



Guidelines for Visitors

We have a beautifully written guideline to support you on your visit to Woods Forest School. Please read this prior to your first visit so that we can create a cohesive environment for the children.

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Thank you for being here with us. We learn so much from each other, and we are thankful you are here to support your child. To help your child adjust and to help preserve the philosophy of how we work with the children, we have developed these guidelines to help you and your child with our day.

Fading into the background

It used to be that children of all ages could be outdoors relatively unsupervised, going to the neighbor or nearest adult when they were needed, but learning to navigate problems and situations amongst each other. While we do not believe that our world is any less safe, we live in a society where good parenting is now seen as always watching, always warning, and always being there to assist children in their play. I think this can be quite harmful to children, so our goal is to be there in a more modeling role. In ancient times, adults went about their business of life, and the children were around playing and imitating the adults in their work; it is how they learned to be adults. If all we do is follow children or stand around watching them, they have no one to imitate. This can be disastrous for young children who are entirely in the realm of imitation for learning.

The teachers at WFS take a different approach. We find a space away from where the children are playing so that we can still see and hear them, but we are not intruding on that play. We sit down and find something to do with our hands. Often, it can be as simple as twisting grass into dolls, sanding a stick for a sword, etc.... This gives the children something to imitate, and it allows them to play with the *feeling* of being unsupervised.

Your child may want to be with you, and that is okay! Simply be there, reading a book, knitting, or asking the teachers for a job (please refrain



from using any electronic devices), giving children the feeling that this is their time to go off and explore, and they have their own work to do. If they sit with you for hours, days, or even weeks, please allow that. They will see the play and activities of the group, and they will be called to join us in their own time when they are ready. Just be there for love, but in other words, be boring.

Allowing our voices to fade into the background

One of the things that I have found over and over again is that children will raise their voices to meet ours (again, imitation). So if we have loud voices, they will as well. If we have a lot of adult conversations, the voice level rises, and they match ours to get our attention or to simply do what we are doing. As you can imagine, it is very difficult to get the attention of twelve children when this is the case. Oftentimes, I will grab the children's attention for some reason, and the adults, in an attempt to be helpful, will repeat to the children what I have said. So all the way down the trail, all I hear and all the children hear, are the many adults giving directions. Try to model what I am doing instead of giving directions verbally; the children will come along. Another thing I often find is that we, as adults, see it as our duty to give them verbal feedback on what they are doing. At WFS, we will use on one noticing with children from time to time but avoid statements that place any judgment on what they are doing. So it is for that reason that we avoid saying things like "good job" (I have attached an article that explains this better).

Allowing for wonder and whimsy

So often we come across something on the trail that is fascinating. Modeling fascination with the world is a wonderful thing to do as many of us as adults no longer see the wonder in berries or animal scat, etc.... For that reason, we avoid naming things for children right off the bat and when we do choose to name them, we do so in a way that brings imagination to whatever it is. Often, I know what it is that the children have discovered; sometimes I don't, which is even better, but I always respond with, "I



wonder what it is”, or “Whoa, look at that!” When children spend time discovering for themselves what it could be, they spend more time in the world of fascination and wonder and are much more likely to remember this discovery later on. So we play with it, we talk about it, we ask questions. We can even leave it without having named it. We often come across bones or dead animals. If I tell the children right off the bat what it is, then they do one of two things: they either say okay - and walk away from it, or they tell me I am wrong. I believe the latter is their way of staying in wonder. The first reaction concerns me more, though because they will likely not remember this discovery and it will not be important to them. Having the name often removes the mystery and interest.

There are things that children come across every day that we want them to be familiar with or to build a relationship with. This is when I will use whimsy. I will give personalities to the plants and trees or names to certain locations that evoke a sense of whimsy, magic, or imagination for the child. For example, poison oak. If I were to just say, “That is poison oak; stay away from it,” I will either be ignored, or I will create a fear of one part of the land. If I instead say, “oh, good morning, Mr. Poison Oak, I see you hiding over there; I promise not to come too close”, then I have the children’s attention without creating fear. We often talk about poison oak and rattlesnakes, etc... as protectors of the land. Their job is to tell us where not to play, and they can get grumpy if we don’t listen.

We often have parents in our school who are naturalists or work in a field that allows them to have quite a bit of knowledge they want to give to us and the children. I love having those parents because, as an adult, I learn so much from them. Around the children, though, we need to wait before naming things and give wonder a chance.

Follow the routine and rhythm of our day.

Staying with the group and following my lead helps the children get comfortable with our days. Any gathering or hiking time is all hands-on-deck time. Model coming to the circle and singing, coming to the story and listening, hiking with the group, etc..... This doesn’t take any explanation for the children, even I call them over with a transition song



instead of words. If your child doesn't want to join at first, they can watch from a distance; I wouldn't even encourage them to come, you simply join in, and they will eventually, too. If your child is crying or upset, I find it best to take them far enough away that the crying doesn't distract the others from being able to hear but allows the child to still see what is happening. If we allow the children to go off and do their own thing during this time, or we take them off to another adventure, it will be harder for them to join in on our day. If a child simply doesn't want to come, I find it best for the parent to simply come and allow the teachers to work with that child. Sometimes it is best to leave them be as I can tell they aren't ready to join us and need to observe from a distance while other times, we will ask them to come over and wait to climb that tree until later. If we need your assistance with a situation, we will ask you to step in.

During the play time between gathering times, fading into the background is best. It allows us to work with the children, assist them when they need it and begin to build a relationship with them that helps them trust us to meet their needs. Allowing us to come to them when they fall down or get sad shows the child you trust us to take care of their needs. If they ask for you, we will bring them to you, but again it is us meeting that need for them which builds connection and trust. Of course, if you are closest, you don't have to sit back and do nothing, just allowing us to handle as much as the child is comfortable with is great. They will always prefer you as long as you are there of course.