

Forest School

Parent Handbook 2023/2024



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GENERAL INFORMATION

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Forest School is to instill a love of the natural world and foster the development of the whole child.

PHILOSOPHY & VISION

We strongly believe in child-led and play-based learning. Children are intrinsically motivated to learn, and they do so by exploring the world around them. The goal is to provide children with repeated access to nature, give them time and space to investigate and foster a sense of wonder.

ABOUT OUTDOOR CONNECTIONS

Outdoor Connections Forest School is run by The Outdoor Connections Foundation (a registered not-for profit organization). OC delivers meaningful outdoor education programs for children and youth designed to enrich the lives of children in the Elk Valley. Founded in 2014, Outdoor Connections has as its mission: to provide affordable opportunities for children of all ages to connect to themselves, each other and the natural world. To learn more about OC you can “like” us on [Facebook](#), follow us on [Instagram](#), or visit our [website](#).

OUR CLASSROOM

We acknowledge the land we gather on is the traditional unceded territory of the Ktunaxa peoples and we give thanks for the ability to explore and play on their native lands. Our classroom is located on 60 acres of private land 12 km south of Fernie, BC. We share this land with Birch Meadows Lodge B&B owners, and their guests. There is a communal designated parking lot to park at during drop off and pick up.

ABOUT FOREST SCHOOLS

Our Forest School is modeled after the Forest School approach that has been established in Europe since the 1950s. Forest School programs adhere to the following two principles: *regular*

and repeated access to natural spaces, as well as child-directed, emergent and inquiry-based learning. The program is guided by the three Pillars Forest and Nature School

- Trust
- Relationships
- Freedom

Ten Principles of Forest and Nature School which we've summarized here;

- Takes place in a variety of natural places
- Regular repeated sessions in the same natural space
- Views children as competent and capable learners
- Led by a qualified Forest and Nature School Educator
- Values play
- Views the opportunity to experience risk as an integral part of a child's learning
- Uses loose, natural materials to support open-ended experiences
- Values the *process* as much as the *outcome*
- Seeks to honour the past and current realities of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples
- Builds diverse communities

The defining feature of this type of nature-based education program is that children are provided with opportunities to build an on-going relationship with the land, to a dedicated educator, to one another, and to themselves through this educational lens.

At Forest School, children have the freedom to explore, play, build, create, imagine, and use their senses to experience the outdoor environment and make lasting connections.

Each day at Forest and Nature School can be very different. It is dependent on many factors including: the season, the weather, animals that may have visited the site, trees/branches that have blown down, ponderings elicited by the educator, the tools and loose parts provided, the children in attendance, how long the group have been together, and most influential - what interests the children.

Sometimes children work collaboratively; solving problems, creating imaginary worlds, giving support to one another or navigating and decoding the social world together. Other times children work independently, finding comfort in their own creations, thoughts and reflections.

Although Forest and Nature Schools are relatively new to Canada, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have been offering land-based education to their children for millennia. Like Forest and Nature School, Indigenous Peoples' approach to education requires people to take responsibility for their own learning while emphasizing experiential learning and peer-to-peer learning. When educators use Indigenous Peoples pedagogy in their classrooms, it helps create an atmosphere of mutual respect and sharing.

The guiding principle at Forest School is that children are competent and engaged learners, and with guidance and support, can lead their own learning process in directions far beyond what an educator can initiate on their own. Learn more about forest schools at; <http://childnature.ca/about-forest-and-nature-school/>

ENROLMENT AND PAYMENT

Fees

We require a \$30 non-refundable registration fee, per child, to secure your child's spot in Forest School.

PRESCHOOL PROGRAM (3-5yrs)

Fall Session: Sept. 5 – Dec. 14 (15 weeks)

2 days/week = \$645.00

Winter Session: Jan. 9 – Mar. 14 (10 weeks)

2 days/week = \$430.00

Spring Session: Apr. 2 – June 6 (10 weeks)

2 days/week = \$430.00

SCHOOL AGE PROGRAM (5-7yrs) WEDNESDAY

Fall Series: Sept. 13 – Nov. 15 (10 weeks)

1 day/week = \$430.00

Winter Series: Jan. 10 – Mar. 13 (10 weeks)

1 day/week = \$430.00

Spring Series: Apr.3 – June 5 (10 weeks)

1 day/week = \$430.00

SCHOOL AGE PROGRAM (5-7yrs) FRIDAY

Fall Series: Sept. 15 – Nov. 17 (10 weeks)

1 day/week = \$430.00

Winter Series: Jan. 12 – Mar. 15 (10 weeks)

1 day/week = \$430.00

Spring Series: Apr. 5 – June 7 (10 weeks)

1 day/week = \$430.00

When/How to Pay

Payment is due;

- Fall Series – August 1st
- Winter Series - January 1st
- Spring Series - March 25th

How to Pay

- Cash and e-transfers are encouraged. E-transfers can be sent to info@connectoutdoors.ca.
- Post-dated cheques are also accepted. Please make cheque payable to *Outdoor Connections*.

No refunds will be given for days missed due to illness, inclement weather, emergency closure, vacation or statutory holidays.

HEALTH AND SAFETY POLICIES

PRIVACY POLICY

Any personal data held by us, including photographic images, will be processed strictly in accordance with privacy legislation and will be used for the purposes that you have consented to. We will not share details with third parties without consent, except where we are legally compelled or obligated to do so.

PARKING & GRAVEL ROAD POLICY

During drop off and pick up time, all parents/caregivers must park in the designated parking lot beside the cabins of Birch Meadows.



Please park on the west side of the parking lot, perpendicular to the cabins. Parking is not permitted in the camping areas or elsewhere on the property.

We encourage carpooling on the Birch Meadows gravel road. We request that there be two forest school children in each vehicle going up and down the gravel road to reduce our wear and tear of the road and also reduce our impact on the guests that may be vacationing at Birch Meadows. We recognize that carpooling can be tricky for some but we ask you to please take it into consideration when deciding to send your child to Forest School.

In winter months we recommend transporting children up and down the road in a 4 x 4 vehicle.

ILLNESS POLICY

In the following cases, we ask that children stay home and only return to school 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided:

- Temperature over 101 degrees F or 38.3 degrees C
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea (watery, profuse stools)

Should the above-mentioned situations arise while at Forest School, children will be asked to return home and come back to school 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided.

In the case of communicable diseases such as measles, chicken pox, mumps, flu, COVID 19, strep throat, viral pneumonia, etc., a sick child may return to Forest School once their health care provider (i.e., naturopath, doctor, nurse, etc.) has communicated that it is safe for them to do so.

FOOD/ ALLERGY POLICY

Children are required to bring their own snacks, lunch and water bottles. Warm tea in the winter is a nice idea. We recommend children bring healthy, wholesome energizing food and a full water bottle.

Nut-Free Zone

We will assess on a term-by-term basis whether we have any children/staff with nut allergies. If we have any children and/or staff with a nut allergy we will adhere to a strict nut-free zone. Parents will be informed of this topic via email prior to the start of Forest School.

Snack-Sharing

In addition, we ask that children do not share or trade snacks, as this ensures the health, safety, and happiness of our community.

Garbage-Less Snacks

We encourage children to try to bring a garbage-less snack. At the same time, we ask that parents/caregivers consider the size/weight/safety of the containers in which their child's snacks are packed. At Forest School, we seek to empower even our youngest participants to carry, open and pack away their own snacks and water bottles on our adventures.

TOILETING AND HANDWASHING POLICY

Children will be required to wash their hands with soap and water before eating, and after using the outhouse to eliminate. Hand sanitizer will be used with consent from the parent/guardian if water and soap is not available.

RISK MANAGEMENT POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Recognizing and experiencing risk is a fundamental component of healthy development. Experiencing healthy risk teaches children their physical limitations so that they are better able to self-regulate and make decisions. A certain level of risk will always be present due to the inherent nature of outdoor play. Forest School educators support children's healthy risk-taking through thoughtful and continuous assessments of potential hazards, consequences and benefits of each experience and/or activity. Safety measures and emergency procedures are in place as a result of the following risk assessments done throughout the year:

- Seasonal Site risk assessment
- Activity or Experience risk assessment

- Individuals risk assessment
- Daily risk assessment
- Dynamic risk assessment

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES AND FIRST AID POLICIES

Forest School has emergency procedures outlined that all facilitators and volunteers are familiar with. One facilitator carries a copy of these procedures, including emergency numbers in their backpack.

The first aid kit is equipped with items such as bandages, antiseptic wipes, gauze, tape, eye wash, anti-allergy medication, bear spray, whistle, and hypothermia blanket.

Accident and Emergency Procedure

In the case of a serious accident or emergency the staff at Outdoor Connections will follow this procedure:

1. The senior educator will take the lead; establishing the nature and extent of the emergency and administer appropriate first aid.
2. Another adult will call 911, emergency services providing the following information;
 - a. Nature of emergency and first aid administered
 - b. Injured party details: age, gender, medical history (see 'Emergency: Medical Form in first aid backpack)
 - c. Location: Birch Meadows Lodge & BnB, 4485 BC-3, Fernie, BC, V0B 1M1
3. Other adults ensure that the remainder of the party is adequately supervised, returned as early as possible to the yurt and receives appropriate support and reassurance
4. Send another adult to meet the ambulance at the car park and direct them to the injured party. In case there is no other adult on site, call the Executive Director to meet the ambulance at the carpark.
5. **Inform the Executive Director** and the emergency contact of the injured as soon as possible.
6. Senior Educator to accompany injured party in the ambulance if the emergency contact hasn't arrived.

7. The Executive Director will continue to liaise with the emergency services until the incident is over.
8. As soon as reasonably possible after the event, the accident will be reported using an Incident Report Form.

PARTICIPANT: STAFF RATIOS

Our maximum teacher to participant ratio is 6:1 for the preschoolers. There will be typically two trained educators per class, making the class total no greater than 12 children. Our Wednesday class may have a total of 16 children, with 2 educators and a volunteer. Depending on the age(s) and needs of the children we may choose to have smaller class sizes. Volunteers will be available for classes that demand more adult supervision.

STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES

Forest School facilitators have experience working with children in outdoor environments, which we believe is the most critical in keeping your child safe. Our staff members are passionate about sharing their love of nature with others.

Our lead educators are certified Forest School practitioners through the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. Forest School educators hold a wide range of other professional certifications including Bachelors of Education, Master of Education, Early Childhood Education or Early Childhood Education Assistant. In addition, we require at least one teacher per class to have their Wilderness First Aid Certificate, Occupational First Aid or CPR/First Aid training. All staff and volunteers have submitted an up-to date Criminal Record Check, with a Vulnerable Sector Screen.

CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

Outdoor Connections is committed to taking a proactive position regarding child protection. In accordance with the Child, Family and Community Services Act, we are required to immediately report if we suspect that child abuse has occurred or if a child is at risk of abuse.

INCREMENTAL WEATHER/ CLOSURE POLICY

Our facilitators consult weather forecasts regularly when making decisions about Forest School. In the event of extreme weather (blizzard, severe storm, high winds etc.) the team reserves the right to cancel the program until it can safely be resumed. If a session is cancelled, parents/guardians will be notified by phone and/or email by the Forest School team.

EXTREME WEATHER POLICY

Educators at Outdoor Connections consult the forecast regularly. During days of uncertain weather conditions educators will ensure participants are close to the yurt so that it can provide protection should thunder and lightning or high-winds occur.

During days of extreme cold (-25C or below) or extreme heat (30C) FS educators will constantly assess participants' comfort and safety, watching for signs of frostbite, hypothermia, heat exhaustion etc. A fire will be lit in the yurt during colder days to provide comfort, warmth and safety.

PROCEDURE FOR TOOL USE /FIRES

Tool Use

- FS Educator will check all tools before use
- Correct and safe use of sharp tools will be demonstrated before use
- Tools will be counted when handed out and again when collected
- All children are to be supervised closely until deemed competent to work with limited supervision
- All safety guards of tools will be replaced immediately after use
- Each child must remain outside the individuals 'blood bubble' while using tools

Fires

- Fires will only be lit in designated fire areas
- Correct use of equipment and fire safety will be demonstrated before use
- Participants will only light fires under direct supervision

- A burns kit and water will be kept within close range of fires
- All fires will be fully extinguished at the end of a session

PREPARING FOR FOREST SCHOOL

CHILD ENTRY AND RELEASE POLICY

Our meeting spot is at the picnic table located in the upper meadow. For safety purposes, an adult must sign the child in once the child has reached the upper meadow and is in the care of our staff. At pick up time a child will not be released into any adult's care until the child has been signed out.

FIRST DAY OF FOREST SCHOOL

On the first day of Forest School, we will spend time getting to know your child. We will talk about their ideas about safety and spend some time together developing safety rules and responsibilities for our group. We will introduce some of the daily activities such as a morning circle, wolf call, storytelling, sit spots, as well as sharing snack together and hygiene habits. Much of the time will be spent with the facilitators observing the children's interests, conversations and learning preferences for developing pathways for the following weeks.

On the first day, it works well to make a plan with your child in advance as to how and when you will be saying goodbye to them (ie: after a hug, a kiss and a high five). This helps soothe their nerves (and yours!) and make the transition to their educator's care easier as well as supporting them to make this experience their own.

CLOTHING AND GEAR LIST

'There's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.' Alfred Wainwright

When everyone is dressed properly, the barrier of discomfort is removed, allowing everyone to freely enjoy the outdoor experience. Part of the learning experience at Forest School is assessing weather and properly dressing for it. Invest in some quality gear for the success and joy of your child during their Forest School days.

**** LABELLING:** Please label all items of clothing, bags and backpacks. Our staff are not responsible for any lost or stolen items while on site.

All Seasons

- **Backpack**
 - With a front chest clip (help the pack stay comfortably on the child's shoulders)
 - Big enough to fit; 1 fleece sweater, 1 pair of socks, 1 pair of extra mittens, water bottle and snacks
- **Lunch/Snacks**
 - Children will be responsible to carry their own backpack, so please be mindful of the weight of your child's snacks.
 - We recommend packing lunch/snacks in lightweight snack containers that your child can open independently.
- **Water bottle** and/or thermos for warm drink
- **Ziplock bag of spare clothes** (Will be kept at Forest School)
 - In a labelled, ziplock bag please pack a full change of clothes for your child; underwear, wool socks, long sleeved shirt, long pants

Winter

To participate safely in winter weather, it is especially important that children are dressed properly. Layering clothing is the best way to stay warm and comfortable.

Base layer (the layer closest to the body)

- **Thermal long underwear and shirt** – Wool fibers are best for staying warm and keeping moisture away from the body but they can be expensive. Synthetics are readily available and more affordable and work well too. Avoid cotton as it retains moisture and makes us feel cold.
- **Wool or wool-blend socks**, fairly thick, but comfortable in the boot.

Middle Layer

- **Fleece pants** (fleece is so cozy and quick to dry, comfortable and warm)
- **Fleece or wool top**, hoody or pull over

Outer Layer

- **Water-resistant snow-suit;** Water-resistant snow pants with a bib work nicely to keep the upper body insulated along with a snow jacket.
- **Winter boots.** Recommended brand: **Sorel** (Bogs brand boots are NOT insulated enough to keep feet warm on the coldest winter days)
- **Wool toque or hat** that fits snugly and covers the ears
- **Insulated, waterproof gloves or mittens** with waterproof outer layer able to tuck inside or overtop jacket. (2 pairs needed every day).
- **Wool/fleece neck warmer** (much safer than scarves)
- **Sun block** (optional)
- *reusable hand/foot warmers are great if your child suffers from cold hands and feet*

Early Spring/Fall (cooler weather)

- Thermal long underwear and shirt (see winter wear)
- Fleece pants
- Fleece or wool top, hoody or pull over
- Waterproof rain pants and jacket/Muddy Buddy
- Closed-toe hiking shoe and/or comfy insulated rubber boots (**Kamik** insulated boots are recommended)
- Thinner toque or hat and light knitted gloves
- Wool or wool-blend socks (can be thinner)
- Sun block (optional)

Late Spring/Summer (warmer weather)

- Closed-toe supportive shoes/Rubber boots
- **Long pants and long-sleeved shirt** (this will help protect from scratches, ticks and insect bites)
- Waterproof pants & jacket
- Sun hat
- Sun block (optional)

Recommendations

- MEC Newt Rain Suits are supplied by Outdoor Connections on days that seem appropriate. These one-piece suits have taped seams and waterproof fabric that provides excellent protection in soggy conditions. We only have sizes 3T, 4T and 5T.
- At Forest School your child's clothing most likely will get dirty, wet and possibly ripped. Second-hand shops can provide cheap functional gear at a fraction of the cost. Feel free to ask us if you have any questions about clothing.

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

A TYPICAL DAY

There is a general rhythm to the day, but please note that our schedule is flexible. The weather, the child's interests, events and activities help shape our time at Forest School. Here's what a typical preschool day looks like:

- 9:00am Arrival
- 9:15am Welcome Circle
- 9:30am Site Assessment & Play
- 10:30am Snack, Books & Storytelling
- 10:45am Activity & Free Play
- 11:45am Sit Spot/Closing Circle
- 12:00pm Departure

ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR

- Sparking Engagement: By modeling enthusiasm for nature play
- Observing: Once the children are engaged in exploration, the educator steps back to give the children space to play and explore
- Learning Alongside Children: The educator gets dirty, explores, creates, builds, learns, gains knowledge, celebrates alongside the children
- Staying Safe: The educator's role is to make sure the group is physically safe

- **Creating Connections:** The educator works to create community with the children, and to help them through conflicts and discussions that arise

The role of the Forest School educator is that of a facilitator. By modeling enthusiasm for nature play, the educator sparks engagement in learning. Once the child is engaged, the educator steps back to observe and learn alongside the child. The educator works to create community with children, parents, and place to work through conflicts and discussions that arise. The educator is there to nurture the children's ability to manage risk and to make sure the children are physically safe and comfortable.

PLANNING, OBSERVATION AND DOCUMENTATION

The learning outcomes are based on real-time explorations and experiences, rather than predetermined concepts. In order to truly nurture emergent learning, FNS educators shift their emphasis from planning to observation and reflection. Instead of planning the activities for the day, FNS educators closely observe participants and identify some of their interests. Educators then provide loose materials or open-ended invitations as possible aids to extend the learning.

FNS educators support their observations by taking photos and videos which are used to extend learning, refocus it, or redirect it. The older participants document their own journey in journal format. This enables them to look back at a snapshot from previous sessions and extend their learning. Educators may prompt them by asking "Were you able to accomplish what you were trying to do?", "What if we tried... today?"

Photos and videos are also used to hypothesize collectively on the learning taking place at Forest and Nature School. Educators, guardians and participants have a chance to reflect on questions such as "What were they learning/ struggling with or mastering there?", "Did this bring about a change in their understanding?". Theorizing like this enables us to assess the learning and development of the participants. It also fosters more meaningful and deeper learning for participants, educators and the FNS community.

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT POLICY

At Outdoor Connections we manage behaviour proactively by engaging in developmentally appropriate activities, and by nurturing a positive physical and social/emotional space. In general, our behaviour management will:

- Consider the child's developmental level and needs
- Make expectations clear and provide scaffolding to help students participate positively
- Focus on the behaviour rather than the child
- Be implemented in a positive and consistent manner
- Be designed to help the child to learn appropriate behaviour and techniques
- Involve consulting with parents/guardians/teachers to include their input of successful approaches with a child, as well as to keep them informed of issues/concerns as they arise
- Help children to develop self-control, self-confidence, decision making skills, the ability to communicate effectively and sensitively in their interactions with others

At Outdoor Connections, inappropriate behaviour is defined as using actions or words that make other children or staff members feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Unsafe behaviour is defined as any behaviour that puts a child or staff member at risk. This includes not responding when called, running, hiding, taking risk without consulting staff, and not following guidelines so that behaviour becomes potentially dangerous to the child or others.

In the case of inappropriate/unsafe behaviour the following steps will be taken:

1. Staff will remove the child from proximity of the group and the two will work together to define the inappropriate/unsafe behaviour and create a plan to modify it.
2. Staff will confer with other Forest School staff to be consistent with expectations and to agree on the best approach for the student.
3. Parents/guardians/teachers will be informed (by phone or at the end of the day face-to-face) of the behaviour and consulted to discover the cause.
4. Staff and parents/guardians/teachers will, together, develop strategies to adjust and eliminate the inappropriate behaviour. These strategies will be implemented with the child at home and at Forest School to offer a consistent approach. Staff and guardians will stay in contact to keep each other informed of the child's progress with regard to the behaviour in question.

5. Staff will follow up with the child to be consistent with expectations and approach as well as to offer feedback and positive reinforcement,
6. In the extreme case that a child's behaviour is consistently inappropriate or unsafe for the child or others, and after the above process has been implemented, the child may be asked to leave the program for a short term or permanently.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

GENERAL COMMUNICATION

Generally, Outdoor Connections staff will communicate with families via email or phone. To reach us in a timely manner, please send an email to info@connectoutdoors.ca or call/text the appropriate staff member.

Please be sure to communicate the following:

- if you will be late/absent
- if any member of your group is ill with a communicable disease (ex: COVID)
- if any member of your group is being treated for lice

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION

In the event of an emergency at FS, parents/guardians will be contacted by telephone once emergency personnel (if needed) have been contacted.

In the event that weather/road conditions make travel to/from FS dangerous for staff/participants and FS needs to cancel programs or close early for the day, parents will be notified by **phone**.

QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

Should you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to ask to speak with FS staff or the Executive Director. If you or the FS staff member feels that you require an extended or more focused conversation than can be had in the moment, plans can be made to do so.

GRIEVANCE POLICY

Your concerns matter to us, and issues may arise in your dealings with Forest School staff. Please communicate your concerns with Forest School staff in person, or via phone or email. We will make every effort to address and resolve these issues in a timely manner.

If you should have a complaint or concern that cannot be resolved directly with Forest School staff, please bring that concern to the CNAC Administrator: admin@childnature.ca. In the unlikely event that the concern still cannot be resolved, a letter can be submitted in writing or electronically to the board of directors of CNAC.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

One of the many special features of Forest School is that sessions are held in the same area of greenspace over a period of time, allowing participants to make a connection with the land and get to know the space throughout the seasons and weather conditions. Through a deep connection to nature and place, children grow up to be stewards of the land. Although this is very positive for learning, it can have an adverse environmental effect due to overuse of an area. We therefore strive to meet a delicate balance whereby we promote children's connection to nature through exposure and meaningful experience, while at the same time fostering an ethic of care and sustainable use of the land we are connecting to. We minimize our ecological impact by rotating our sites for play, staying on trails as much as possible, and keeping activities with the highest impact in our main area in front of the yurt.

At Outdoor Connections we recognize the importance of environmental sustainability. We conduct ongoing ecological impact assessments looking out for potential concerns and negative impacts such as; compaction, interference with local wildlife habitats, areas that are being overused, natural elements (like twigs and plants) being removed, and human-made materials being left behind. We discuss site maintenance with the children and are conscious of our ecological impact.