



The Neighborhood Family Handbook

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Welcome

Welcome to The Neighborhood family! The Neighborhood, a nature-based early learning center, is currently a home-based preschool that is designed to teach children ages two to five years of age through a combination of the Reggio Emilia approach of learning and nature-based play. At The Neighborhood, we believe that children need a daily opportunity to spend time in nature, and not just a short amount of time on a playground. Each day, we are committed to letting our children spend a majority of their day learning in nature, rain or shine. Studies have shown that nature-based play has many benefits over traditional schooling. Children participating in nature-based learning programs consistently outperformed their peers who did not participate in nature-based learning.

"When children play in natural spaces, they're far more likely to invent their own games than in more structured settings which is a key factor in becoming self-directed and inventive adults later in life."

-Richard Louv

Nature-based learning has many benefits:

- ❖ Promotion of attention skills and short-term memory
- ❖ Protection against inattention-hyperactivity symptoms
- ❖ Enhancement of children's creativity and imagination
- ❖ Improved social relations, communication skills, and cooperation among students
- ❖ Increased value of nature and pro-environmental behaviors
- ❖ Increased learning engagement
- ❖ Increased opportunities to explore, develop and hone math skills

"Play is the highest form of research." - Albert Einstein

It is The Neighborhood's vision to bring cognitive, language and literacy, social and emotional, creative arts, and mathematical learning outdoors. While there will be an indoor space for center time, much of the day will be exploring outside in fields, hiking trails, making structures and fairy homes in our outdoor classroom in the woods, exploring nearby brooks, and visiting the local chicken coop. Many children are not able to get their energy out and work on large muscle/motor skills in the traditional preschool setting with limited outside time. This is an opportunity to work on those gross motor skills before refining the smaller, fine motor skills needed for writing later on. Nature-based learning also happens outside in all weather (with the exception of extreme weather that causes concern for safety). Many preschools keep children in for rain, snow or colder weather. Our belief is there is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing. We work with students to understand what gear is appropriate for all kinds of weather to keep ourselves comfortable in order to continue exploring outside. This helps teach adaptability and problem solving, which are huge life skills that children need.

Mission Statement:

Our mission is to enrich the preschool experience by providing children daily exposure to learning in nature. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach paired with learning in the calming outdoor setting, children will develop independence, communication skills, emergent literacy, and mathematics. With nature-based learning, we provide hands-on experiences for children to learn while having fun!

Core Values:

Kindness
Nature
Exploration
Curiosity
Community

Our Philosophy:

- *We believe children learn best through play and self-directed learning where they can follow their interests and are given autonomy in daily choices.
- *We utilize our natural setting and the changing seasons as our inspiration for curriculum studies using the Reggio Emilia approach of learning alongside our children, following their lead.
- *We provide emergent literacy opportunities and introduce mathematical concepts while learning with natural materials.
- *We help children develop a sense of self and community through team building experiences and social interactions with their peers, while providing support with a social/emotional curriculum.
- *We strive to make preschool a fun and enjoyable place to learn.

"The most effective kind of education is that a child should play amongst lovely things."
-Plato

Curriculum

Our school uses an emergent curriculum, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach in Italy. This means that we follow the children's lead by exploring their interests and then we dig deeper into the questions that arise on our outdoor adventures through the use of nature studies. Being a nature-based preschool, we also learn about the seasons that we are experiencing every day outdoors. Growing up in New England means that we get to explore the seasonal changes and adaptations that animals make throughout the year, whether they stick around for winter and adapt their diets, migrate south, or prepare for hibernation. We also learn about seasonal celebrations like harvest festivals and maple syrup season. We believe in teaching children about risk assessment. When children are given a chance to engage freely in adventurous play, they quickly learn to assess their own skills and match them to the demands of the environment. By giving children a hands-on approach to learning and exploring topics that they experience, we believe that children will find a love of learning. Helping children find this love of learning is our job as Early Childhood Educators and is the sole purpose behind what we do.

"Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum." - David Sobel

We also supplement our emergent curriculum with the Second Step curriculum for social and emotional learning and some aspects and language from the Foundations curriculum for literacy introduction.

Second Step:

The Second Step curriculum uses puppets, classroom-based photos, books and games to work on key social skills to help children learn about big emotions, how to enter play, asking for help and handling conflict with peers.



Fundations:

Fundations is a proven literacy program that introduces letter sounds and names using keywords with the help of Baby Echo (a baby owl puppet that helps children learn to repeat sounds during lessons). In the pre-kindergarten year, students will start learning to write letters on a writing grid based on letter formation. While writing is part of the Fundations program, we will never force a child to participate in this learning center. It is a choice. Fundations is the literacy curriculum that our town uses in the elementary school setting and therefore will provide a smooth transition into literacy learning for kindergarten.

Scholastic My Big World:

Each one of our students also receives a monthly Scholastic My Big World Magazine that we read together during snack time before they are sent home. These have seasonal topics.



Developmental Goals:

To meet important developmental learning milestones, all of our adventures and explorations reflect the Connecticut Early Learning Developmental Standards (CTELDS) and the NAAEE Guidelines for Excellence.

Our School Day and Year

Rhythm of Typical Day:

Student Arrival/Transitional Activities
Yoga & Morning Meeting
AM Snack
Transition to Outdoor Classroom
Outdoor Nature Play and Learning Centers
Outdoor Nature Play and Learning Centers
Transition to Lunch/Washing Hands
Lunch
Story Time
Nap/Quiet Reading Groups
Afternoon Snack
Inside Center Time/Outdoor Nature Free Play
Reflective Closing Meeting/Whole Group
Student Dismissal



School Year Start and End Dates:

With minor exceptions, The Neighborhood follows the Simsbury Public School calendar, including holidays, vacations and snow days, excluding half days. (*Appendix A- School Calendar*)

The Neighborhood may host a number of special events throughout the year where families are invited to join us. This may include art shows, field trips, the Week of the Young Child event and an End of the Year Celebration.

Birthdays:

Special treats for your child's birthday are allowed. Please see the director before sending in food, as there may be allergies or food restrictions in our class.

Field Trips:

We hope to take a number of field trips into our community throughout the year and will be looking for families to volunteer their time and car to join us. Those trips and dates/times will go out about a month ahead of time so you have plenty of notice if you'd like to join us.

Attendance:

The Neighborhood does not refund for days missed due to illness, vacation, snow days, or any other events resulting in non-attendance. Snow days in excess of five will be added onto the end of our calendar year. You are paying for your child's spot in a small program that only has 6 spaces available. Regular attendance is important for your child and our learning community as we build new routines, skills and expand our understanding of the world around us.

Arrival and Departure:

Our morning begins at 8:00 with some transitional activities inside. We ask that all children arrive by 8:30 as our morning yoga session and circle time starts promptly at 8:40. Arriving later really slows down our timing to get outside. Here we start our day with a morning song and check in with every student. Then we jump into discussing our day's plans before preparing for our outdoor classroom space. If your child will be absent or late, please contact the director either by email or marking your child out on our daily reporting app.

Students will be signed in on our Tadpoles app by the teacher and each student will sign into their classroom with a special name piece. Please check your child's cubby to make sure they have two pairs of extra socks, underwear, pants and shirts in case of accidents or really wet days. We want to foster independence, so please try to allow your child to put their filled water bottles and their insulated lunch boxes in our lunch box bin each morning.

Our day ends promptly at 4:30 when the preschool closes for the day. We may be outside on the blacktop playing (cones will be up to notify cars coming up the driveway), inside the house, or in the outdoor classroom for pickup time, depending on our activities planned for the afternoon.

Authorized Pickup:

In the event a legal guardian is unable to pick up your child, an adult listed on your child's Authorized Pickup portion of the enrollment papers can pick up. We ask that all new persons ensure that they have proper identification at pick up, as we will not release a child to the care of anyone unknown without it. In the event you plan for someone besides an authorized pickup, written notification via email to the Director is required.

Late Pick Up:

There is a \$20.00 charge for every 15 minutes or fraction thereof that a parent/guardian is late to pick-up. Late fees must be paid within 5 days from the date they are assessed.

Inclement Weather/School Closings and Delays:

The Neighborhood will not operate during extreme weather conditions that are dangerous for our young students. While we will typically take Simsbury Public School system's lead for all weather related closings, there are times we will remain open, as snow days make the best days for outdoor adventures. In the event of a closure or delay, you will receive a notification through email and text by 7:00am.

Meals:

Please bring your child to school with a labeled water bottle everyday so that they can stay hydrated throughout the day. We will refill these as needed throughout the day with our filtered water.

Every morning, children have a variety of AM snack options offered around 10am.

Parents should bring their student's lunch in a lunch box with ice packs (if needed). Please bring an easy picnic like food for your child, as most days we will try to eat outside on our front picnic table. Meals will not be heated.

Afternoon snacks will be provided after nap time. Occasionally, we will create a special snack that has to do with our unit of study, or use of seasonal fresh fruit upon class request and parent approval. (*Appendix B- Snack Menu*)

Director will notify you of any known allergies and restrictions for food brought into school.

Withdrawal policy:

Two weeks written notice is required when withdrawing a child for any reason. If the proper notice is given, any unused tuition will be refunded within thirty days of the withdrawal.

Dressing for the Weather: Gearing Up for Adventure at The Neighborhood

Clothing Suggestions:

We are committed to going outside every day and want your child to be dressed in adequate layers so they are comfortable enough to explore with us. We ask that families provide the appropriate under layers each day, as well as backup clothing in your child's cubby. We provide the Oaki one piece rainsuit. This suit will fit right over their underlayers they wear to school. This outerwear will keep your child dry so they can explore all the elements outdoors. This allows us to splash in puddles, explore in mud and sit on wet grass without feeling uncomfortable. Please send your child to school with closed toe shoes.

"There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing." - Ranulph Fiennes

We encourage all families to buy well insulated rain boots. Our school has a partnership with Oaki which offers our families a 25% discount on Oaki orders of \$29.99+ using the promo code **theneighborhood**. We recommend the Neoprene rain/snow boot pictured below by Oaki.com.



Getting Dirty:

Please do not send your child in anything you do not want dirty or wet. We plan to explore outside and use art materials everyday. You are more than welcome to have your child change clothing at the end of the day if you have plans after school.

We ask for two full changes of seasonally appropriate clothes to be at school in their extra clothes bin at all times. We will let you know if we have used something from the bin during the day and you can send in replacements. Dresses and skirts that can be tucked into rain pants are fine.

Labeling Your Child's Belongings:

To help our teachers, please label all of your children's clothing, including extra clothes in their clothes bin. This also includes mittens, coats and boots. You can use a laundry-safe Sharpie or other similar marker or purchase labels at Oliver's Labels (www.oliverslabels.com), or Name Bubbles (<https://www.namebubbles.com/>).

Please make sure to dress your child for the weather. If it is cold, please send in warm underlayers like fleece or wool. No open toed shoes.

To help families acquire needed clothing/gear, we will have a lending clothing library available for families. If you have items that your children outgrew that are in the size range of our preschool explorers and would like to donate them to the school, we will make sure to offer them to our families. This clothing will also be used for day to day use when a child has soiled through their own layers and needs to borrow.

Registration Requirements and Enrollment Requirements:

Enrollment at The Neighborhood is open to children from ages 2 years to 5 years of age. Enrollment is granted without regard to a child's race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, or special needs; and without regard to a parent or guardian's race, color, creed, religion, age, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy or special needs.

Initial enrollment is contingent upon receipt of the completed enrollment application, signed fee

agreement, registration and equipment fee, deposit and signed Parent Handbook receipt. In addition, all children must have a health form prepared by the child's physician on record that documents a physical examination within the previous 12 months, as well as up-to-date immunizations, including the flu vaccine.

Communication

Daily Communications through *Tadpoles*:

The Neighborhood uses the daily reporting app, *Tadpoles*, to capture photos and videos throughout the day, and to document and communicate our explorations. Families will receive a daily report at the end of each day, as well as receive photos and videos throughout the day. Parents also have access to a portfolio of their child's past daily reports and captured moments at school.

Health and Safety

Behavior Expectations for the Children:

Our number one goal is to meet the needs of our students enrolled at The Neighborhood. Part of meeting that goal is teaching expected behaviors and group expectations. Through the use of our Second Step Curriculum, a teacher will intervene when children need help handling conflict, in addition to creating benefit/risk assessments and creating rules around any risky behaviors. Teachers will continuously document children's development and growth. In this process, if teachers see concerns that need to be addressed with families, they will contact the families and arrange a meeting to discuss the concerns and make a plan together to address them.

The Neighborhood believes that prevention is essential to good discipline. The following techniques may be used:

- ❖ distracting children from potential problems
- ❖ reminding children of the rules and expectations they helped create
- ❖ helping children to solve problems and come up with solutions
- ❖ allowing children to step away from the larger group to calm down either in their sit spot (meditation and journaling spot outside) or in the cozy corner (inside classroom) where calming tools can be practiced together with the teacher
- ❖ ignoring inappropriate behavior that is not harmful
- ❖ helping children to articulate their feelings
- ❖ helping children to understand natural consequences of their behaviors

Discipline Policy and Philosophy:

If behaviors of a student continue to be unsafe for themselves and/or other students after setting up a plan with families, The Neighborhood might suggest a screening be done by the school system. If the family agrees, we will help coordinate in any way possible.

If the family refuses to pursue a screening or consult with their child's school system or a mutually agreed upon resource, it may be determined that The Neighborhood is not able to continue services.

Connecticut Health Assessment Record and Immunization Form:

Physical Examination - The Connecticut State Department of Health requires that each child admitted to the Center be examined by a licensed physician and have a signed certificate indicating the date of the exam. Yearly updates on exams are needed for all children, as well as documentation of updated immunizations. The Flu shot and all other immunizations listed on this health form are REQUIRED by the State of Connecticut for your child to be in care.

Illnesses:

Children should be kept home if they have symptoms of illness included, but not limited to:

- 100 degrees or higher without medication
- Sore throat
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Any infectious condition

Please notify the school by 8:00 if your child will not be in attendance that day. Students should not be sent back to school until they are **symptom free without medication for 24 hours**. If your child becomes sick at school, you will be notified to come pick them up. If we cannot reach you, we will refer to the numbers provided on your emergency contact form.

****Please notify the director if your child has been seen by the doctor and is diagnosed with something that is contagious, as it is our duty to inform families to look out for symptoms and stop the spread of illnesses in our small school community.**

*****Administration of Medication Policy**

The Neighborhood will only administer emergency medication which include prescribed inhalers and premeasured commercially prepared injectable medication (i.e. Epi-Pens, Auvi-Q, etc.), non-prescription topical medication and EMERGENCY oral medication (i.e. Benadryl and tylenol for febrile seizures). The parental responsibilities include providing the center the proper medication authorization form, and the medication. The medication administration form must be signed by the authorized prescriber and parent/guardian giving the center authorization to administer the medication. This form is available upon request. Our responsibilities include, but are not limited to, ensuring the medication administration form is complete and that the

medication being received matches the medication orders and stored as directed. We will keep accurate documentation of all medications administered during school.

Head Lice:

Parents must notify the school if they discover that their child has head lice. If there is a confirmed case of head lice identified in our school community, all children will be screened. Students with head lice will be sent home from school and will be readmitted when they have been treated and are nit free.

Ticks/Mosquitoes:

At school, we will be teaching the children about mosquitoes and ticks during the beginning of our school year. We will also establish tick checks at the end of a hike or after coming out of the outdoor classroom area each day. This can be a daily routine to do with your child at home as well before bed or before taking a bath. Parents should send labeled bug spray to school that we can apply before adventuring in the woods.

Injuries:

If your child is injured while in attendance at The Neighborhood, parents will be notified at pick up time. In the case of a more serious injury, broken skin, or head injury, parents will be notified by phone. If we are unable to get a hold of you and an action plan is needed for an injury, we will use the emergency contact numbers provided.

Mandated Reporters:

The Neighborhood staff are mandated reporters, as required by the state of Connecticut to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect to the appropriate authorities.

Safety Guidelines and Risky Play:

"Risk taking is important for growth. We learn that it is either safe to take a risk or it is not. School success depends on the willingness to risk the wrong answer, approach a potential friend, or work on a new physical ability. Nature activities provide real opportunities for children to take part in physical, social, and emotional risk assessment and challenge." - Julie Powers

Dear Neighborhood Families,

We are so excited to welcome you into our nature-based learning community. Your preschooler will enjoy hands-on learning everyday both nestled inside our home with age-appropriate natural materials and outside in our 7 acres of natural space. We believe nature play is necessary and beneficial for children's emotional well-being and all areas of development in that it provides a open-ended and calming environment filled with fun, challenging experiences, and carefully managed risky activities.

Why Risk?

Why is it important for your child to participate in risky play? Risk taking is often given a negative connotation, with risk and hazard often being seen as the same. However, risky play is something that children naturally seek out, it's in their genes to explore and children need it developmentally. Facing risks helps children assess the world around them and their place in it. Over time they will see their abilities grow and become more confident and know their own limits. (Almon, 2013) Children are more likely to develop responsible attitudes toward risk if they have experience dealing with risky situations (Wyver, 2008). Research and many benefit risk assessments have shown us that the benefits to learning how to manage risks on their own, learn how to proceed after failure, communication skills taught and character building gained along the way outweigh the small risk of injury. If we teach children how to safely assess the activities that they are doing or how to safely use the tools they may need to proceed at a task, they will learn how to use sound judgment when taking any risks in the future. These future risks could be riding a bike in the road, taking a test, trusting a peer who is making unsafe decisions, driving a car, or changing their career. All of the skills our students are learning through risky play in nature can be used throughout their life.

Our Safety Precautions

Here at The Neighborhood, we take safety of our students and staff very seriously. Therefore, we train all staff in child and adult first aid and CPR. We train teachers and volunteers in site assessments that are done daily before students arrive to check our outdoor spaces for hazards and potential risks that could pop up along our hiking trails or forest learning areas. We have safety protocols for risky activities such as stick play and water safety and have also planned out general protocols for emergencies small and large that we go over with teachers and students so that everyone is following safety guidelines but are also prepared and ready when we need to work together and help a peer. Teachers are also highly trained to really observe

students, their skills, and to know their temperaments and attitudes toward new things before trying risky activities with them. Joan Almon reminds us to “know your children, give them the freedom they can handle, and don’t let your own fears get in the way.” (Almon, 2013) Almon also reminds us that letting go of fears becomes easier when they are replaced with observations of children’s ability to assess risk. We ask our students 3 important questions before headed out to any of our different nature spots.

1. ***What is wonderful about this space?*** We want children to seek the beauty in nature. We want them to enjoy their time spent outside exploring with peers and researching animals and nature items or pheromones that peek their interest in our outdoor spaces. In nature, children can more easily self-regulate. We hope to help them find their sense of place and peace out in our nature spaces.

2. ***What do we need to be mindful of when we visit this space/do this activity?*** While our teachers will always be near our students, supervising them with both sight and sound, it is important for children to learn to assess their environments for dangers and risks. It is essential for them to know what is safe to touch and what we should avoid and why. These are important life skills and ones that are beneficial to learning in wild spaces. Being able to understand when there is potential risky consequences for something such as fort building for example, is the first step in coming up with safety rules and learning how to take precautions in using large branches, tools, or using communication to work as a team.

3. ***How will we stay safe in this space?*** With that last question we encourage children to help us make a benefit risk assessment for our risky experience or visit to a wild space. Benefit risk assessments go a step further than identifying a risk. It recognizes that many activities carry benefits at the same time that they carry risks. Both risks and benefits need to be examined and weighed against each other. (Almon, 2013) This is our opportunity to teach children about the risks that we may encounter and what the exact steps are that we will take to keep our bodies and our friends safe. We also talk about what we will learn while doing this activity or the fun that will be had if all safety precautions are followed. This might involve teaching children to identify poison ivy or ticks. This part of our discussion might also cover how to safety walk on loose parts such as a river rock bed or carrying large branches with friends and how we communicate effectively with each other to discuss proper lifting and moving. We also set consequences for friends who chose not to make the safe choices that were discussed. Children go into each adventure with clear expectations for how we will stay safe, and if that that is not an activity they will be part of.

Here at The Neighborhood children have access to so many beautiful nature spaces such as our large fields, wooded areas that we will turn into our forest classroom together, and trails to explore. Some of the risks we are fortunate enough to encounter and learn from on the property are turned into lessons that we will cover with students and train staff in so we can enjoy our time spent outdoors while being mindful of the hazards we need to come up with rules for or learn more about. One such hazard is ticks. We educate students in ticks by learning how to identify them, using safety precautions before heading out, and how to do tick checks with children. These are lessons taught early on in our year before we ever explore our wooded

areas beyond the fields and large trails. When playing in our wooded “forest classroom”, we teach our students about things in nature they might find, such as wild berries and mushrooms, deer droppings, or poisonous plants or plants with thorns that can be harmful. We do allow students to climb trees that we have deemed safe with direct adult supervision. We talk about checking branches to see if they are sturdy and set safety guidelines such as not climbing higher than your teacher. With our staff right behind our students, guiding them branch to branch through descriptive communication, children learn the skills and confidence to take on hard challenges.

It is our belief that learning outside in nature and participating in what some would call “risky play”, we will prepare our students for kindergarten and beyond by teaching them self-regulation, persistence in learning new skills, communication in working with peers and teachers, creative problem-solving skills, and building their own confidence to be lifelong learners. If you have any questions or concerns about the nature-based adventures and activities that our students participate in, please talk to Chelsea about the benefits of risky play.

Thank you,

Chelsea

Chelsea Johnston
Founder and Leader Educator
The Neighborhood: A Nature-based Early Learning Center

Resources:

- Little, Helen & Wyver, Shirley, (2008), Outdoor play: Does avoiding the risks reduce the benefits?, Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 33-40
Almon, Joan, (2013), Adventure: The Value of Risk in Children’s Play, Alliance for Childhood
Natural Start Alliance (Butler, Amy & Stires, Anne), (2019), Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook: Teaching, Environments, Safety, Administration, NAAEE



Family Handbook Agreement

I, _____, have read The Neighborhood's family handbook. I have had the opportunity to review any questions and agree to follow their policies and procedures. I understand that failure to follow the policies set forth may result in the discontinuation of care.

Printed Name

Signature

Date