



## **The School in Nature Parent Handbook**

The School in Nature is designed to give students an opportunity to participate in activities that emphasize outdoor and experiential learning. Foremost, our goal is to help students develop their capacity and passion for learning through exposure to an inquiry-based model of discovery and reflection. Our program will also include an emphasis on helping students develop their resilience, perseverance, focus, attention to detail, social and emotional skills and a deeper love for learning and nature as a whole.

At the core of the School in Nature is exposing students to projects and activities that support their academic development. This will be done through the regular use of nature journals, outdoor art projects, participating in activities that challenge them physically and working on daily puzzles/challenges that will allow them to practice core mathematics skills. We encourage collaboration with your child's regular school classroom teacher to enable our educators to support any areas of concern with your child whether that be academic, character, or behavioral.

There is substantial research from authors such as Richard Louv (*Last Child in the Woods; saving our children from nature deficit disorder*, 2005) to show that children benefit from this type of learning and, in some cases, it can help them develop their capacity to focus and improve their academic performance. In broad strokes the program philosophy is to help children:

- Develop greater resilience and confidence through hands-on outdoor exploration and guided experiential learning.
- Develop their leadership and social/emotional skills to support them at school and in other areas of their life.
- Foster a deeper love for learning and stewardship through inquiry-based outdoor projects that teach them to focus, persevere and take pride in their finished work.
- Discover and harness the unique qualities within themselves to contribute to the diversity and strength of our learning community.
- Develop and maintain their mental and physical health by attending a safe, rewarding and active experiential learning program that will act as an outlet and anchor in their schedule.



## Operating Procedures

- Educators and volunteers of the program agree to follow best practices including providing an abundance of opportunities for emergent curriculum, free exploration, child directed learning, play-based learning, 'risky play' and the inquiry approach.
- Educators and volunteers agree that our program is delivered rain-snow-or-shine, and will work diligently with children and their families to have students dress appropriately for the weather.
- Staff and volunteers must also model appropriate dress themselves. Indoor space will be used in the event of extreme weather, and all efforts to keep children comfortable as they learn and play will be made.
- In the case of extreme weather conditions that are unsafe for transportation, programming for the day will be cancelled. In most cases it will be up to individual families to decide if they can safely travel to the program. During harsh weather conditions that are safe for the children to be outside, students will participate in a variety of indoor classroom activities combined with shorter intervals of time outside. Indoor activities will always be related to nature and connected back to our experiences outside.

## Privacy Policy

- Your child's privacy is taken seriously and all steps possible will be taken to protect your child's privacy. You will be required to sign a media release consent form upon your child's registration in the program.
- Photos will only be shared once consent has been given and only for the purposes agreed upon, which may include program promotion (including our website, and social media), education, and parent updates. All individual's health information will be kept private and confidential and will not be shared with third parties unless we are legally required to do so. Please contact us immediately if you have any concerns regarding the privacy of your child.

## Drop Off and Pick Up

- Child(ren) can be dropped off at the School in Nature no earlier than **8:45am** and pick-up by **3:30pm** at the latest. If dropping off or picking up outside these times please notify the school. Closing circle starts at 3:15pm.



- When dropping your children off please park in the large parking lot by the barn.
- **Location:** 316362 3<sup>rd</sup> Line C, Heathcote, Ontario N0H 1N0

### **Health and Illness Policy**

- Staff and students will be asked to refrain from participating in the School in Nature programming until 24 hours after the last of the following symptoms have subsided:
  - Temperature over 101 degrees F
  - Vomiting
  - Diarrhea
- Students who experience any of these symptoms during School in Nature programming will be supervised and removed from the group while parents are contacted to bring them home.
- Students affected by communicable diseases must have their health care providers consent prior to returning to the Program.

### **Food Policy**

- Students will be required to bring their own lunch and snacks for each day they participate in the program. This will allow students to easily attain proper nutrition while following personal dietary preferences and restrictions. **Lunches and snacks must be nut free.**
- We ask that pocket snacks (in small easy to transport containers) be packed each day as well as an easy to transport water bottle.
- We ask that participants do not share snacks from their packed lunches.
- All staff and students are asked to wash their hands with soap and water prior to eating and after using the washroom at the School in Nature.

### **Risk Management**

- Schools in Nature present an abundance of opportunities to manage risk. From tool use, to fire building, to navigating steep landscapes, children at outdoor schools must learn to acknowledge, manage, and conquer daily risks. Risky play is also acknowledged and accepted in Forest School settings with careful management and supervision. The School in Nature takes all steps possible to manage risk so that students are exposed to healthy benefits rather than hazards. Daily,

seasonal, and individual risk assessments are carried out on site. Healthy risk management is modelled, and students are taught to encounter and manage the risks outdoor school presents.

- Examples of risks at a School in Nature/ Forest School may include:
  - Injuries from strenuous physical activities such as rock and tree climbing.
  - Injuries from improper tool use such as whittling knives and matches.
  - Reactions to environmental allergens including poison ivy.
  - Reactions to insect bites including bees, wasps, and ticks.
  - The potential for wild animals to visit our site such as coyotes, raccoons, and foxes.
  - Inclement or extreme weather conditions.

Staff make every effort possible to manage these risks in a safe and effective way. We embrace the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play that can be found at, <http://www.participaction.com/>.

### **Procedures for Tool Use**

- Tool use is introduced at School in Nature by educators who have experience using specific tools properly; after proper introductions, and trust with students has been established.
- Before tool use is introduced:
  - The first few weeks at School In Nature have passed where rules, routines, and boundaries are established.
  - Educators have become confident in their tool use with practice and experience.
  - Safe alternatives such as butter knives and vegetable peelers are used to increase students' confidence and experience working with tools.
  - Tools are inspected to be safe.
  - The working area, tools, and need for tools are assessed.
  - Permission from parents to use whittling knives has been given.
  - Tools are transported in a safe way by an educator.
- A safe well-spaced working area is established, "The Tool Zone".

### Procedure for Knife Use

- Perform risk assessment on knives, working area, and the user of knives:
  - Check tools and assign knives to individuals. KNIVES ARE PROVIDED BY INDIVIDUAL FAMILIES FOR THEIR CHILDREN'S USE, THEY MUST BE FIXED BLADE KNIVES, APPROVED BY AN EDUCATOR, AND HAVE A COVER.
  - Work with students one-on-one to train them and supervise them.
  - Knives are stored in a safe manner, by an Educator at all times.
  - A well-spaced, safe working area, or 'Tool Zone' is established that is designed for proper tool use.
  - Blades are covered when not in use.
  - Gloves are removed prior to tool use.
  - Cutting movements are always made in a direction away from the body.
  - The hand holding the material is as far away from the blade as possible.
  - Students must always be sitting, and cutting motions must avoid their legs.

### Procedures for Fires

- Establish a Fire Area with safe boundaries around it. Teach students how to enter and exit this area.
- Fire site must be free of hazards including tree roots, rough, and slippery ground.
- Assess weather conditions. Do not light fires when the wind is strong, the environment is too dry, or there is a fire ban.
- Maintain a safe distance of at least 1.5 m between fire and stump seats.
- Ensure seating is spaced to have a safe escape route.
- Keep fire 4m or more from shelters or materials that will ignite easily.
- **NEVER LEAVE FIRE UNATTENDED.**
- Have fire blanket, soaked bath towel, and/or water to extinguish fire immediately beside it.
- Have a water bucket full of fresh water for immersing burns.
- Keep flame height equivalent to or lower than knees.

### **Procedures for Cooking with Fire**

- Risks assess the fire area.
- Maintain proper hygiene with clean hands, utensils, and surfaces.
- Have soap and water or disinfecting wipes available for proper hand washing before and after cooking.
- Educators must ensure food is fully cooked by splitting it open before consumption.
- Use green wood if cooking on a stick and remove bark before cooking.
- Do not re-heat cooked food and avoid oily or high fat foods that risk high flames.
- Check that hair is tied back and clothing is not loose prior to cooking.

### **Toileting Procedures**

- Proper washroom facilities are located in the Elephant Thoughts School in Nature building. These facilities are regularly checked for cleanliness and proper supplies. When students are outside and a far distance from the main facility, they are encouraged to do 'nature pees' in private areas such as behind trees. Staff are prepared if 'nature twos' need to happen with proper materials and hand washing kits. This would be in the case that students are so far away from the main facility where washrooms are located, that they risk having an accident. Students will be taught to dig a hole in a discreet location, and to follow our 'leave no trace' policy.
- Parents are asked to always send an extra change of clothes for young children in the program who are just learning these proper techniques.

### **First Aid, Clothing, and Equipment**

#### **First Aid Procedures**

- Our First Aid Procedure plan is modelled after Forest School Canada's plan for responding to emergencies. All staff members and volunteers are familiar with this plan and it is carried in the orange First Aid Backpack that is present for all Forest School excursions and activities. All emergency health information including parent phone numbers, health card numbers, allergy and medication considerations are also carried in this pack. Staff who are trained and certified in first aid are on site at Forest School every day, and will take the lead in responding to emergencies should they arise at Forest School.

### **ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY FIRST AID PLAN**

*In the case of a serious accident or emergency at School in Nature, staff will respond immediately by:*

1. Assessing the circumstances of the accident or emergency. The educator with most seniority will take the lead in administering first aid. Other educators and volunteers will assist by contacting emergency services if required and supervising students.
2. Ensuring the environment surrounding the accident is safe, and all are accounted for. Ensure students are supervised and kept as calm as possible and receive safety instructions (eg. Put tools away).
3. Assessing the victim, and lead educator asking assistant to **call 911** if required. Lead educator begins to administer first aid. Person on the phone must
  - Describe the nature of the accident
  - Share medical information about the victim including age, gender, and relevant information from Emergency Health Form located in the orange backpack
  - Location: **316362 3<sup>rd</sup> Line C, Heathcote**
  - Report what first aid is being administered
4. Having another adult meet the ambulance and lead them to the scene of the accident.
5. Contacting parent or emergency contact on the injured student's Emergency Health Form. Have this person meet the ambulance at the receiving hospital with any health requirements (eg. medications).
6. Ensuring the remaining group of students are supervised and kept as calm as possible in a safe and central location.
7. Lead educator continues to communicate with emergency services until the situation is under control.
8. Reporting Accident on Incident Report Form as soon as possible.

### **IF THE ACCIDENT OCCURS TO A SCHOOL IN NATURE EDUCATOR**

1. Assess the extent of the injury and ensure the environment surrounding the accident is safe. Make best efforts to ensure students are supervised.
2. Other educators call emergency services **911** immediately if required.
3. Report the nature of the accident.
4. Location: **316362 3<sup>rd</sup> Line C, Heathcote, Ontario N0H 1N0**

5. Report first aid administered.
6. Report accident on Incident Report Form as soon as the situation is under control.
7. The Orange Emergency Backpack contains a first aid kit with bandages, gauze, antiseptic cleaners, Polysporin, Natural Tears and Benadryl among other first aid items. Medications that students require are also kept in the backpack, as well as all emergency forms.

### **Clothing and Material List**

- Proper clothing is essential for a happy, productive, and comfortable day at Forest School. Please follow the forecast closely leading up to your child's day and consider our following clothing policies. Depending on the weather please be prepared to bring:
  - Backpack packed with water bottle, lunch box, sunscreen, sun or warm hat, rain or snow gear (splash or snow pants and jacket or one piece), change of socks (preferably wool), and extra mittens in colder months. A bug jacket can be an optional item for warmer weather. (Camelbak has a junior sized backpack with water bladder and built in whistle that is a great design for hiking, but a larger bag would also be a requirement in this case.)
  - Indoor shoes (or slippers), and outdoor shoes appropriate for weather conditions of the day; running shoes, hiking boots, rain or snow boots are all suitable options. Shoes that cover toes are strongly recommended.
  - Weather Appropriate Outdoor Clothing - students should be dressed in layers for cold days including a waterproof outer layer, a base layer - avoid cotton if at all possible for this outer layer, a shirt or sweater layer, long pants, and again, wool socks or ski socks are highly recommended. (MEC has a good selection of appropriate outdoor clothing for kids, as does Columbia Kids.) Extra changes of clothes may be left at school for your convenience.
  - Optional items include personal nature reference guides and a compass. Please leave personal toys at home as they are not appropriate for the program and may get lost in the woods!
  - Show and Tell items may be brought from home to share and could include finds from nature, travel artifacts, and books!



### **Materials that will be provided include...**

- safety whistles
- clipboards
- paper, notebooks, sketchbooks, pencils, erasers, rulers, etc.
- nature Detective Kits - including a net, magnifying glass, notebook, and sketching materials.
- nature reference guides and program resources will be kept on site.

### **Inclement Weather Policy**

- School in Nature staff follow weather forecasts consistently and communicate this information with parents in extreme weather conditions. In the case of extreme weather conditions that are unsafe for transportation, programming for the day will be cancelled at least 1 hour prior to our regular start time. In most cases it will be up to individual families to decide if they can safely travel to the program. During harsh weather conditions that are safe for the children to be outside, students will participate in a variety of indoor classroom activities combined with shorter intervals of time outside. Outdoor time will be limited in weather below -25 degrees C and above 30 degrees C. All efforts will be made to maintain safe and comfortable exposure to temperatures.
- When dropping your child(ren) off at the School in Nature, if the driveway is too icy, orange cones will be put out to indicate the driveway is unsafe. In these instances, drop off and pick-up will be at the road.

### **Inclusion and Accessibility**

- We seek to maintain an inclusive and respectful environment for all participants in our program. We encourage all participants to follow the Golden Rule by 'treating other people and living things the way you would like to be treated'. All friends are welcome in the forest regardless of any status that may be perceived as a barrier. Staff seek to maintain this inclusive environment and will take necessary steps to do so whenever necessary. As such, financial aid and flexible payment schedules and arrangements are offered on an as needed basis and in a discrete manner to protect the privacy of individual families. We strive to offer clothing exchanges and maintain a collection of gear to be loaned as often as possible to increase students' accessibility to the program. Staff consistently reinforce our policy for inclusive behavior



and routinely revisit our “Golden Rule” policy by sharing a corresponding story, guiding respect circles, and facilitating conflict resolution among peers.

- Parents and students are encouraged to make staff members aware if they ever feel excluded for any reasons, and a team approach will be taken to ensure that inclusion and accessibility are maintained at all times. Efforts to maintain an accessible physical environment are also made on a routine basis.

### **Child Protection Policy**

- We take the prevention and reporting of suspected child abuse very seriously. Preventative measures against child abuse will be taken at all times, and staff understand their duty to report suspected child abuse immediately in accordance with the Child and Family Services Act. Our duty to report Child Abuse is reinforced during staff training.

### **Child Entry and Release**

- We require a written or verbal authorization if students are to be picked up by anyone other than parents and legal guardians named on students’ emergency medical forms. Should an unauthorized person arrive to pick up a student, that child will not be released into the care of the adult until verbal consent has been given over the phone.
- Staff will not release students to any person who appears to be or is suspected of being intoxicated at the time of pick up. Staff are legally required to care for the child in such cases. Staff will make arrangements for the safe transportation of the child by a parent or guardian who is not intoxicated.
- We understand all parents’ rights to access their children and information about their children regardless of marital status. Information and access will only be denied when there is a written separation agreement or court order provided to the school directing us to do so.

### **Planning and Observation**

- Planning for daily activities is done in a ‘backwards manner’ where educators plan activities and lessons that follow students’ interests from previous sessions. Educators work closely with each other and maintain excellent communication to prepare for activities, games, lessons, and provocations that emerge from student’s discoveries and

past experiences at Forest School. We closely monitor the value of our lessons and know when to redirect learning and play, when to provide more freedom and choice, and when to share more knowledge about particular areas of interest.

- Curriculum is uncovered rather than being covered at the School in Nature, and allowing opportunities for emergent learning is our top priority. Careful observations are made by educators every day to guide our backwards approach. Anecdotal notes of favourite activities and topics are made, video clips and photos are taken, and discussions including staff and students are continuous regarding these topics. The value of documented learning opportunities is discussed, and used to guide future planning. Reports on students' cooperation, respect, and learning are shared with parents in December and June of each school year. Reports are only issued for full time students in our primary / junior programs.

### **Behavior Management Policy**

- We strive to maintain an inclusive and respectful environment for all participants in the program. We expect that respect is always demonstrated towards ourselves, each other, and the natural environment. In the event that a student's behaviour is incompatible with the program, the program director reserves the right to end the student's involvement in the program. VIOLENT, AGGRESSIVE, AND INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR, INCLUDING SEXUALLY INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR, IS NOT TOLERATED AT SCHOOL IN NATURE. Any person who demonstrates such behavior is subject to being asked to leave the program either in the short term, or permanently.
- The Code of conduct for the program is to 'treat others as you wish to be treated!' In the event that the code is broken, students will receive guidance and gentle reminders of this. Students may be removed from their proximity to the group and guided through acceptable behaviour management by a staff member. In the case of repeated offences, students and parents will be involved to create a suitable behaviour correction plan. All efforts will be made to focus on the behavior that must be corrected and not the child. Behaviour management will be delivered in a positive manner and be designed to help children learn appropriate strategies and techniques. Healthy development of self- confidence and regulation are key components



of our program. Appropriate social problem-solving skills are modelled by School in Nature staff and discussed with students throughout the program.

- All needs of the child will be provided for at School In Nature. Children's need for attention, protection, supervision, proper food, proper clothing, proper shelter, and adequate water will always be met.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

- Staff and students are encouraged to follow the principles of 'Leave No Trace' as an effort to minimize the ecological impact on our school property. We recognize that having regular repeated access to the same special spots on our property can have an adverse impact on the environment as soil compacts and erodes. As such, we encourage all to stay on the trail when we are hiking, we also rotate the sites on our property that are used most often. Staff encourage students to leave all living and growing things the way we found them for all to enjoy. Staff and students monitor our most frequented sites on the property for litter and the introduction of invasive species on a regular basis. Activities that have the highest impact are limited to the main school grounds. Regular ecological assessments are also made on our property to monitor the impact we have had on the land and plan for healthy revitalization of it as much as possible.

### **Communication Strategies**

#### **General Communication**

- Staff always welcome feedback, questions, and concerns from families. Regular open communication is very important to us. Staff are happy to answer any questions families might have at drop off and pick up, in person. Should questions or comments arise that cannot be answered at drop off and pick up, email is the best means to communicate. Please contact Tara at [tara@elephantthoughts.com](mailto:tara@elephantthoughts.com) If your message is more urgent or time sensitive **please text Tara Bailey directly at 705-606-2588**. Please be sure to notify us if:
  - your child will be late or absent
  - your child has contracted a communicable illness
  - your child is being treated for lice



### **Emergency Communication**

- Should an emergency occur at School, parents and guardians of the children involved will be contacted immediately once emergency services have been contacted (if they are required). Please be sure to update any important emergency contact phone numbers on our emergency health forms as this is the information that will be used to contact parents and guardians. Parents and guardians will also be contacted in the event of extreme weather that might arise during program and affect transportation safety. In this case parents will be contacted by phone to formulate an emergency travel plan.

### **Grievance Policy**

- Concerns that may arise involving experiences at School in Nature are very important to us. Please never hesitate to contact staff by phone, email, or in person if there is a matter you wish to discuss. We are always willing to work with families to problem solve through various challenges and arrive at positive solutions together. Please never hesitate to share your concerns so that they may be resolved in a timely manner.