



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 the program and the Center. The fall and spring sessions run twelve weeks each and are taught by North Branch Nature Center staff member and FPS Director 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, 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 natural world. Our program is modeled around the German style Waldkindergarten in which children spend their entire time outside in rain, shine, or snow except in extreme weather conditions. Playing and learning outside in all types of weather allows children to develop self-care skills, confidence, and resilience. Our nature immersion program uses natural space to support learning and development of the whole child through all five senses. We empower children to be active in their own learning process by encouraging and supporting each child's innate sense of wonder and paying careful attention to personal interest in the context of what nature presents us each day. In this way, learning is meaningful and can flow spontaneously through play with nature, in nature, and with other children. An inquiry-based style of teaching that engages the senses and is informed by each child's curiosity and personal interests is used to guide, rather than direct children in their learning process. In this way, children take ownership of their learning and develop a sense of agency and self-efficacy. All the while, we encourage respect and gentle caring for nature, ourselves, and one another. With an eye towards the future, our program is fashioned to nurture earth stewardship and community involvement in later years.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

THE LANDSCAPE OF OUR PROGRAM

Forest Preschool enrolls children ages 3.5 – 6 years old. Our community of budding naturalists 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 to connect with nature more deeply. Playing with nature may take the form of concocting culinary delights out of mud, building animal homes out of sticks, or perhaps making marks on paper or log rounds with charcoal. We also provide opportunities for children to learn how to use real tools including hammers, saws, and whittling peelers that promote fine motor skill development and a positive self-concept

Each day and throughout the seasons, we use a gentle daily rhythm. Our rhythm includes spontaneous play, creating with nature, movement, circle time, songs, storytelling, exploration, discovery, free play, and reflection. We use songs and storytelling to assist in developing foundational literacy skills. Numbers are explored often by counting in nature as opportunities present themselves.

We offer children an assortment of natural material and props that inspire play, exploration 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 people innately desire taking risks, we also support children’s exploration of healthy risk-taking. This may take of 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 gratitude for all aspects of human and ecological communities.

We use abundant opportunities in the natural world to encourage:

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

SCHEDULE OF THE DAY

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

9-9:30 am: The morning begins with an offering of nature related “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.

9:30 am: Clean up and bathroom break.

9:40 am: Hike to Deer Camp with ample time for observation, discovery, and trail games along the way.

10:00 am: We come together for circle time to share the joy of singing, listening to an oral story, finger play, or puppet show.

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

10:20 am: Children become active again, following their curiosity, and engaging in flow-learning. 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, make friends with a tree, watch a bird, build a mouse house, create, follow animal tracks, balance on a log, experiment, discover, play, etc.

11:50 am: Lunch and rest.

12:20 pm: Free play in the forest.

12:45 pm: Closing circle. We come back together to share gratitude and observations and then round out the day with song.

12:50 pm: Head back to the barn.

1:00 pm: Pick-up at the barn.

ACTIVITIES AND BENEFITS

Forest Preschool can be described as a school “without walls.” Although our setting differs from a traditional preschool, our basic goals are the same – to care for, stimulate, and educate young children.

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 have been well established in Germany since 1993. Many studies have been conducted to determine how students benefit from such programs. The following excerpt is from the Forest Kindergarten Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_kindergarten
 “When children from German Waldkindergartens go to primary school teachers observe a significant improvement in reading, writing, mathematics, social interactions and many other areas.[19] Boys may be less intellectually able than girls at typical school tasks such as reading and mathematics, so forest kindergartens have been recommended in the early years.[20] Roland Gorges found[19] that children who had been to a forest kindergarten were above average, compared by teachers to those who had not, in all areas of skill tested. In order of advantage, these were:

Improvements
Knowledge and skills in specific subjects
Reading
Mathematics
Constructive contributions to learning
Asking questions and interest in learning
Motivation
Sports

Art and imagination
Music

“

LOGISTICAL INFORMATION

CALENDAR

The spring Forest Preschool session runs every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday from 9 am to 1 pm. You may enroll your child for one day. We follow the Montpelier school system calendar. **FPS is not in session during local school’s spring break.** FPS is a drop-off program.

CANCELLATION

In the case of extreme weather, we may need to cancel a Forest Preschool morning. **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.

In the case of a canceled day/s, we will reschedule **ONE** make-up **during the week of June 5th - 9th,** the week following our regularly scheduled end of the spring session.

If for some reason your child cannot attend a session, we are not able to reimburse you for that missed day.

TUITION

\$580 for a 4-hour day once a week for a 12-week session. **A \$200 deposit is required to secure your child’s spot** in the program. You may include the deposit with the registration form and send it all to NBNC. Once your deposit has been received, you will receive confirmation from our Membership Coordinator and your child will be officially registered.

The 2nd tuition payment of \$200 is due on the first day of the session. The **3rd and final tuition payment of \$180 is due on week 6** of the program.

LATE PAYMENT POLICY

If the second payment is not received one week after the start of the program, your child will not be able to attend class that day. If the final payment is not received one week after the middle of the session, your child will not be able to attend class that day. If you are unable to meet this payment schedule, please let us know prior to the start of the program and we can set up other arrangements.

After a Forest Preschool session has begun, the initial deposit and first tuition payment is not refundable.

POLICIES & PROCEDURES

CHILD SAFETY IN THE FIELD

Forest Preschool follows clear safety protocol around the use of real tools and fire and follows numerous other safety protocol and best practices to ensure your child’s safety. At the same time, we follow a rhythm of the day and use particular routines that reinforce those protocols. In doing both, a foundation of safety and caring, which is integral to all the work we do at FPS, is laid. This is why the children in our program thrive. 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.

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, peanut-free 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 9 am. Pick-up is at 12 pm outside at the education barn. Routines are important to children, so we will be working on a smooth start & end at 9am & 12pm. *A punctual drop-off enables a smooth transition for your child.* Please do not drop off or pick up a child without signing in or out. Please remind anyone else who is driving 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 or let us know that they're here.

Please pick-up your child promptly at 1 p.m.

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 your pick up and drop authorization list, please amend it in writing.

COMMUNICATION

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 anything major 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

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, non-violent communication with children and their families.
- Practice mindful awareness of our bodies, our actions and our communication.
- Follow seasonal, emergent curriculum that empowers students as leaders of their own learning.
- Utilize positive forms of discipline, such as redirection, awareness of crisis cycle and interrupting

this cycle at an early, pre-crisis stage, respectful conversation away from the group, reflection time, etc. 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.

BEHAVIOR POLICY

If a negative behavior occurs in the preschool, staff will address and seek to resolve it directly with the child. If the difficulty persists, it is important that parents, teacher, and director work together to address behavior/s. 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) to come and take the child home.
- 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, a group situation 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 our entire time outside, rain or shine, except in the case of extreme cold or lightening. The education barn will be used for our activities 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!!**)
- Boots (rain boots for the wet seasons/ insulated boots for snow season)

- Hat (wool or fleece)
- Gloves or mittens (water proof or water resistant) 2 pairs
- Neck warmer

LAYERING is the key, as your child will be very active outdoors and, at times, sitting. 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 as it wicks moisture off of the body. Hats are required in cold weather. In 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 in insulating the foot. The best insulation for the feet is two pairs of wool socks with water-proof boots that have wiggle room.

There are of course natural consequences to not wearing the proper clothing. You 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 sometimes have extras or can help you locate others.

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 their 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. It is important to recognize that if a child does not know when the parent is leaving, there can be constant stress waiting for that moment 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 ahead of time. The most important thing is to tell your child exactly what will happen and then follow through decisively. Planning and practicing a routine the night before can be comforting. When it comes time to say good-bye, trust that doing so just that is the best course of action. It can be difficult to walk away on the first day of school, but in so doing 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.

FPS is a drop-off program. To ensure a consistent dynamic for all children, parents may not attend class with their child.

GETTING DIRTY

We will send home 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. 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.

STAYING HEALTHY

CHILD SICKNESS

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 in order to return to school 2) Vomiting 3) Diarrhea 4) Pink-eye. Please note: Any outbreak of communicable disease will be communicated to all parents.

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!

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!