

A photograph of a forest path. The path is covered in fallen brown leaves and is flanked by tall, slender trees. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a warm, golden glow and long shadows on the ground.

FREE TO BE *Forest School*

Parent/Caregiver
Handbook

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ABOUT US

Our Forest School Leaders are internationally accredited and trained professionals with backgrounds in education, environmentalism and wilderness survival skills.

WHAT IS FOREST SCHOOL? /OUR ETHOS

Forest School is a holistic, learner-led and hands-on approach to education. Traditional schooling, especially for older children, focuses only on intellectual development (test taking). At Free to Be Forest School (FBFS), our goal is to unleash the individual potential of all of our learners. We know that learning is not separate from the rest of a child's experience. In the outdoor environment, children learn by engaging all of their senses, and that learning becomes rooted within them instead of simply memorized and forgotten. Through scaffolded, experiential learning, we ignite their passion and curiosity and build up their confidence and self-esteem, all while fostering a connection to the natural world. The skills acquired in Forest School have life-long value, and will prepare the learners for an unlimited array of experiences in the real world.

Forest School is meant to be a long-term process throughout the year. Learners form relationships with one another and with the environment as they observe how it (and we) change throughout the year. By applying skills in a real-world context, learners see firsthand how their decisions impact not only themselves, but their environment and those around them. Forest School provides a highly engaging environment that emphasizes collaboration and cooperation. At the end of each class, and of course each session, learners reflect on their own growth, development and personal goals. Reflection, review and critical analysis are key components to learning in the Forest School setting.

The Forest School Pedagogy is rooted in many different learning theories:

- Forest School Leaders consider and address each learner's physical, social, emotional and identity needs (Maslow)
- Forest School instills in the learner a positive regard for nature (Kellert)
 - Learners have opportunities to be completely absorbed and focused on something of their choosing (Csikszentmihalyi)
- Forest School promotes learning through discovery and reflection (Bruner)
- Leaders recognize learners as individuals with multiple intelligences and modalities of learning (Gardner)
- Forest School encourages a sense of community (Peck)
- Leaders introduce and encourage new ideas using small, achievable tasks (scaffolding) (Bruner/Vygotsky)
- Forest School encourages shared learning (Vygotsky)
- Leaders recognize the importance of personal wellbeing (Laevers)
 - Forest School provides ample space and time for the children to explore and engage in various types of play (Hughes/Parten)
- Learners are able to experience appropriate risk-taking (Mortlock)*

**Failure is to be embraced positively and constructively. Experiences may not always lead to success, but they never fail to produce learning!*

In the Forest School setting, children also learn:

- Nature journaling and nature studies
- Identifying local flora and fauna, especially what may be beneficial or harmful
- Animal tracks and scat
- Orienteering and cartography
- Basic knots and their uses
- Den-making and shelter-building
- Fire-lighting, safety and maintenance (certain locations only)
- Basic whittling (potato peelers)
- Weaving
- Tool safety and use
- Mindfulness techniques
- Simple yoga flows

TERMS & CONDITIONS

In order to participate in any of our programs, all required forms and waivers must be completed in full online before the program begins. Payments must also be made by cash, check, Zelle, Venmo or PayPal Business to FREE TO BE Forest School prior to the start of the program. Refunds will not be given in the event that we must close early due to inclement weather. However, if we cancel a class for any reason and cannot reschedule, we will offer a \$30 refund per learner. Programs may also be cancelled if there are insufficient registrants. Any child who is absent or leaves during the middle of a program due to illness, injury, expulsion or any other reason will not be refunded any portion of the program fees.

There is a Annual Membership fee of \$35 per student or \$45 per family. Membership fee is charged every September, and/or when you first enroll your child. Registration is for the entire seasonal session only. We offer one free trial class, scheduled at least two weeks in advance, per child. "Drop-In" classes must also be scheduled in advance and are \$45 per child. The fee for each 12-week Seasonal Session is \$400/child. There is an additional 10% off for each additional class your child is registered for. One free make-up class is allowed per season free of charge, as long as we have openings available in other classes. A week's advance notice is required. In the event of park or trail closures due to storm damage, construction or prescribed burning, classes will be held at a different local county park.

PRIVACY POLICY

In registering your child for a program, you are providing FBFS with sensitive information about your child. FBFS collects this information in order to communicate with you (parents/guardians) and to protect your child's health and safety during our programs.

Any personal data you give to us will be processed following the privacy legislation and will only be used for the purposes for which you have given consent. We will not share your details with third parties without your consent, except where we are legally compelled or obligated to do so. Select pieces of information (allergies/medical conditions, emergency contacts) will be printed and kept in a binder marked “Staff Use Only”. The binder and/or an electronic document will be kept in the emergency backpack, which is carried by a Forest School Leader at all times, so that pertinent information will be quickly accessible in the event of an emergency. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you should have any questions or concerns about protecting the privacy of the information you provide us. Please note that, with your consent, images may appear on our website, Facebook page and marketing material.

ILLNESS POLICY

Parents/guardians are asked to keep their children home in the following cases, and only allow a return to forest school 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided:

- Temperature over 100 degrees F
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

Should a situation arise while at FBFS, parents/guardians will be asked to pick up their child. A health care provider (doctor, chiropractor, naturopath, etc.) must provide documentation that it is safe for the child to return to FS in the case of a communicable disease such as measles, chicken pox, mumps, flu, strep throat, viral pneumonia, etc.

Please Note: Any outbreak of communicable disease will be communicated to parents/ guardians via email. If a child is being treated for lice, please let us know so that we can pass on any relevant information to other families, and the child will be able to return once lice is cleared.

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES & FIRST AID

FBFS has written emergency procedures that have been made familiar to all leaders and volunteers. A copy of the procedures, including emergency phone numbers, is carried by a leader at all times. All FBFS Leaders are required to have Adult, Child & Infant CPR/First Aid/AED certification as well as Wilderness First Aid certification.

FOOD POLICIES

Due to the potential for life-threatening allergies, we ask that parents/ guardians refrain from packing nuts in their child’s snacks. Sunflower seed substitutes for nut butters are welcome. However, given FBFS will take place in a public space, we cannot guarantee a nut-free environment. Children with severe allergies should have an EpiPen on them, and an additional EpiPen with staff. All food provided by FBFS will be organic, vegan and allergen-friendly unless otherwise specified.

SUSTAINABLE SNACKS

At FBFS, we encourage parents/guardians to pack litter-less snacks for their children, while also bearing in mind the size and weight of the containers in which their snacks are packed. All learners are responsible for carrying their own water and snacks on their adventures. Any treats or snacks that we provide for our learners will be organic, vegan and gluten-free unless otherwise specified.

HANDWASHING & DRINKING WATER

All learners and leaders are required to wash their hands with soap and water before eating, and after using toileting facilities. At most sites, water bottles may also be refilled in the restroom area. We carry potable water, soap, hand sanitizer and alcohol wipes with us for every class.

LEADER TO LEARNER RATIOS

The ratios between FBFS Leaders and learners vary depending on the age of the children. AM groups (3-6 years) have a ratio of 1:4 and PM groups (7-12 years) have a ratio of 1:6. There will always be one male and one female FS Leader for each class.

ROLE OF THE FOREST SCHOOL LEADER

The responsibilities of all FBFS Leaders are of wide range and include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Ensuring the physical health and safety of the children by co-assessing and co-managing risk with them on an ongoing basis;
- Considering the social and emotional safety of the children and creating a caring and respectful learning community;
- Observing each child and recording their development in order to provide both documentation and other learning opportunities;
- Modelling care and respect for the natural environment and one another;
- Modeling proper use of tools and supplies.

PARENT/GUARDIAN RESPONSIBILITIES

It is the responsibility of the parent/guardian to ensure all necessary forms and fees are submitted electronically prior to your child's attendance. It is also imperative that you ensure your child is equipped with the proper clothing, outerwear and other supplies needed for the season and length of the program. If a learner arrives with less-than-adequate clothing, they will be sent home. It is also the responsibility of the parent/guardian to provide FBFS with any and all information that would assist us in meeting the individual needs of your child.

DRESS CODE

Adequate clothing and gear is required at all times during forest school classes, keeping in mind that we are outside 100% of time. Depending on the season, children will need rain suits, snow suits, waterproof boots, boot liners, extra warm clothing, sun hats, warm hats, waterproof gloves, sneakers, etc.

Long pants tucked into long socks and rain boots are recommended during every season to prevent ticks, chiggers and poison ivy. Please do not dress your child in shorts or open-toed shoes. Sun hats are required in the warmer months and water-proof outer shells like rain suits are recommended in the Spring and Autumn.

For Cold Weather:

- Base Layer - The key to this layer is to wick moisture away from the skin and insulate. Natural fabrics such as wool or silk work well;
- Middle Layer - This is another insulation layer to keep your child warm. Wool sweaters (merino wool is exceptionally warm and soft on sensitive skin) and fleece tend to work well. These could be multiple layers that your child could remove should they get too hot;
- Outer Shell - Waterproof and windproof, as well as breathable;
- Warm winter hat which covers the ears and a neck gaiter/balaclava (scarves are choking hazards);
- Layered, warm socks such as wool socks;
- Rain boots with wool liners or snow boots.

For all seasons, please be prepared with a sun hat, jacket, breathable clothing like silk, cotton and wool, rain suits and boots. All long hair must be tied back!

All learners are responsible for all of their clothing and other belongings at all times. Labeling clothing is recommended. FBFS is not responsible for any lost personal items.

PARENTS/GUARDIANS ARE REQUIRED TO DROP OFF THEIR CHILDREN WITH SUNSCREEN AND BUG SPRAY ALREADY APPLIED

DROP-OFF/PICK-UP REQUIREMENTS

All registered learners must be signed in and out at all times by a FS Leader. Parents/guardians must give FBFS written authorization for the people who may pick up their child or be contacted in case of an emergency, and advanced notification must be given before there is any change in the usual pick-up routine. We always act in the best interest of the child if there is any confusion or uncertainty.

UNAUTHORIZED PICK-UP

If someone other than a parent/guardian/authorized pick-up person arrives to pick up a child and we haven't been notified in advance, the following will take place;

- The parent/guardian will be called for verbal permission;
- If the parent/guardian/emergency contact cannot be reached, the child is not allowed to leave FBFS until they have been contacted;
- FBFS Leaders will remain with the child until an authorized pick-up person arrives. Late pick-up fees may apply.

CUSTODY & ACCESS TO CHILDREN

According to the law, both parents of a child have equal rights to said child and to the information about their development, health and welfare. The only time a FS Leader can deny the access of a parent to a child is when there is a written separation agreement or a legal court order. FBFS requires a copy of this document.

INCLEMENT WEATHER

In the event that current weather conditions make it unsafe for travel and the program needs to be cancelled for the day, parents/guardians will be notified via telephone, email and parent Facebook group at least one hour prior to the time the program would have started. In the event that the weather makes it necessary for FBFS to close earlier than normal, every effort will be made to contact each parent/guardian by telephone. If parents/guardians cannot be contacted, emergency contact people will be called. FBFS Leaders will always remain with children until they are picked up.

EXTREME WEATHER POLICY

Leaders at FBFS consult the forecast throughout the day, and weather-related safety is considered in all decisions. In the case of potential thunder and lightning, leaders will ensure that we stay close to shelter so that it may be reached quickly if a storm occurs. In the case of extreme cold (zero degrees or below) or extreme heat (100 degrees or higher), FBFS Leaders will constantly monitor each child's comfort and safety, watching for signs of frostbite, hypothermia, heat exhaustion, etc. In instances of high winds, FBFS Leaders will keep the children in more open, grassy areas.

DAILY RHYTHM

Every class at FBFS is tailored to meet the needs of each individual child, and adapts to each group of learners each day that they are together. The focus is always on the learners and not the "activity". Leaders take into account the preferences and abilities of the children with every activity that is introduced. It is the job of the FS leader to support every opportunity for a child to shine. By being empathetic about the interests of their learners, leaders are able to recognize how to create natural learning opportunities, driven by the learner's own intrinsically motivated desire to explore and discover their world. That being said, each class does have a predictable routine. This daily rhythm frees the children from having to worry about "what's next" and creates a sense of safety and security which is necessary to fully immerse themselves in their play and work.

Gathering Meeting - Our gathering meeting welcomes the group and assesses everyone's moods and needs. We do a brief "calendar", discussing the day of the week, month, season, and current weather. We also address any safety rules and establish boundaries. A story may be shared now or at camp that relates to our current nature study. Lastly, a yoga sequence or other gentle stretch is incorporated to prepare our bodies and minds for the day ahead;

Hike and Explore - Children collect their things and we journey together into the forest. We set up "camp", and the children PLAY! The possibilities here are endless! This is really where the magic happens, and that is why we spend the majority of our time immersed in this child-led exploration. When it is time to head back, the "camp" is cleaned, children gather their things, and we make the journey back to our original meeting place;

Snack and Bathroom Break - Children are encouraged to bring their own personal snacks with them to eat. We will always notify parents and caregivers of any group meals or snacks, and unless otherwise specified, they will all be organic, vegan and gluten-free;

Craft/STEAM/skill practice - Each day, children have the opportunity to participate in the day's planned activities. This is different every day for every group of children. Older children enrolled in session blocks have the opportunity to practice skills like weaving, felting, shelter/den building, fire starting and maintenance, and basic whittling. Younger children can participate in STEAM activities related to our current nature study. Some days we may play a nature-themed team building game. *STEAM and skill practicing activities make take place before or after hikes or while at camp*;

Closing Meeting - The closing meeting is where we reassess moods and reflect on everything that we have learned during class.

EMERGENT LEARNING

Learning at FBFS can and will often look different than learning within a traditional school setting. At FBFS, we want your child to learn through emergent, inquiry and play-based learning. We believe that all children are capable of learning through pursuing their own interests, asking questions and expressing themselves in many different ways.

RISK MANAGEMENT

The experience and management of risk is a fundamental part of forest school and an important part of healthy development. By scaffolding skills and gradually increasing the level of difficulty, children gain confidence and experience risk in a safe and controlled environment. There is always a trained FS Leader nearby to assess the situation. Each activity is always weighed for risk vs benefit, and sites are risk-assessed daily.

FREE PLAY

Studies show that free play is important for the development of the whole child (social, emotional, intellectual, etc.) Each year it seems that free play is given less and less priority within the traditional school system, even though the benefits are seemingly endless. At FBFS, our classes are designed to give the learners as much time as possible to delve deeply into self-directed discovery and play.

BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

At FBFS, we take a proactive, respectful and responsive approach to discipline. It is our goal to foster a relationship with each child and create a safe space for them to thrive and engage in activities that are developmentally appropriate. We have found that with any negative behavior, there is an underlying need that is not being met and is trying to be communicated.

In general, behavior management needs to:

- Provide the child with the space, tools and opportunity to regulate their own behavior;
- Consider the child's developmental level and needs;
- Be implemented in a positive and consistent manner;
- Be designed to help the child learn appropriate behavior and techniques;
- Help the learner to develop self-control, self-confidence, decision making skills and the ability to communicate effectively and sensitivity with others.

PROHIBITED BEHAVIORS

Corporal punishment, sexual abuse and harassment are strictly prohibited at all times. This includes hitting, spanking, pushing, shaking, pinching, biting, grabbing, slapping, etc. FBFS mandates a zero-tolerance policy for any abuse, harassment, corporal punishment or neglect of any child. There must be a safe environment for each child at all times and all leaders are expected to ensure that no harm comes to any child at any time. A child must never be humiliated, either physically or verbally, through sarcasm, taunting, teasing, degrading, etc. Deliberately harsh or degrading measures that would humiliate a child or undermine a child's self-respect are not acceptable.

ACCESSIBILITY & EQUALITY

One of our long-term goals at FBFS is to make our program accessible to a wide range of participants regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language, physical/emotional/mental ability, or socioeconomic status. We seek to dismantle the barriers to participate in forest school by making our site physically accessible for everyone and our community safe and welcoming. In the future, we hope to receive funding for children who need 1:1 support, to set enrollment fees on a sliding scale based on need, and to establish a lending library of outerwear (snow/rain pants, boots, hats, mitts, etc.) so that the supplies needed to safely enjoy FBFS are not a barrier to participation. We welcome your feedback and suggestions in the realization of these goals.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Each FBFS class is always held within the same area throughout the whole school year. This allows the learners to become very comfortable with and knowledgeable about the area. We believe that by fostering deep connections to the FS site, learners will grow to love nature and be stewards of the land and environment.

At FBFS, we try to use natural or recycled materials as much as possible. We also stay on trails and keep activities with the highest ecological impact in multi-use areas. All materials are either returned to their designated areas or thrown in their respective trash bins, and we routinely hold clean-up events to reduce litter in the areas that we frequent. Environmental sustainability is a priority and something that we are very passionate about. We continually assess any and all ecological impacts that may have been caused by our program and make plans to manage and limit any potential negative impacts. We also encourage the children to think about possible positive and negative impacts their choices have and of activities that we can perform to help the natural environment around us.

GENERAL COMMUNICATION

Generally, FBFS will communicate with parents/guardians via email and text message. Weekly updates will also be posted to the FBFS Parent Group on Facebook.

Please be sure to communicate via email or text message for the following:

- If you will be late/absent
- If your child is ill with a communicable disease
- If your child is being treated for head-lice

FBFS Leaders are also available for brief “check-ins” during pick-up/drop-off times and are happy to share the day’s highlights with you, though their priority will always be on the learners during that time. If you would like to have a longer or more focused conversation with a FBFS Leader, please do not hesitate to communicate via email or to set up an in-person meeting time via email or telephone.

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION

In the event of an emergency at FBFS involving your child, parents/guardians/emergency contact people will be telephoned as soon as emergency personnel (if needed) have been contacted. In the event that weather/road conditions make travel to/from FBFS dangerous for leaders/learners and FBFS needs to cancel programs or close early for the day, parents/guardians will be notified by both telephone and email.

QUESTIONS & CONCERNS

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak with a FBFS Leader at drop-off/pick-up times. If you require an extended or more focused conversation, please communicate this request via email. Similarly, should any FBFS Leader need to communicate with a parent or guardian, this will be done via email. For any complaints or concerns that cannot be resolved directly with a FBFS leader either through an in-person conversation or via email, please bring those concerns directly to Jaime at (609) 618-5581.