



## **FOREST KINDERGARTEN PARENT HANDBOOK**

Welcome to the Woolly Bears Forest Kindergarten Homeschool Program!



*Sowing Seeds of Respect for Self, Others, and the Earth*

Flying Deer Nature Center, 5 Abode Road, New Lebanon, NY 12125, 518 794 6687, [flyingdeernaturecenter.org](http://flyingdeernaturecenter.org)

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## MISSION AND VALUES

### **Mission**

Flying Deer Nature Center is a wilderness school and community dedicated to mentoring children, adults, and families in deep connection to nature, self, and others.

We facilitate nature immersion, fostering a lifelong relationship with the natural world and an ability to listen deeply to ourselves and to others.

### **Values**

We believe humans are inextricably connected with the rest of nature, and offer dynamic nature experiences to awaken a felt understanding of this connection. A result of our work is *deep nature connection*, an intrinsic state of being happy, alert, energized, and connected to one's surroundings through knowledge, senses, empathy, and intuition.

Our work attempts to nurture deep nature connection in our students and community. We utilize the 8 Shields approach to education and mentoring. We seek to create a culture in all programs that encourages practicing the core routines of nature connection, and offers both group learning and, when possible, one-on-one mentoring. In and outside of programs, Flying Deer seeks to create an environment where all involved feel safe to be themselves and to share their gifts. We hope to support all in our community on their journeys of deep nature connection.

In our early childhood education programs, we nourish young children's sense of wonder, curiosity, and reverence through exploration, observation, inquiry, and free play. We also wish to guide children this age toward becoming independent, as well as socially and emotionally adept at interacting with their peers.

### **Core Elements and Practices**

- Place-based connection to the same natural landscape over an extended period of time
- Rhythm experienced through the changing of seasons, as well as daily engagements
- Unstructured free play and loosely structured activities that cultivate the ability and confidence to create/build (i.e., materials that are open-ended and stimulate the imagination)
- Emergent curriculum as the children develop interests individually and as a group
- Mixed-age group for diverse modeling
- Risk and safety awareness through modeling and leadership
- Reflections on learning through sharing and stories
- Nature awareness and primitive skills, including foraging for wild edibles, tracking animals, building shelters, making crafts from the gifts of the earth, finding ways to stay warm and comfortable in all situations, identifying bird calls and alarms, honing our awareness through sensory games, learning to travel lightly on the earth
- Listening to stories and singing songs that inform and inspire, and bringing home our own stories of our experiences and adventures.

## **Attributes of Deep Nature Connection**

*Happiness:* The light in the eyes of a young child giggling with glee as they jump in a puddle in the rain.

*Vitality:* The electricity in the body of a child as they hear, *Hey, want to come catch a frog with me?* and dash off full speed toward the fun.

*Deep Listening:* A teenager listening deeply to a younger sibling who excitedly tells the story of a recent experience—listening as though this child is the only person in the world telling the most interesting story in the world.

*Empathy:* A young adult who has spent their entire life connecting deeply with the plants, trees, birds, and animals at their Sit Spot, bringing a sense of empathy and understanding to a challenging disagreement with another person.

*Helpfulness:* A busy parent who slows down in the midst of their day to tune in to what a loved one, friend, acquaintance, or stranger might need right then—even if it's simply opening the door for someone whose hands are full.

*True Aliveness:* An empty nester who, with a new abundance of free time, reconnects with life by doing the things that bring a lasting, glowing vitality to their being.

*Love:* An elder, radiating love as they sit before a group of children and parents, captivating them with a meaningful story and opening their hearts and minds.

*Quiet Mind:* Moments of deep silence that open a window into one's soul and the soul of the world.

## SAFETY AND HAZARD PREVENTION

- **Ticks:** If we find an embedded tick, a caregiver will remove it with tweezers and place it in a zip-lock bag with an alcohol cotton pad. We will label it with the date and child's name and give it to the parent upon pickup. Children are encouraged to wear boots and rain pants. We recommend using an essential oil tick repellent, and will have some in our camp kit.
- **Lightning:** If lightning is present, we will leave the site and seek cover in our main office. We will closely monitor weather before leaving on any excursions, to avoid being far from cover in a storm.
- **Illness and Injury:** Please keep your child at home if they have a fever of 100° or more. Please keep your child at home if they have vomited within the past 24 hours or are demonstrating other signs of an upset stomach. If a child has a fever or vomits during a program, parents or caretakers will be called to pick them up. In the event that the parent or caretaker cannot be reached when a child is injured or sick during a program, the emergency contacts (other than parents) listed on your child's health form will be called. While waiting for a parent/caretaker, the child will rest with an instructor or other Flying Deer staff. When weather is challenging, the child will rest indoors with a Flying Deer staff member.
- **Stinging Insects:** All known allergies must be recorded on the child's health form. If one wasp is seen, the group will be instructed to freeze. If more than one is seen, the group will be instructed to move away calmly and then freeze.
- **Water:** No swimming. Any creek or water play will be at wading level and will be closely monitored at all times.

## **PROGRAM POLICIES AND COMMUNICATION**

### **Age Policy**

Children attending Woolly Bears Forest Kindergarten must turn 4 by the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month of the start of each session, and must be no older than 7 by the end of each session. For the Fall session, children must be 4 by September 1. For the Winter session, children must be 4 by January 1. For the Spring session, children must be 4 by March 1. Exceptions will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

### **Counselor Program and Elders**

Mentorship through different generations and ages is key to developing meaningful relationships with the land and the larger community. We offer a counselor program to teens ages 12–17, who will join us as guides in the forest to mentor younger children through leading games and activities, and telling stories. We also welcome any elders within our community to share their stories and experiences with the children. Both teens and elders are essential assets to our programs and build a sense of a cohesive community over time.

### **Evaluations**

For children who are with us all year, we will be conducting periodical, informal evaluations of growth and development. These will be communicated to parents through photographs and a written description at the end of the Fall and Spring sessions.

### **Communication**

All changes in program logistics will be communicated via email. Snow days or any other cancellations will be via telephone. For closings/delays due to weather, we will follow the Chatham Central School District.

### **Story of the Week**

As part of our community culture, we use reflection as a tool for growth and a deeper understanding of ourselves as well as an organization—and we encourage the children to share with you at home. We communicate the latest happenings of our days in the forest through a weekly “Story of the Week” email. We use phones or a camera to take photographs in order to best illustrate learning and fun during our time together.

### **Parent Involvement**

If you would like to share talents and skills relevant to building nature awareness, or come in to tell an inspiring story, let us know! Visits must be scheduled in advance. At the beginning of each session, we will nominate a class parent to help organize our events and celebrations.

### **Community Celebrations**

The first day of each session, we have an opening circle for families and parents from 9:00–9:30 am. At the end of the first day, we will have a community potluck. On the last Thursday of each program, we have a celebration from 12:00–1:00 pm. We will also host a seasonal clothing swap.

## CALENDAR, SCHEDULE, AND DROP-OFF/PICKUP INSTRUCTIONS

### Yearly and Weekly Calendar

Our program runs in three sessions, Fall (12 weeks), Winter (6 weeks), and Spring (12 weeks).

We offer families three options for attendance:

- 1 day/week—Wednesdays only
- 2 days/week—Tuesdays and Thursdays
- 3 days/week—Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays

Each program day runs from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm.

### Fall 2018 Dates

September 18–December 13

No program on September 19 (Yom Kippur) and November 21–22 (Thanksgiving week).

### Winter 2019 Dates

January 15–March 28

Winter Break: February 19–21

### Spring 2019 Dates

March 12–June 6

Spring Break: April 23–25

More information and dates are also available on our website:

[flyingdeernaturecenter.org/forest-kindergarten](http://flyingdeernaturecenter.org/forest-kindergarten)

For all holidays, we follow the Chatham Central School District calendar:

[chathamcentralschools.com/calendar/](http://chathamcentralschools.com/calendar/)

**Snow makeup days** will be held on the week after the regular closing date for each session. Days are to be determined by staff.

### Typical Daily Rhythm

Our day starts at 9:00 am. We gather at the barn, where we say goodbyes and join our fellow Woolly Bears in games and an opening circle at 9:15 am. We then head to our campsite or visit another part of the forest. During this time, we weave in relevant activities and adventures. We have lunch and story time at 12:00 pm and then a closing circle before heading back to the barn at 1:00 pm for a short goodbye song with parents. Please arrive promptly at 9:00 am for drop-off.

**Drop-off and Pickup Times**

Please arrive promptly by 9:00 am with children fully dressed for the day. If you will be arriving later than 9:15 am, please text or call the designated instructor so we know to watch for you or can give you instructions on how to find us, as we will not always head to our campsite immediately after opening circle. On some days, we may not be able to accommodate late arrivals.

**Late Policy**

Please note that late pickups (after 1:00 pm) incur a fee of \$20 for each 15 minutes or portion thereof.

**Morning Sendoff**

We find that, for most children most of the time, a shorter goodbye in the morning is better. However, if you think—or discover—that your child needs you there longer, even into the program time, on the first day(s), we are happy to work with you. Contact us and together we will make a plan to help your child transition successfully into independent attendance.

**Extra Gear**

On the first day of the trimester, we will need a few extra minutes with you in order to receive your child's bag of extra gear for their bin. (See “What to Bring” on the following page.)

## WHAT TO BRING AND HOW TO DRESS YOUR CHILD IN EACH SEASON

Our goal is to make your child's experience of the outdoors a positive and comfortable one, and your dedication to properly dressing them is essential to the success of our program. We will be outside in ALL weather, ALL day. During the winter months, we will seek shelter for mealtimes, but for your child's safety and enjoyment, it is essential that they have what they need on every day of the program.

If even one child is unable to stay warm, it can affect the program, as we may need to shorten our outside time for safety. Please be aware of weather forecasts and dress your child appropriately. Keep in mind that, even on dry days, your child may get wet in the creek or from wet grass, and wet can equal cold! If your child arrives at the program without the proper gear, our staff may decide it is not safe for them to stay. In this situation, you would be asked to return with your child later in the day, with adequate gear.

### **Snack and Lunch**

We will provide a small, healthy gluten-free and sugar-free snack every day. Please let us know upon registration if your child has any dietary restrictions.

- Tuesdays: Popcorn and fruit or veggie
- Wednesdays: Seed butter on rice crackers and fruit or veggie
- Thursdays: Cheese or nondairy alternative, crackers, and fruit or veggie

Please pack lunch and water in easy-to-carry containers. We encourage you to send a "garbage-less" lunch (i.e., nothing to throw away). Tupperware works well, as do "thermos"-type insulated containers. Please don't send glass! An actual lunchbox is unnecessary and may prove too bulky, plus it is hard to hold on the lap while sitting on a log.

A lunch consisting of many small snacks works well. During the winter months, it is essential that the children get enough long-lasting calories from the food they eat. Please include more high-fat proteins, such as nut/seed butters, avocado, meat, or cheese.

We will have water jugs available to refill water bottles and offer warm tea on cold days.

### **Backpack**

Your child needs a backpack that fits well, is easy to carry, and is big enough to hold lunch and a water bottle. One of our goals is for your child to work toward self-sufficiency; if the backpack is crammed too full, it will be difficult to pack and, if it doesn't fit properly, it will be hard to carry. A 16-liter capacity is a great size for our purposes.

### **Fabrics**

Cotton sucks body heat away if it gets wet, even damp with sweat. This makes it great for t-shirts on hot summer days (and fine on warm days in fall and spring), but in general we avoid cotton the rest of the year. Polyester, silk, and wool all work better than cotton in an outdoor environment that is sometimes wet (from rain, snow, or creek time).

## **Extra Clothing**

At the beginning of each session, you will leave some extra gear with us, to be stored in your child's bin in our barn. On the first day of the session, please bring the required extra gear in a plastic grocery bag with your child's name on it. Anytime you need to replenish the bin, please bring replacement items the same way. We will use the plastic bag to send wet gear home. Please send only clothing and footwear that you don't mind getting wet and dirty. Please label all items (backpacks, too) with your child's name! It really helps us help you get your stuff back.

Note: The required items do not need to be purchased new. Check out thrift stores, or let your friends know you're looking for hand-me-downs. We will also hold children's clothing swaps.

## **How to Dress Your Child for Early Fall/Late Spring**

Dress your child for the weather that is forecast that day. In early fall and late spring, this often means long pants, a short-sleeved shirt, a warm upper-body layer, like a wool sweater or fleece, and waterproof boots with warm socks.

**Pants:** Rather than shorts, we recommend pants during fall and spring because they offer protection from scrapes, bug bites, poison ivy, and ticks. Even on dry days, your child is likely to get wet in the creek or from sitting on wet ground, so denim jeans are never appropriate in our program. Once wet, denim is uncomfortable and restricts movement, and takes a long time to dry. Quick-drying polyester pants (like jogging pants or, in cooler weather, fleece pants) are much better because they will stay warmer when wet and dry faster than cotton pants, plus they offer good mobility. A good pants system for this time of year is synthetic or wool, long underwear or pants (or even two pairs), under rain pants.

We recommend rain pants for every day! Rain gear makes a good wind block, even if it's not needed for rain or creek splashing. Look for rain pants with stirrups that go under the boot, or brands that include stirrups *and* shoulder straps—awesome! Don't leave the rain gear with us (unless it's an extra set) because you may find you need it first thing in the morning. Be aware that “winter” coats and pants are usually *not* waterproof.

**Socks:** Cotton socks are a bad idea. Polyester, silk, or wool socks are much better. Merino wool is soft, not scratchy, but if your child complains, try having them wear a pair of thin polyester liner socks underneath. On the warmest days, water shoes with no socks are fine.

**Shoes:** Water shoes (closed-toe preferred; back strap required; Crocs do not provide enough support), sneakers, or waterproof boots might all be appropriate, depending on the day. The grass is often wet in the morning, so it's good to start in boots. Muck-type neoprene boots are warm *and* waterproof; we like them a lot!

**Hat (optional):** Sun hats (such as baseball caps) really help to keep kids cool and protect the face and eyes from the sun. Warm hats (wool or fleece, not cotton) help warm the whole body when the weather is cold, or even on a cool morning.

**Mittens:** If it's cold enough to need mittens, choose non-cotton and preferably waterproof. Mittens are much warmer than gloves!

**Sunscreen/repellent:** If you are using sunscreen or bug repellent, please apply it to your child in the morning. If you want us to reapply these during the day, put them in a bag with your child's name on it to be left in their storage bin. Due to skin allergies and preferences, we are unable to supply these products, and we don't want preschoolers handling them on their own.

### **Extra Gear in Bin for Early Fall/Late Spring**

- A complete change of clothes: shirt, pants, underwear, and socks
- An extra upper-body layer *not made of cotton!* No cotton sweatshirts, please.
- Extra footwear: If not carried in the backpack, an extra pair should be left in the bin.
- Extra mittens—important in case the first pair get wet.

### **How to Dress Your Child for Winter/Early Spring**

Be aware of the weather forecast; if it is above freezing, you may need to dress your child for wet as well as cold.

**Base layer:** Silk or polyester long underwear and thick wool, polyester, or silk socks. Polyester pajamas are another good option. The key for this layer is to wick moisture away from the skin and insulate it with a breathable layer. Both shirt and pants are needed.

**Mid (insulating) layer:** This is another insulation layer between skin and the elements. The airspace between layers helps kids stay warm. Wool sweaters and fleece tend to work well. Both shirt and pants are needed. (This is where parents sometimes make the error of using jeans or other cotton pants. Please be sure all pant layers are wool or synthetic fleece. No street pants, even as insulating layers, please.)

**Outer Shell:** Snowsuits and coats with snow pants. One-piece snowsuits can be very warm and keep snow out completely. The disadvantages are that some snowsuits make going to the bathroom difficult, and they aren't as easily adjusted if body temperature changes—for instance, with activity level. Bib-style snow pants, combined with a warm winter coat, are a great solution. Be aware that “winter” coats and pants are usually *not* waterproof. An alternative is to wear a waterproof shell (raingear) over one or more insulating layers. Most young children don't sweat much, so breathability is not a big issue. In very cold weather, consider multiple insulating layers under the weatherproof layer.

**Socks:** Winter socks need to be extra warm. Merino wool is soft, not scratchy, but if your child complains, try having them wear a thin pair of polyester liner socks underneath. Thick synthetic socks (like polyester or polypropylene) or heavyweight silk are also good options. All of these retain some warmth when wet. Cotton clothing, including socks, is not appropriate in winter weather. Cotton holds moisture, either from sweat or the environment, and even damp clothing conducts away body heat and can make you cold.

**Footwear:** Winter boots must be well insulated and *completely waterproof*. Some “snow” boots are just water repellent. Consider purchasing boots that are one size larger than your child’s foot. This creates extra space to assist in insulation. The best foot insulation is two pairs of wool socks and waterproof boots that have wiggle room.

**Hat:** Warm hat (wool or fleece) that covers the ears

**Balaclava or neck warmer:** No scarves, please, due to the risk of strangulation when playing.

**Mittens:** Mittens should be waterproof (or as close as they get) and insulated. Mittens are much warmer than gloves! Mittens should be easy to put on, not too bulky, with good wrist coverage.

### **Extra Gear in Bin for Winter and Early Spring**

- A complete change of base layers (including socks), mittens, hat, and insulating layers (e.g., fleece pants and a fleece sweater)
- A second pair of winter or neoprene boots, if you have extra. We realize two pairs of boots is a big investment, but having good boots is key to getting your child out for extended periods in winter. Try buying them a size up so your child can get two winters out of them—the first year, perhaps, with an extra pair of socks.

### **Layers by Temperature**

Above 60°—Mid Layer

60° to 50°—Base Layer + Mid Layer

50° to 40°—Base Layer + Mid Layer + Lighter Outer Layer (such as coat, raingear)

40° to 25°—Base Layer + Mid Layer + Outer Layer

Below 25°—Base Layer + Mid Layer + Outer Layer + Additional Insulating Layer

### **Clothing Brands**

Some brands to look for: Patagonia, Marmot, North Face, Columbia, REI, Molehill Mountain MEC (Canadian brand). For kids’ raingear: Polarn O Pyret, Oakiwear, Celavi.

Backpacks: The L.L. Bean Junior Original Backpack: [llbean.com](http://llbean.com)

Boots: Any muck-type boot or insulated snow boots for winter. If you’re purchasing Bogs or a similar type of boot for the winter, make sure they have the warmest rating.

## Resources for Clothing and Supplies

[muckbootcompany.com](http://muckbootcompany.com)

[bogsfootwear.com](http://bogsfootwear.com)

[kamik.com](http://kamik.com)

[llbean.com](http://llbean.com)

[oaki.com](http://oaki.com)

[outdoorgearlab.com/a/11061/Introduction-to-Layered-Clothing-Systems](http://outdoorgearlab.com/a/11061/Introduction-to-Layered-Clothing-Systems)

[adventurousparents.com/](http://adventurousparents.com/)

[realtravelfrance.com/2014/11/15/why-wear-merino-wool/](http://realtravelfrance.com/2014/11/15/why-wear-merino-wool/)

[mamidea.com/webshop/babywearing-c-19.html](http://mamidea.com/webshop/babywearing-c-19.html)

[rei.com/](http://rei.com/)

[hm.com](http://hm.com)—great for thin wool thermals

[mountainwarehouse.com/us/kids/](http://mountainwarehouse.com/us/kids/)

[littlespruceorganics.com/](http://littlespruceorganics.com/)

[trashnothing.com](http://trashnothing.com)—for used clothing

## SONGS AND VERSES

### **Good Morning Dear Earth**

Good morning dear earth,  
Good morning dear sun  
Good morning dear trees and the flowers everyone  
Good morning dear bees and the birds in the trees  
Good morning to you and good morning to me.

### **Storytime Song**

Fairies of the storytime  
Come and share your stories with me  
I am listening with my ears  
And I'm sitting quietly

### **Meal Blessing**

Earth who gives to us this food  
Sun who makes it ripe and good  
Dear earth, dear sun, by you we live  
Our loving thanks to you we give

### **Lunch Bblessing**

I thank the earth for feeding my body  
I thank the sun for warming my bones  
I thank the trees for the air that I breathe  
I thank the water for nourishing my soul

### **Goodbye Song**

May troubles be less and blessings be more  
May nothing but happiness come through your door  
And may you have luck wherever you go  
The blessings outnumber the flowers that grow  
May the wind be at your back  
And the Sun be overheard  
May friends be at your side wherever you are led