

Foothills Forest School

Family Handbook 2025-2026

Welcome to Foothills Forest School! We are delighted for you to join us and build a community around engaging our children in thoughtful experiential outdoor education. Forest School is a play based, child-centred inspirational learning process that offers opportunities for holistic growth through regular sessions. It is a long-term program that supports play, exploration and supported risk taking. We seek to encourage children to develop confidence and self-esteem through learner inspired, hands-on experiences in a natural setting. Forest School has a developmental ethos shared by thousands of trained practitioners around the world. Its roots reach back to the open-air culture, friluftsliv, or free air life, seen as a way of life in Scandinavia where Forest School began. It is now emboldening early childhood around the world and we feel blessed to engage in this work for our future generations.

The forest school model facilitates more than just knowledge-gathering, it allows learners to develop socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually. We seek to create a safe, non-judgemental, nurturing environment for learners to experience new adventures and take risks. Forest School inspires a deep and meaningful connection to the world and an understanding of how a learner fits within it. In practice that might look like a little one spending all day outside making toys out of sticks and leaves, playing in a creek bed with the salamanders, or exploring science through examining a snail they might find on the Forest School trail. Our approach to risk means that children constantly expand on their abilities by solving real-world issues, building self-belief and resilience. We believe that risk is more than just potential for physical harm, but a more holistic thing, there are risks in everything we do, and we grow by overcoming them. Forest School therefore, helps children to become resilient, creative and independent learners.

At Foothills Forest School, our staff is composed of adults who are called to work with young children and conduct themselves in a way that is worthy of imitation. We strongly believe children take in the essence of the adults in their world in a deep way, that essence then becomes a part of the child. We orient ourselves around the mindfulness of what our children are taking in while in our presence. We acknowledge a child's desire for the quiet, creative warmth and closeness of adults to meet their needs for connection and relationship. This is a powerful call to engage in self-development, the rewards of which benefit both the adult, child, and our surrounding community. We are excited for you to join us on this adventure through an embodied childhood filled with wonder, care, and delight.

General School Procedures

Academic Calendar:

Foothills Forest School follows the Blount County School Schedule for start dates, federal holidays and all school breaks. FFS School Calendar is attached and will be on your child's Brightwheel page.

- We will follow Blount County schools cancellations due to weather, if road conditions are unsafe. We strive for children to experience all types of weather in order to embrace the beauty of the shifting climates in the forest, as such Foothills Forest School will make every effort to open as usual.
- We DO NOT close with Blount County for sick days
- If Foothills Forest School cancels class for any reason that is unique to our school or your child's class, we will have a makeup day within that calendar year. These makeup days will be scheduled in accordance with Montvale Springs availability and communicated via Brightwheel.
- In the event of an emergency weather situation, the teachers will take children to a cabin safe spot until the threat is over. If early pickup is determined by the Director, parents will be notified via Brightwheel to pick up their children.

Parent Communication:

Foothills Forest School will use a communication software called Brightwheel for communication, tuition payments, and all enrollment paperwork. This application will allow parents to communicate directly with teachers while maintaining the privacy of personal information. Brightwheel allows parents to stay updated on classroom news, school closings, upcoming events, important calendar items and other pieces of necessary information. Parents will receive information about signing up for Brightwheel prior to school beginning and are required to use the app to stay updated and informed.

Brightwheel Communication & Monthly Newsletter:

You will receive photos of your child with stories from their day or a description of their week through brightwheel. This is a valuable way for teachers to keep parents in the loop regarding their child's interests, explorations and social and emotional development.

Teachers and staff are available to respond to Brightwheel messages regularly. You are more than welcome (and encouraged) to send a Brightwheel message at any time that is convenient for you. Teachers and staff will respond to messages as soon as they are able.

FFS will also send a monthly newsletter outlining our monthly themes, games, songs, etc that the students are learning as well as share photos and seasonal exploration. This is another great communication tool for families to be engaged with their child's growth in our program and to share with friends and family about happenings in the forest.

Enrollment Fee:

The \$100 enrollment fee for our programs is non-refundable.

Tuition & Withdrawal:

Tuition is due by the first of the month and no later than the 5th. There is a \$5/day late fee after that time. All bills will be sent through Brightwheel. You can either pay through Brightwheel or via check to our Director. Payments made by check made out to Foothills Forest School.

We must have one month's notice for any changes that may affect your child's schedule at Foothills Forest School. You will be responsible for any tuition due during that one month.

Sibling Discount of \$50/mo will be provided to families with multiple children enrolled. The discount will be applied to the younger sibling's tuition in Brightwheel.

Absence Policy:

If your child is sick and cannot attend school, or your family has a scheduled trip during school sessions, please alert FFS staff through Brightwheel.

- In the case of an absence, the day's tuition will not be refunded or made up.

Medication

If your child needs to be given medication while at school (like an inhaler), please let one of your child's teachers know and print instructions to be kept with the medication in their backpack so that the proper procedures can be followed.

Bathroom Safety:

All students must be FULLY potty-trained in order to attend FFS. This means that your child can independently use the bathroom with no or limited help from a teacher. This includes going both #1 and #2 on their own. As a standard procedure, students will go #1 outdoors and #2 indoors unless too far from facilities to do so.

Illness/Injury

If your child is injured at school, you will be notified either immediately or at pickup depending upon the severity of the injury. If your child injures their head (including the face), you will be notified immediately either through a Brightwheel message or a phone call. If your child begins to display signs of illness at school, you will be notified and may be asked to pick your child up from school. Please keep your child home from school if they are ill. Rest is important, and we strongly believe in normalizing rest days! A full day in the forest can be a lot of hard work, so if you feel that your child needs a rest day and you are able to keep them home, please don't hesitate to do so! To control the spread of illness, children with vomiting, diarrhea, and/or fever

must remain at home and not return to school until the child has been symptom free, without medication, for 24 hours.

Allergies

If your child has any allergies that other families and teachers need to be aware of, please notify your child's teacher through Brightwheel as soon as possible.

Your prompt notification allows ample time for teachers and families to prepare with the proper care of your child.

If your child uses an Epi-pen, please inform your child's teacher, pack one in their backpack, and show a teacher where it is located. Again, your prompt notification allows ample time for the teacher to prepare with the proper care of your child.

Class Procedures:

Driveway Courtesy

Our Driveway through Montvale is a 1 lane road. We will have everyone arrive in the same time window and wait until the window is over prior to all departing, all together. Please refer to the site map to understand the flow of traffic and understanding parking. If you do approach another car, please pull off into designated parking areas and wait for the flow of main traffic to pass before continuing to enter

Please enter the driveway between 8:50 and 9:05 for drop-off, and everyone will promptly leave at 9:05. If you are going to arrive after 9:05, please let us know by sending us a message through Brightwheel that includes your ETA so that we can let you know where we will be when you arrive (at the pavillion, down the trail, or down at camp) If you will be late, do not enter the driveway until 9:15 as it is a one way road and parents will already be driving out. You will need to wait until the last car in line has cleared the gate before proceeding.

Pickup is between 1:50 and 2:05, and everyone will promptly leave at 2:05. Please let us know if you are running late by sending us a brightwheel message with your ETA so we can wait for you with your child. Pickup will be in the large pavilion unless otherwise specified. If you will be late, do not enter the driveway until 2:15 due to all parents departing.

Drop-Off

Drop-off can be a tender transitional time for some children. We are here to help that transition go smoothly for you and your family. Please walk your child to the large pavilion to find their class mat, making sure they are dressed appropriately for the day. Encourage them to carry their own backpack in order to foster a sense of independence. Keep your goodbye as short as possible because long goodbyes tend to be more difficult for the child. We are happy to help your child transition into the day by doing a hand-off.

Pick-Up

This is a time for teachers to briefly talk with you regarding your child's day. We will be communicating what your child did at school during this time and any potential concerns. If you have questions/concerns regarding your child, please let us know. We can chat after pick-up or, if time does not allow due to the nature of pickup and the timing of the driveway, we can set up a meeting or phone call.

Please let staff and teachers know via Brightwheel ahead of time if an alternate person is picking up your student. If your family has additional drivers (grandparents, babysitters, etc.), it is your responsibility to ensure they are on our approved pickup list and to inform them of all traffic safety policies and procedures.

Alternate Pickup Location:

In the event there is a conflicting activity happening at Montvale Springs that requires us to change pickup location, we will communicate in advance via Brightwheel and share a map explaining the alternate pickup spot.

Daily Schedule

8:50-9:05: Drop off

9:05-9:15: Morning Circle (gathering as a class, reading stories, and check in with everyone)

9:15-9:30: Hike to camp

9:30-10:00: Snack and Morning Meeting

10:00-11:15: Free Play, Group Lessons, Crafting

11:15- 11:30 Circle (a time to gather as a class for songs, group games, stories, celebrations)

11:30-12:00: Lunch

12:00-1:00: Free Play, Group Lessons, Crafting

1:00- 1:15: Gratitude (gathering as a class to sing songs and take turns giving thanks together)

1:15-1:30: Clean Up and Gear Up

1:30-1:50: Hike to Pavillion

Teaching Philosophy

Research strongly supports the idea that young children learn best through direct experiences with the world around them. Being outdoors provides children with not only fresh air, but endless resources for imaginative play, creativity, hand-eye coordination and balance, physical strength, and mental clarity. By tapping into a child's innate sense of wonder about nature, we can help them learn basic environmental and natural science principles, as well as respect for all living beings. Our lessons flow organically from the natural rhythms of the seasons and from the children's daily discoveries. There are no set lesson plans: each day is shaped by the animals, insects, birds, amphibians, weather, and foraging that is encountered, providing endless spontaneous teachable moments.

Behavior Guidelines

FFS believes and acknowledges that children are complex beings, with complex needs. We approach each child with care, curiosity and concern, but we also acknowledge that Forest school is not necessarily the best fit for all children. FFS reserves the right to pause enrollment at any point during the school year. A pause in enrollment can occur for any number of reasons, but common reasons include observable patterns of detrimental behavior, displays of complex trauma behaviors, repeated physical injury to peers and academic interventions beyond the scope of our learning framework.

Discipline/Redirection

We use a proactive approach to behavior management that uses self-regulation and integrates social-emotional learning and discipline. Positive discipline allows children to solve their own problems with the guidance and modeling of their peers and teachers. Conflict is often turned into a learning opportunity. This opportunity allows peers and teachers to teach children the social, emotional and communication skills necessary to effectively express their feelings, resolve conflict, and develop prosocial behaviors.

General Forest Rules:

Boundaries

Children are expected to stay within the boundaries that have been established by teachers at all times. If students struggle with adhering to our boundaries and repeatedly leave approved camp areas this will be cause for a meeting with teachers and parents to discuss your child remaining in our program.

Ingestion

Children will not eat or drink any substance or material found in nature without explicit teacher permission. For young kids, we use the terminology "We don't put nature in our mouths" and repeat it often.

Sticks

Children may not play with a stick that is longer than their arm, unless it is clearly and responsibly being used as a walking stick, a tool (digging, for example), or for building under the supervision of the teachers. This provides the children space and time to work on their communication skills in order to effectively communicate their wants and needs. To keep everyone safe, running is not permitted while holding a stick. We appreciate your help in reinforcing these rules with your child. Children naturally use sticks as weapons (bow & arrows, guns, etc.). We recognize the value in this type of play, so it is not strictly prohibited. However, as a school, we encourage peace and kindness, so teachers will gently guide students towards

other uses for sticks in their play. Children may be encouraged to take a break from playing with sticks or to play with their sticks in a different way.

Rough-and-Tumble Play

Children may engage in rough-and-tumble play. We believe in the value of exuberant, boisterous, rough-and-tumble play to a child's overall development. This vigorous, big-body play allows children to use language (verbal and nonverbal) and learn how to negotiate, take turns, compromise, and get creative. The children are learning about cause and effect while also developing empathy for others. Children are encouraged to communicate their wants and needs with their friends when partaking in this type of play. A teacher may step in and help a child who is having difficulty expressing their wants and needs by identifying the child's wants/needs and then helping the child voice those wants/needs. If a child is continually struggling to read friends cues and listening to boundaries, they will be redirected away from rougher play. If teachers notice a pattern of this escalating into unsafe interactions, classes may need to change their approach and parents will be included in conversation about what is being seen and what boundaries are being created. We are committed to a safe and inclusive environment that meets the needs of our students as individuals and as a whole. We maintain a zero tolerance policy for intentional physical injury of peers at all times.

No Toys

Nature provides the materials necessary for learning outdoors, so toys from home are not allowed. We cannot guarantee that a toy from home will make it home at the end of the day in good condition due to the nature and location of the program.

No Technology

We ask that you do not send your child to school with any of the following:

- Electronic gadgets or toys of any kind
- Hand-held gaming devices
- Apple or Gizmo Watches
- Cell phones

Ticks, Poison Ivy, and Bees

It is highly recommended that you check your child for ticks when you get home. They can be exposed to ticks while at school due to the nature of the program, but teachers will do their best to keep an eye out for ticks. If a tick is spotted on your child while at school, a teacher will remove it and place it in between 2 pieces of clear tape and give it to you at pickup in case you would like to get the tick tested. Your child's tick bite will also be circled with a permanent marker and monitored to see if the bite grows. Teachers will identify poison ivy (Sister Ivy) in areas the students spend time in. Students will be encouraged to learn to identify poison ivy as well. Bees, wasps, and yellow jackets can be present at school due to the nature of the program. Bees are loved and respected, and students are taught to be gentle and give them their space. In the

event of a bug bite/sting, the area and your child's overall mood and health will be monitored. You will be notified of any bites/stings that are noticed during the day at pickup.

Child Safety Policies:

To ensure the safety and protection of all children and staff, our organization maintains a strict policy that staff members are never to be alone with a child or vulnerable person in a private or unobservable situation.

Procedures:

- At least two authorized adults must be present during all interactions with children whenever possible.
- All one-on-one meetings must take place in a visible and interruptible setting
- Random supervisor checks will be implemented to monitor compliance.

Although we aim to avoid situations where staff are alone with a child or vulnerable person, certain unavoidable circumstances may arise. In such cases, risk mitigation procedures must be followed.

- Staff must inform a supervisor immediately when a one-on-one situation is anticipated or occurs unexpectedly.
- Keep the interaction time-limited and in a visible, open space.
- Document the encounter, including time, reason, location, and persons involved.
- Use transparency tools
- Follow up with the child's parent/guardian to inform them of the interaction if it was unscheduled.

We maintain a zero-tolerance policy for any form of sexual abuse, exploitation, or misconduct involving children or other vulnerable persons in our care.

Enforcement:

- Any allegation or suspicion of sexual abuse will be taken seriously and reported immediately to the appropriate authorities and child protection services.
- Any staff member found to have engaged in sexually abusive behavior will be terminated immediately and referred for prosecution.
- All staff are required to undergo background checks and receive regular training on child protection.

While we recognize that appropriate physical contact can be a healthy part of interaction with children, boundaries must be maintained to ensure all actions are respectful, safe, and professional.

- Examples of Appropriate Displays of Affection: Side hugs, High-fives or handshakes, Verbal praise or encouragement, Brief pats on the back or shoulders
- Examples of Inappropriate Displays of Affection: Kissing or intimate touching, Full frontal hugs or sitting on laps, Touching of private areas (except as necessary for diapering or medical needs, and only by authorized personnel).

- Note: All physical contact must be child-initiated, non-coercive, and in the presence of other adults whenever possible.

To protect both staff and children, interactions between staff members and children or vulnerable persons outside of official program hours or activities must be limited and approved.

Procedures:

- Staff must not initiate or encourage private relationships with children or vulnerable persons outside of program settings.
- Any planned interaction (e.g., attending a child's sports game, tutoring, etc.) must be:
 - Approved in writing by a supervisor and the child's parent or guardian.
 - Held in public or observable places, never in private homes or secluded settings.
- Social media contact with minors is discouraged and must follow organizational digital communication guidelines.

Group Dynamics:

All students will remain within eyesight and earshot of a teacher at all times. The standard teacher:child ratio for outdoor classes is 1:6. For most of the day, each class stays together in designated areas, but they may split into smaller groups for hikes, focused learning, or other activities. The only people that interact with the students during the day are employees or volunteers who have been thoroughly vetted. Most of the time, there will be two (or more) adults with each class. Smaller classes may only have one teacher or may be combined into a multi-age classroom. Teachers always have administrative support and carry emergency forms and an official first aid kit at all times.

Hiring Procedures:

All staff and volunteers are thoroughly vetted to determine their ability to safely work with children in the forest context. Before being considered for employment, all teaching candidates will go through at least two rounds of interviews and are required to submit:

- a personal CV of past jobs
- 2-3 professional references
- responses to specific questions documenting their understanding of children and child development
- a clean background check

All volunteers and substitutes must: meet with our Director, and undergo a background check. These checks and balances provide the information needed to make an informed hiring decision with the safety of our students in mind.

Site Assessment:

The sites and structures are checked for safety each morning before the children arrive at school. Any hazards will be taken care of or the group may relocate to another site for the day.

Fire Safety:

Children are only in the presence of fire while under direct supervision of their teacher(s). Although a child may be invited by a teacher to help tend a fire, they are given very specific instructions based on their age and ability to discern safety around fire. They may help collect and haul firewood, but the teachers are always in charge of adding fuel to the fire. There is always direct adult supervision when children are in the vicinity of fire or hot coals.

Water Safety:

All visits to the creek and pond are under full supervision of teachers. Children will be allowed to wade in water that is less than knee deep while wearing water shoes or rain boots.

First Aid at School:

In the case of a minor injury, the teachers may administer basic first aid—wash the injury with soap and water and cover with band-aids—as they see fit. The parents will be notified of any significant injuries at pickup (or after school via phone call if the child is picked up by another adult). In the case of a major injury, the teachers will call 911 and the parents/emergency contact and apply basic first aid until medical help arrives. All teachers have easy access to First Aid kits at all times. Children will always be sent to the nearest hospital if such extreme measures are needed.

Illness:

To control the spread of illness, children with vomiting, diarrhea, and/or fever must remain at home and not return to school until the child has been symptom free, without medication, for 24 hours. Should a child become ill while at school, parents will be contacted to pick up the sick child promptly. If a parent cannot be reached immediately teaching staff will call the next emergency contact to arrange pick-up.

Dispensing Medication:

If your child takes any medications that must be administered during the school day, you will need to provide a signed authorization that allows teachers to administer medication, even non-prescription. Specific instructions regarding dosage, frequency, and symptoms of the condition for which the medication is administered should be listed on the authorization form signed by a parent. The medication should be labeled with the child's name. The staff member who administers the medication will document the time, the dosage, and any noticeable side effects.

Emergency Evacuation:

In the unlikely case that we need to evacuate the property, all parents would be notified via phone call of the destination and pick up protocols.

“There’s no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing”



Daily Items Needed:

- Child-size backpack that can hold all gear
- Full waterbottle
- One snack & filling lunch
- Waterproof rain pants
- Rain boots (insulated in cold weather)
- full change of seasonally appropriate clothes in a waterproof or Ziplock bag (don’t forget socks & underwear)

Warm Weather Gear:

If the temperature is above 50, your child should wear or have all of the following:

- Comfortable Play clothes that can get muddy
 - Warmer Days: quick dry short sleeve shirt and shorts
 - Cooler Days: long sleeve base layers and sweaters
- Sunscreen & bug spray applied before drop off
- Sunhat and swimsuit, if desired
- Closed toe water shoes for creek play

Cold Weather Gear:

If the temperature is below 50, your child should wear or have all of the following:

- Comfortable base layer including wool socks, quick-dry pants and long sleeve shirt
- Mid-layer fleece pants and top or thick sweater
- Waterproof rain jacket or thick outer layer
- Warm hat/beanie
- Waterproof mittens, preferably 2 pairs
- Scarf or neck gaiter
- Small teacup

Waterproof and water resistant are DIFFERENT.

Pants

Rain pants are a crucial layer and are required. They keep your child comfortable even when its not raining because the ground will be cool and/or damp. They also protect from poison ivy in the summer and bug bites. We highly encourage true rain pants and not "snow pants." Snow pants are warm but tend to absorb water easily. It is crucial that the pants have a closure (velcro, elastic, cord and toggle) at the ankle to cinch the pants tight over boots to keep water out.

Under layers

It is helpful to have a range of under layers to keep your child warm and comfortable in various temperatures.

- Base layer: thin layer of silk, wool or Capilene long underwear.
- Mid-weight: a middle weight layer of wool or Capilene
- Heavy-weight: a thick layer of wool or stretch fleece leggings.

Boots/Shoes

You are required to send your child(ren) in rain boots (preferably BOGS or Oakiwear) as they are best for keeping kids' feet warm and dry while playing outside in the winter. We also recommend rain boots to be generally worn year around, since we will spend so much time in the creek and it protects more from poison ivy and bug bites. We prefer boots that are fully waterproof, opposed to a neoprene top half, but do what fits your child best. Closed toe shoes will be required for creek play.

Brands we love: Bogs, Oakiwear, Outdoor Research, REI, Lands End, Gordini, SmartWool, WeeWoolies, Haley Hansen

Avoid: MARMOT OR LL BEAN- your child will be soaked in an hour

General Tips:

- Layers, layers, layers! The ideal way to keep your child comfortable as she/he romps through the woods.
- Please put your younger child in pants with elastic waistbands- no zippers, snaps, belts or suspenders as these greatly complicate pottyng! Older children can wear what fits them best
- Washing: It is best with waterproof outdoor clothing to not over-wash them. It greatly reduces the waterproof quality. We recommend simply wiping or hosing off really dirty clothes. Do NOT put waterproof clothing in the dryer. It is also good to avoid putting silk, wool, or Capilene in the dryer as well.

*There may be additional dates added to the calendar throughout the year. FFS will communicate any changes to the calendar as far in advance as possible via Brightwheel.