conditions: 1) Temperature over 100 degrees F. (Child must be fever free for 24 hours before returning to school) 2) Vomiting 3) Diarrhea 4) Pink-eye. Please note: Any outbreak of communicable disease will be communicated to all parents.

If you plan to keep your child home for the day, please contact Mary Zentara by email, cell phone: (802)595-4255 or text, or call NBNC prior to the start of the day.

TICKS

Of course, a school with a focus on nature is going to spend time in wild, natural areas! Please check your child EVERY SINGLE DAY when your child returns home. Long pants with tick repellent on them add protection. Deer ticks are extremely small. Ask us for a "tick card" if you aren't positive how to ID them.

COMMUNITY EVENTS

The North Branch Nature Center is a valuable resource to the central Vermont community. From monarch tagging, bird banding, summer camps, After School Programs, and ECO Programming, to our naturalist lecture series, Bird Fest, Caterpillar Day, and miles of trails to discover, NBNC has much to offer anyone who wants to learn about and enjoy the natural world. We hold many public events throughout the year, some at no cost to you at all. Please consider becoming a member of NBNC and enjoy the benefits of discounts on special programs! For membership information contact: info@northbranchnaturecenter.org. Also, consider "friending" us on Facebook receive regular postings and stay abreast of what's happening at NBNC!

North Branch Nature Center does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, religion, or national origin in its admission policy or conduct of its educational programs.

Thank you for becoming part of the Forest Preschool community at the North Branch Nature. We look forward to getting to know you and your children this year!