



# Nature Preschool

at Irvine Nature Center



# FAMILY HANDBOOK





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# WELCOME TO THE NATURE PRESCHOOL AT IRVINE NATURE CENTER!

Dear Families,

The preschool years are a precious time different from all other periods of childhood. No longer totally dependent on their parents, your children are striking out to forge their own discoveries, relationships, and methods of expression through many first experiences. Simultaneously, they continue to look towards important adults in their lives for guidance, love, and care. And what incredible sway these adults have in impacting what kinds of people children grow into! It is an honor that you have chosen us to play this role in your child's life in the coming year.

Over the next months, your child will grow and learn in countless ways. They will grow strong and courageous as they tackle new trails and scramble over new logs. They will make new connections and understandings of the worlds of math, science, art, and literature and continue to find their voice as they label and share these discoveries.

They will learn about the intricate web of life that surrounds us and how we fit into it. They will learn how the earth cares for us and how we can care for it. Moreover, they will establish rich relationships with others in our community and nurture a deep inherited connection to nature. Your child will do all of this through doing: hands-on experimentation, self-directed exploration, and play. Oh so much play!

This handbook is designed to share our philosophy and answer questions about policies and procedures. If you have further questions or any concerns about our policies or your child's experience, please don't hesitate to contact me at [RooneyK@ExploreNature.org](mailto:RooneyK@ExploreNature.org) or 443-738-9223.

I look forward to hearing from you!

In All Types of Weather,



Katie Rooney  
Director of Early Childhood Education Programs  
Irvine Nature Center





## MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of The Nature Preschool at Irvine is to foster appreciation for the natural world while providing children with hands-on experiences for skill development in all areas of learning.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Irvine Nature Center is located on land which served for millennia as a shared place for seasonal hunting, trapping, and trade by Indigenous Peoples living along the Chesapeake Bay and Susquehanna River. The majority of these came from Algonquin tribes, most notably the Piscataway people, located to the south, and several groups of Iroquoian speakers, especially the Susquehannock tribe, to the north.

Today the Baltimore area remains home to descendants of these tribes, as well as to several thousand members of the Lumbee and Cherokee tribes, many of whose parents or grandparents relocated from Virginia and North Carolina to pursue industrial jobs in Baltimore following World War II.

Elders from the Baltimore American Indian Center – “a place where people are treated with dignity, respect, and understanding, and cultural practices are kept alive” – advised Irvine on the location and layout of the Native American site. Members of the Center assisted with construction of the wigwams and performed a ceremonial blessing.

In creating a Native American Site for educational use, Irvine respectfully recognizes both the Indigenous Peoples who were the original caretakers of the forests and fields of the Maryland Piedmont and their descendants who carry on the rich cultural traditions of their

heritage. These communities are our friends and neighbors today. We acknowledge the violent and painful history of forced displacement, which Indigenous People suffered at the hands of white colonists. We affirm that through our educational programming we will strive to honor the legacy of the Indigenous generations before us, to validate the loss of tenured and sacred land, and to ensure that the deep spiritual connections between this special place and its stewards remain steadfast for generations to come.

## EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

We believe that childhood should be joyful and wholesome; that the earliest, most memorable kind of learning includes climbing trees, catching frogs, and making mud pies. We believe that empathy, love, curiosity, and respect are the truest foundation of learning.

When thoughtful nature-based curriculum is combined with direct experiences in nature, a transformative change takes place. This connection is both powerful and empowering. We believe it is every child’s right, as an integral part of the natural community, to develop a foundation of academic skills through encounters in the natural world.

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Irvine Nature Center strives to model diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in all our policies, practices and procedures and to create an environment in which everyone feels valued and respected. Irvine supports this DEI-focused environment for its membership, staff, visitors, students, and Board of Trustees by actively recruiting participation from all constituencies of our region and by aligning our programs, policies, practices, and resources so that all people have genuine opportunities to learn and thrive.

**READ ABOUT IRVINE’S MISSION, VALUES, AND MORE AT:**

[www.ExploreNature.org/about/mission](http://www.ExploreNature.org/about/mission)

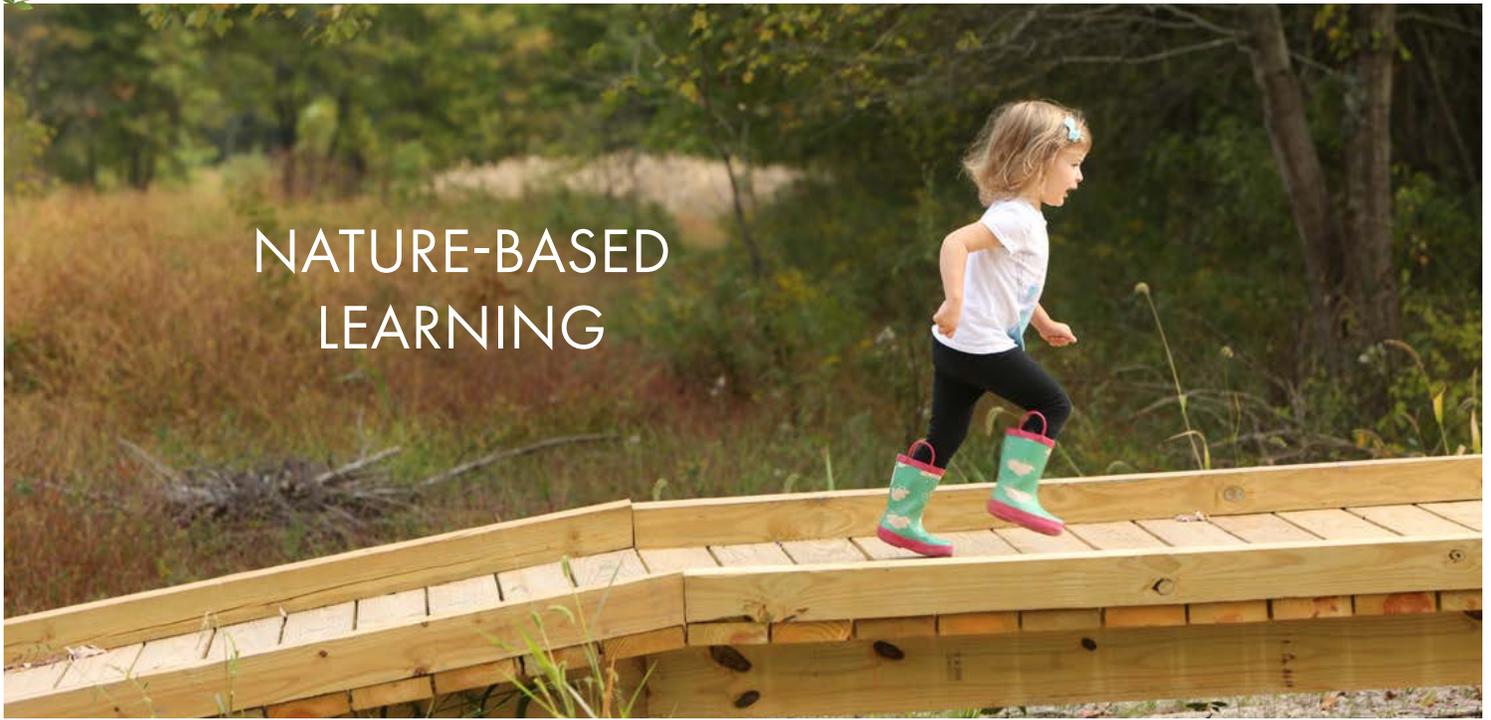


## WHAT MAKES THE PROGRAM DIFFERENT



**In contrast to traditional preschool programs, the Nature Preschool allows children to:**

- Have extensive outdoor time each day.
- Interact with and care for live animals native to our area.
- Learn directly from biofacts and artifacts and experienced naturalists and environmental scientists
- Develop earth-friendly habits such as recycling and composting.
- Create and reflect on learning through a variety of expressive art forms using natural and recycled materials.
- Be the main drive in their own learning, shaping both daily activities and the curriculum.
- Learn through a combination of teacher-led and self-guided wild nature play.
- Develop a life-long relationship with the natural world and love of learning through an emergent curriculum rooted in natural rhythms of seasonal change.



## WHY?

NATURE-BASED CURRICULUM encourages healthy minds and bodies. Being connected to nature is wired in the essence of every human being. However, busy modern lives have left many people, including children, disconnected from this core. A nature-based curriculum guarantees children an opportunity to build a lasting connection with nature through sensory learning.

There is a growing body of research that links nature-based learning with higher scores on standardized tests, improved physical fitness, a more developed understanding of science and

math concepts, reduced effects of ADHD, and better academic performance all around.\*

Our program provides a framework for skills children need to be prepared for kindergarten and a life-long love of learning. At The Nature Preschool, they will grow their physical, social-emotional, cognitive, language, and creative skill. Their capacity to self regulate and be contributing members of a community will blossom, leaving a strong foundation for future learning. All while being with nature.

*\*Sources: The Last Child in the Woods by Richard Louv and the Children & Nature Network [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org)*

## HOW DOES NATURE-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORK?

We strive for learning to flow naturally through child-led exploration and play, both indoors and out. While there is some formal teaching and learning, the majority of the day is dedicated to informal and experiential learning through PLAY. It helps to understand the following terms:

**Formal learning:** knowledge acquired through a structured lesson or content presented by teacher (used limitedly)

**Informal learning:** knowledge acquired through discovery and natural interactions with others and environments

**Experiential learning:** knowledge acquired through direct, hands-on, sensory learning experiences

**Unstructured play:** play that does not involve adult rules, adult narration, or adult direction\*

**Wild nature play:** unstructured play in a natural environment

**Child-led/centered/driven:** following children's interest in activities, topics, or places to allow them to make true meaning out of experiences

**Risky or adventurous play:** play that allows children to determine their own physical capabilities (e.g. climbing a tree); children learn to assess their own risks independent of adults telling them what they are able to do/capable of doing and how to make things reasonably safe\*

**Emergent curriculum:** refers to the fluid nature of learning by which topics of study emerge as students interact and interact with the learning environment and the facilitation of further investigation of these topics

**Provocation:** an invitation to explore, examine, create, or reflect based on given materials; there is not one correct way for the child to interpret a provocation

*\*Teachers are always responsible for removing hazards and checking for unsafe conditions anywhere a child plays. Adults are always there to support, guide or help a child as appropriate.*

# CHILD-CENTERED LEARNING & OUR CURRICULUM

OUR EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY underscores our commitment to child-centered learning. Educators guide students to new learning as children ask questions, express curiosity or concern, and show enthusiasm towards discoveries. Students experiment, problem-solve, and explore with their senses. Students voice opinions and express ideas through language and the arts. Students develop friendships and learn from one another through cooperative play. In other words, students actively participate in all aspects of learning!

## WE INTEGRATE MANY APPROACHES TO SUPPORT EACH CHILD'S LEARNING AND GROWTH BY:

- providing a supportive, safe learning environment to encourage discovery, questioning and experimentation;
- offering sensory opportunities with live animals, natural objects, artifacts, trail games, outdoor interpretation, and creative arts activities;
- engaging cognitive growth and problem solving skills through hands-on games and play invitations;
- developing physical motor skills through active learning and play;
- empowering children to experience and evaluate risk through adventurous play;
- promoting social skills and positive self-image through group play and cooperative learning;
- entrusting children through choice and self-determination in play, including with who they play with;
- encouraging children to express their identity in whatever safe form it takes;
- cultivating empathy through discussion and celebrating diversity of all living things;
- nurturing self-expression and creativity through arts, singing, storytelling, and reflective time in nature;
- encouraging family involvement through community celebrations and class visits to help students appreciate the wisdom of their first teachers — their families;
- partnering with parents to celebrate their child's talents and best meet the needs of each child;
- instilling respect and appreciation for the natural world.





### OUR OPEN-ENDED CURRICULUM IS INFLUENCED BY:

- The seasonal rhythms of Nature and the gifts she provides through weather, plant growth, and animal movement
- Our students and their families (**Please be sure to fill out the “Getting to Know You” form**)
- Our original Nature Pedagogy that combines Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and Montessori philosophies of child-centered learning and emergent curriculum with nature-based learning
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards
- Guidelines for Excellence in Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs created by the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)
- MSDE standards for early learners

### WE DEVELOP LANGUAGE & LITERACY BY:

- Exposing students to letters, letter combinations, and words
- Modeling writing and offering writing opportunities
- Providing print in many forms (i.e. magazines, books, field guides, labels, and signs)
- Storytelling and listening to/ retelling stories
- Inviting students to “write” their own stories through dictation, early writing, or drawing
- Encouraging dramatic play
- Singing, rhyming and experimenting with sounds
- Generating lists or reading to perform a task (i.e. recipe or game instructions)
- Identifying characters and storylines to promote comprehension
- Introducing new vocabulary, words from other languages, symbols, and sign language
- Modeling and encouraging conversational language skills

### WE EXPLORE MATH IDEAS BY:

- Finding, following, and repeating patterns
- Figuring out what is missing among groups
- Estimating
- Songs, stories, and games with counting
- Using number and time words
- Graphing and charting
- Grouping (i.e. dozen, pair, many)
- Shape recognition and creation
- Classifying and grouping objects
- Sorting and matching objects
- Measuring and using scales
- Tracking seasonal and time progressions
- Counting with one-to-one correspondence
- Examining series of objects
- Comparing groups of objects to describe quantity and size

## THE NATURE PRESCHOOL STAFF

THE NATURE PRESCHOOL is led by Katie Rooney, Director of Early Childhood Education, and Alexia Savold, Assistant Director of the Preschool. Together they have a wealth of education and experience in nature-based early childhood learning and teaching. Both are former preschool teachers and their children are Preschool alumni.

Our teachers come from diverse backgrounds, but they all share one thing in common: a love of nature and preschoolers! Teachers are knowledgeable about developmentally appropriate practices for early childhood learners and have a wealth of teaching experience. Most are credentialled through MSDE. Two co-teachers staff each class of 12-14 students.

In addition, Irvine partners with local universities to mentor new teachers. We frequently have interns or volunteers that join our classes. At times there may be three or four adults working with a group. All adults working with classes are fingerprinted and background checked and volunteers/interns are never left alone with students.



## LICENSING & ACCREDITATION

THE NATURE PRESCHOOL is licensed by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) Office of Child Care and participates in MD Excels. We comply with the regulations outlined by MSDE, in the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR). You can review Maryland's Guide to Regulated Child Care and the regulations, available in the cubby rooms.

In addition to our preschool license, we are nationally accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC is internationally known for its rigorous standards that guide the highest quality early childhood education programs.



## SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

THE NATURE PRESCHOOL makes every effort to meet the dynamic needs of all students. If you believe your child may have needs which require additional planning or preparation on the staff's behalf (such as a unique health, behavioral, or developmental needs), speak to the Director prior to enrollment. We are not equipped to accommodate some acute health conditions or special needs.

The majority of our time together at The Nature Preschool is spent engaging in child-led, play-based learning and children choose what to play, with whom, and where. Initially, some children are not accustomed to this type of play and it may take time for them to grow comfortable with engaging cooperatively with others. Teachers are trained in social-emotional development and outdoor teaching, and are ready to guide and coach these children.

Certain behaviors are considered severe in the context of our outdoor, open-ended structure (ex: eloping from the group, frequent aggression, or other unsafe behaviors). For more information on our approach to discipline, please see p.13.

If your child has a diagnosed developmental delay, physical/cognitive/psychological disability, or is in the process of learning English, please be sure to disclose this information on your enrollment paperwork and share any Individual Family Support Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Plans (IEP) with us. This enables us to fully understand your child's unique needs and better prepares staff to best support your child. In addition, if your child receives any private or state provided intervention services (speech, occupational, physical, mental health therapies), we welcome collaboration with their provider! The more we collaborate as a team with all individuals that work with and know a child, the better the outcome.

Dietary restrictions and allergies are common. We do our best to accommodate each student's needs and staff are well versed in life-threatening food allergies. Many staff hold medication administration training to administer life-saving medication in the event your child is exposed to an allergen.

Information regarding your child's needs, interests, and abilities is collected through the "Getting to Know You" and "All About Me" forms.



## DOCUMENTING STUDENT GROWTH

**OUR STUDENT ASSESSMENT** is rooted in authentic assessment. Differing learning styles, interests, and skill levels become evident as teachers informally observe students daily. Assessment tools help us gain insight about children's cognitive, language, social-emotional, physical and self-help, and connection to nature. Evaluations are varied (see below) and are sensitive to family culture, experience, abilities, and home language to ensure they are meaningful and relevant to each child.

This kind of on-going authentic assessment, combined with frequent parent dialogue, helps provide insight about progress made over the course of a school year. Unlike tightly structured standardized evaluations, authentic assessment highlights a child's progress in a dynamic, holistic way. It provides a true vision of what skills a child has achieved and what they have yet to master (NAEYC, 2003; revised in 2009). Because we utilize authentic assessment, student assessment is on-going as teachers plan curriculum tailored to each child's needs. This information helps ensure we provide the right opportunities for each child's development. This also helps us make improvements to our preschool program overall. The following strategies are used to help assess student growth:

**ANECDOTAL RECORDS** are a collection of informal observations based on teacher notes and photos. The teacher must therefore be an observer and researcher.

**OBSERVATIONAL OVERVIEWS** are a summary of teacher observations based on their anecdotal records demonstrating your child's abilities and includes photographs with examples. An overview for each developmental domain and connection to nature are created each fall and spring.

**WORK SAMPLES** are selection of student work that may include mark-making or writing, cutting, artwork, or evidence of fine motor skills such as weaving, lacing or beading.

**NATURAL HABITAT NOTES** can be completed by families wishing to contribute to their child's Field Guide. You can detail observations, include a photo, and record milestones using the form available in your child's cubby room and on brightwheel.

**STUDENT FIELD GUIDES** combine work samples, Observational Overviews, and any Natural Habitat Notes, providing a central documentation of student growth and learning. These Field Guides are updated and made available each semester.

**CONFERENCES** are held in November and May. Please take advantage of these special times to meet with teachers and talk about your child. There is no class on conference days so that teachers and parents can meet. We encourage families to help care for one another's children during conferences, as they are for adults only. Alternatively, you can request to have a virtual conference instead. If you wish to conference at other times during the year, feel free to let your child's teacher know.

**HEARING AND VISION SCREENING** for students ages four and up through the Baltimore County Health Department. Parents must give written consent to participate. If results determine that a child's hearing or vision require further attention, you will be notified and directed to your pediatrician or specialist.

**ADDITIONAL SCREENING MAY BE CONDUCTED** using developmental checklists as needed for individual children. Staff will be given an orientation on these assessments and ensure they consider the child's culture and language.



# THE DAILY FLOW

OUR DAYS FLOW NATURALLY with our flexible schedule, while emphasizing important activities. We invite and embrace emergent curriculum as we follow students' interests. Our teachers are facilitators of learning, they are in tune with students' needs, skills, and discoveries. Therefore on occasion the flow of the day changes or we spend more time in one activity than the other.

We start our day with Imagination Stations for self-directed play. After clean-up, students gather for circle time filled with greetings, songs, group activities, and investigations. We then head inside for a bathroom break and hand washing. Half-day classes eat snack and full-day classes eat lunch- outdoors if weather permits! Our trail activities encompass creative arts, writing, nature investigations, science experiments, child-led exploration, and unstructured play. Before leaving for the day, we gather in a closing circle to review our day and say goodbye. Full day classes return to the building after their hike for a snack and indoor rest time.

In severe cold, wind, or rain, we will still go outdoors. It may be for a shorter period of time or we may start our day indoors with imaginations stations and/or incorporate a special project, experiment, animal visit or large motor activity.

**The half day schedule is very similar with snack before hike and then a closing gathering before goodbye.**

A Day at The Nature Preschool		
Imagination Stations		
Clean-Up		
Circle Time		
Potty		
Lunch		
Gear check + Trail Time		
Snack		
Rest Time		
Goodbye		

## ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

**Cubby room doors open at 8:45am so you can access your child's cubby, gear, and the restroom.**

WHEN YOU ARRIVE, please sign your child in on the brightwheel communication app (see Communication section for more information) and then help your child use the restroom and wash their hands. Students should bring their backpacks outdoors, but full-day students should leave their lunches and their rest mats in their cubbies. If necessary, please apply insect repellent or sunscreen to your child. Then walk them down to their Class Grove (assignment provided with your Welcome Them Packet). Teachers will greet your child and eagerly welcome them into the Grove **no earlier than 9am.**

If we must start indoors, you will be notified via brightwheel. Families must still sign their child in and help them with the restroom and handwashing.

*NOTE: Parents/guardians must touch base with a teacher and sign children in and out on brightwheel at drop-off and pick-up each day.*

*\*If the individual is not listed as an approved pick-up on your child's emergency contact form, please include their contact information as well as your explicit permission.*



### ABSENCE:

If your child must miss class due to illness or another reason, please let us know so that we can keep an accurate record of attendance. Please send a brightwheel message to "Staff & Admins" to let us know they will be absent and why.

### LATE POLICY:

Please message "Staff & Admins" if you will be late to pick up. If tardiness becomes an on-going issue, we may charge a late fee of \$15 per child for the first 15 min and an additional \$1 per minute after that.

### SIBLINGS IN CLASS:

While many siblings enjoy playing in our classrooms during drop off or pick up, we ask that you never leave siblings unattended. Additionally, children should not play in the indoor classroom when teachers are not present (with or without adults). Class time is reserved for enrolled participants only. Throughout the year we offer special events and activities which often include family members so that everyone can participate. You may also play in the Outdoor Classroom any day after 11am or visit the trails or exhibit hall.

# SNACK, LUNCH & REST TIME



SNACK AND LUNCH TIMES are important times of our day. They not only provided a necessary boost of energy for our hikes and play, but encourage social conversation and self-help skills. They learn to open and close containers, use silverware, and how to converse with peers. When possible, we will serve full day and AfterCare snacks “family style” so children learn how to take appropriate portions, use table manners for passing food, and practice motor skills necessary for pouring, scooping, using tongs, etc.

**In half-day classes**, each family is responsible for providing a small snack for their child each day.

**In full-day classes and AfterCare**, Irvine will provide snack for the class. Please disclose your child’s dietary restrictions and food allergies prior to the start of class. We will accommodate your child’s needs as best we can, however, in some cases we may request that you provide a supplemental snack. If you are more comfortable with your child bringing a snack from home, you may do so, but follow the guidelines above.

We strive to offer natural, healthy snacks such as fruits, vegetables, cheese, yogurt, beans, rice, whole grain cereals, or breads. We try to avoid food that contains dyes and preservatives or highly sugary snacks. If you would like to donate a snack to share with the class, we would love that! Please contact your child’s teachers for any specific dietary guidelines. The Maryland State Department of Education requires that served foods be whole fruits or vegetables, or are produced in a licensed facility. This means we cannot serve fruits or vegetables that parents wash and cut at home or baked goods prepared at home. Teachers must wash and cut all produce. Please keep this in mind if you decide to send in a shared snack. If you enjoy cooking with children, we encourage you to coordinate with teachers to arrange a class visit to prepare a favorite recipe!

<b>ECE FOOD GUIDELINES</b> <i>All ECE programs are peanut free.</i> <i>Some children have life- threatening allergies to peanuts.</i>	
<b>Students should bring foods...</b>	<b>Staff will not serve</b> <i>(parents may send for their child)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• that are peanut-free</li> <li>• high in good protein or energy</li> <li>• <b>low</b> in added sugar or desserts</li> <li>• in reusable containers rather than single-use packaging with any needed cutlery to limit waste and teach sustainable practices</li> <li>• that do <b>not</b> need refrigeration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• meat products</li> <li>• products not made here at Irvine or in a licensed facility</li> <li>• whole grapes or tree nuts, raw peas, hard pretzels or chunks of raw carrots to children who are 3 yrs or younger</li> </ul>
<b>Suggested Trail-Friendly Snacks:</b>	<b>What About Birthdays?</b>
Fruits/veggies Whole grain pretzels or crackers Almond or cashew butter Granola Fruit/nut bars Dried fruit and peanut-free nuts	You may commemorate the day by helping your child pick out a special snack to share with class. Please no cookies, cupcakes, etc. Instead, a favorite fruit and other nutritious item are perfect. Please note, these items may not be made at home. Don’t forget to check in with teachers about any dietary restrictions.

## LUNCH:

**Full-day students must also bring a bagged lunch from home daily. These will not be refrigerated so please be sure to include an ice pack.**

**\*Do not bring peanut products. We are a peanut-free school because some children have life threatening allergies to peanuts.\***

## REST TIME:

After a busy morning and hike, full-day classes have a state-required rest time. During this quiet-ish time, children rest their bodies while listening to music or a story, reading books, or drawing. Please see the Recommended Gear List for necessary materials. ALL nap items should be rolled up and placed in the designated spot. **Please label all items.** These items must go home weekly to be laundered.

## BEFORE & AFTERCARE



## BEFORE & AFTERCARE

### WHAT IS EARLY BIRD CARE?

It is a before-care option that takes place from 8:30 - 9 a.m. Children engage in quiet activities and animal visits with a teacher or Director prior to joining their class at 9.

### WHAT IS FERN CLUB?

It is an AfterCare offered to full day students only, 2-5pm. Fern Club follows the same teaching philosophy and curricula of the Nature Preschool classes with a heavy focus on child-directed nature play. AfterCare teachers meet the same requirements as regular preschool teachers and are in regular communication with classroom teachers to provide a consistent, loving, enriching environment. Students will go on daily hikes but return to the main building or Outdoor Classroom by 4pm. Students may be picked up at any time, but Fern Club has a flat rate, regardless of actual pick up time.

### WHEN IS IT AVAILABLE?

Enrollment in both Before and AfterCare is available for 1-5 days a week whenever school is in session.\* While occasional use is available, drop-in care is not. This must be arranged ahead of time.

*\*Early Bird and Fern Club are not available during "slow start" days. Fern Club will also not be in session on select days, such as during monthly Preschool Staff meetings held on pre-determined Mondays. These dates are included in The Nature Preschool Family Calendar provided with contracts and at the beginning of the school year.*

# ADJUSTMENT TO THE NATURE PRESCHOOL

STARTING PRESCHOOL is a big step for most. Some children are excited to participate and easily acclimate to class. Other children are nervous at first but quickly ‘warm up’ as they engage in activities. Still others may have a longer adjustment period as they gradually become comfortable with a new environment and expectations. Occasionally, a child who is eager at first may have difficulty later when they realize the change is permanent. This adjustment is not necessarily related to a child’s maturity level; every child handles new situations in his or her own way, especially in this post-pandemic world. We acknowledge these differences and provide support and encouragement to help each child adjust to our program.

As a Caregiver, you can positively impact how your child responds to this transition. There are many ways to prepare your child for class, such as talking about it a few weeks before school starts. As your child asks questions, answer them positively and honestly. “You’re going to explore outside, meet animals and new friends, sing, make art projects and learn lots of new things. It will be a fun adventure!”

We encourage you to visit Irvine with your child to get familiar with the trails and outdoor classrooms. This may alleviate some trepidation about unfamiliar settings. Prioritize attending the Family Orientation Day the week before school starts so your child can see the indoor classrooms, the bathrooms, and meet the staff. We offer Caregiver/Child classes as well as Summer Nature Camps if you are looking for more ways to acclimate your child before the school year.

When you drop off, assure your child that you will be excited to hear all about the day when it is time to be picked up. You might even give your child a challenge: “While you are in class today, pick something special to tell me about — I can’t wait to hear about your day!” Also let them know who is picking them up or when you will see them next.

If you expect your will have great difficulty with the transition, please be sure to mention this in your General Student Information Form and check out the tips in your Welcome Packet.

## ITEMS FROM HOME

We strongly discourage bringing toys from home. Bringing these items can distract from the rich natural environment the Preschool provides. If a transitional object must accompany your child, these items must remain in their backpack. Children can go visit that transition object whenever needed for comfort. Full-day students may bring a small stuffed animal from home for rest time.

**NOTE: Toys that encourage aggressive play, including weapons of any kind, are not permitted.**



# CLOTHING

FALL & SPRING (ABOVE 70°F DURING CLASS)	FALL & SPRING	WINTER		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Sun hat</li> <li>· Sunscreen and bug spray as needed (applied before class)</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Fleece jacket</li> <li>· Insulated, waterproof mittens</li> <li>· Lightweight mittens or gloves (for outdoor snack time)</li> <li>· Hat</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Base layer top and bottom (long underwear)</li> <li>· Mid-layer top and bottom</li> <li>· Insulated, waterproof mittens</li> <li>· Lightweight mittens or gloves (for outdoor snack time)</li> <li>· Balaclava or neck gator</li> <li>· Hat</li> </ul> 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· T-Shirt</li> <li>· Shorts or pants</li> <li>· Long sleeve shirt for layering</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Rain jacket with hood</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OR one piece rain suit</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Warm, water resistant winter coat</li> <li>· Snow pants</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OR one piece snowsuit</li> </ul> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Shoes or closed toed sandals that are okay to get wet</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Waterproof boots</li> <li>· Tennis shoes/hiking boots</li> <li>· Wool/fleece socks</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Insulated, waterproof boots</li> <li>· Wool/fleece socks</li> </ul> 		

OUR BODIES AND CLOTHES get messy — and muddy! Shoes get muddy, pants may become grass-stained, and shirts may drip with paint, clay, or glue. Sometimes all this learning is even in our hair. Our classes exemplify what it means to learn by doing. Because we encourage this kind of whole-hearted, whole-bodied learning, we urge you to dress your child in clothes that are not restrictive and that can get dirty. We provide smocks for art projects, however we will not force any child to wear a smock. **Expect that your child (and their clothing) will get dirty!** If at any time your child's clothing becomes wet and uncomfortable, we will assist them in changing into their extra set of clothes.

Please send your child to school in appropriate footwear for any weather to ensure your child can freely explore. Children need comfortable, protective shoes with gripping soles for running, jumping, and climbing. Sneakers or well-fitting hiking boots are best. Your child will need rain boots for wet and rainy days and also for visiting the stream.\*

**\*As weather can change unexpectedly, please leave a pair of rainboots at school or bring them every day. Nature Preschoolers are puddle hounds. If there is mud, they will sniff it out!**

## WEATHER APPROPRIATE ATTIRE:

Please dress your children in weather-appropriate clothing for sustained outdoor play daily. Please check the local *hourly* weather forecast for 21117 to help guide your clothing decisions. Please note it is often a few degrees colder at Irvine and often windier.

Check those wind chill temps for comfort! Dressing in layers during the winter is best! For a great how to layer video, check out [Maplewood Outside School's website](#). Please see the Recommend Gear List for more specific information.

## ADVENTURE APPAREL PROGRAM:

The Nature Preschool aspires to provide a full set of outdoor gear for each student through Our Adventure Apparel, Gear for the Year program. These items are provided free of charge for that year's use. If families return all gear at the end of the year, then your Pacesetter Membership is extended a year! While this program is still in its early stages, **availability of gear is determined by donations. We may not have everything for everyone.**

## CHANGE OF CLOTHES:

Please provide **two** extra sets of clothing to leave at school. The clothing should be stored in a shoebox in your child's cubby. See the Recommended Gear List for more info and check your child's cubby regularly to refill back-ups or switch out for seasons.

## BUG SPRAY AND SUNSCREEN:

We highly encourage families to apply sunscreen and bug spray before drop off. Students in Fern Club AfterCare may leave these items with teachers for reapplication after lunch. All bug spray and sunscreen must be labeled with the child's name and appropriate paperwork completed. **These items may not be kept in a child's cubby or backpack.**

# FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND SPECIAL EVENTS

WE ENCOURAGE YOU to play an active role in our program! Your preschooler counts on you for support and encouragement outside of their new world of learning. For ways to stay in the loop check out the Communications section of this handbook on page 30.

## THE NATURE PRESCHOOL PARENT GROUP (NPPG)

We hope you will join the NPPG. This group organizes community events and helps connect families to provide support to one another and Preschool staff. The NPPG is typically run by a set of parents, one from each class. If you'd like, please join the Nature Preschool Parent Group on Facebook.

## FAMILY SHARING

Join us during class to share a special family tradition or past time. This may be in the form of a story, cooking, creative arts project, game, or sharing of a cultural holiday. We welcome all traditions and hope you will consider what you can share with your child's class! Please contact your child's teacher directly to schedule a family sharing.

## GENERAL VOLUNTEERING

We love volunteers! If you would like to assist our school we have opportunities both with classes and outside of class. Please let us know if you are interested! You can also volunteer with other Irvine departments. Please visit website for info.

## SPECIAL EVENTS

We recognize that certain times may not work for your family to attend an event so we have scheduled some events to take place during class, and others in the evening. Siblings are always welcome! For dates and times, please see the Nature Preschool Family Calendar and the event invitations.

**Fall Campfire and Night Hike-** The night glows in autumn magic. Join us for a nocturnal hike followed by warm cider and seasonal treats around the campfire to celebrate the change in seasons.

**Winter Solstice Celebration-** Join your child towards the end of their regular class time for a special tribute to the longest night of the year through a hike, craft, and song.

**Spring Equinox Celebration-** Join us to welcome the noisy season of spring through a large Preschool gathering. Activities typically include a campfire, song, and an activity.

**Summer Celebration-** Join your child towards the end of their last regular class time for a special good-bye to the school year and hello to summer. We'll share songs, memories, and a special treat!

**NOTE: Please bring canteens, mugs or sippy cups for your family when attending our events. This cuts down on waste and dishwashing!**





## FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND SPECIAL EVENTS CONTINUED

### HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

Holidays are exciting for our little ones! At The Nature Preschool, we downplay commercial aspects of holidays and focus on the seasonal and family tradition aspects of holiday celebrations. We acknowledge holidays and cultural events through wholesome activities such as songs, stories, and food tasting. Please let us know how we can celebrate a holiday that is special to you or contact your child's teacher to arrange a time to share a Family Tradition.

### BIRTHDAYS

To commemorate your child's special day, we keep things low key and dependent upon that child's comfort level. We typically sing happy birthday and share what we love about the child. Families are invited to donate a book to the school and join the class at snack time to read the book and enjoy snack. Some families like to provide snack on that day too. Please make sure to carefully read the food guidelines on p. 13 for more information.

If you choose to donate a book, it may be a new or used book donated anytime during the year. We will place a bookplate inside the cover with your child's name and date of birth. Each time we read your book, we will fondly remember your child. Thank you for helping our library grow!

# COMMUNICATION

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN STAFF AND FAMILIES enriches the educational experience of our students. We regularly touch base with parents to share details about your child’s day and will always make time to chat with you via brightwheel messages, phone, or in person during non-instruction times within their normal work hours. Please keep the lines of communication open with us and let us know of any significant events or changes in your child’s life. Visitors, moving, new babies, divorce, illness, or death can affect children in class. When we are informed about these changes we are better equipped to offer support and encouragement for your child. If you notice any unexplained change in your child’s behavior, feel free to discuss it with our staff.



**NOTE: The teachers’ first priority is with students when they are present. If you have a concern that needs discussion, please request a meeting outside of class time.**

## BRIGHTWHEEL

To ensure that all of your child’s teachers and all family members stay up to date on important information and joyful moments, we use the brightwheel communication app. Check-in and out, newsletters, flyers, important documents, photos, and messages between staff and families are all housed in brightwheel.\* Please note, administrators may not have easy access to email/phone during the day. Therefore, we prefer that brightwheel messaging be used.

	Parent	Family	Approved pickup	Emergency contact
Create a brightwheel account	✓	✓	✓	
Can check-in & check-out	✓	✓	✓	
View activity feed	✓	✓		
Send and receive messages	✓	Send only		
View child’s profile	✓			
View and pay bills	✓			

All caregivers and any individual that regularly drops off or picks up your child should have their own personal account and the brightwheel app downloaded to their phone. **For record-keeping purposes, each individual must have their own account. Caregivers may not share an account.** We strongly encourage all caregivers to include their cell phone number so that they can receive important alerts such as early dismissals or health notices. For general brightwheel help including how to update your account and add an approved pick up or a family member, please visit the [brightwheel help page](#) or the Help section on the app. There are even video tutorials!

There are different types of accounts. See the image above from brightwheel and visit the [website](#) for more information.

Your child’s teachers as well as Preschool admin will send messages through the app. To ensure you receive messages in a timely manner, please be sure to set-up push notifications on your phone. Administration will also send urgent ALERTS with information about emergency closures or health notices. These messages send a text message as well as an in-app message.

If you need to contact the Preschool, please send a message using the app! You can send a message to two different groups:

**Staff & Admins:** These messages go to all of your child’s teachers and administrators and any other parents associated with your child’s account. This includes your child’s Fern Club teachers. Parents of other students do NOT receive these messages. Please use this option for almost all messages.

**Admins only:** These messages go to all Preschool admin and any other parents associated with your child’s account. Parents of other students do NOT receive these messages. Please use this option for messages you are not comfortable with class teachers seeing.

*\*Please note, some features such as the Requested Forms section (which we use for collecting enrollment paperwork) are only available through the website.*

# COMMUNICATION CONTINUED



## NEWSLETTERS FROM THE NATURE PRESCHOOL

Teachers send bi-weekly newsletters full of descriptions and photos that showcase what their classes are up to. These messages will also include reminders, important dates, flyers etc. The Directors send monthly newsletters diving deeper into the why behind what we do.

## PARENT BULLETIN BOARD AND CUBBIES

We often post flyers on the parent board or near the brightwheel check-ins. Please check these spaces to stay in the loop. But these items will also be on brightwheel.

## GRIEVANCES

If you disagree with an action taken by a staff member or would like to make a complaint, please make direct, initial contact with that staff member to share your concern through brightwheel, email, phone, or by setting up a time to meet outside of class time. If you are not comfortable speaking with that staff member or do not receive a satisfactory response, please contact the Director of The Nature Preschool. If you still do not receive a satisfactory response, please contact the Director of Education or Deputy Director. All feedback and complaints will be addressed in verbal and/or written form within a two-week time frame.

## REPORTING CHILD ABUSE

Some communications are subject to state laws regarding confidentiality. According to Section 5-704 of the Family Law volume of the Annotated Code of the State of Maryland, any teacher or other professional employee of the school who has

reason to believe that a child has been subject to abuse or neglect must immediately inform Child Protective Services. In complying with the mandate to report, the person so reporting is given immunity from criminal or civil penalties or liability when that person, in good faith, makes a report. Such reports are confidential.

Staff suspecting such abuse are required to notify the local department of social services about suspected cases of child abuse or neglect as soon as possible as well as Preschool administration. A DHR Reporting form/SSA 180 must be completed within 48 hours following the verbal report. The verbal report should be made immediately upon the reporter having a suspicion that child abuse or neglect has occurred. A copy of the form must also be provided to the local State's Attorney's office. Notification of the Director of the Nature Preschool or the Director of Operations does not substitute for the staff member's need to call the local department of social services, complete the form 180 and notify the State's Attorney's office.

If at any time an Irvine staff person is accused of abusing or neglecting a child, the accused staff person will be immediately removed from all classroom and trail activities and contact with students while a complete investigation is conducted. Any Irvine staff person that is informed of any suspicion or accusation of abuse or neglect by a staff person is required to report that information immediately to the Director of the Nature Preschool. If you, as a parent or guardian, suspect a staff person of any abuse or neglect, please inform the Director of the Preschool immediately. The Director of the Preschool will inform the Director of Education and the Deputy Director. The reporting staff person will notify the local department of social services as soon as possible. In addition, the Director will inform the MD State Department of Education (as required by licensing) and NAEYC.

Please note, Preschool staff use anatomically correct vocabulary to refer to genitalia or "underwear areas" to refer to the general area.



## OUR APPROACH TO DISCIPLINE

THE PHYSICAL SAFETY and emotional well-being of every child is of utmost importance. Every child will be made to feel safe and protected while in our care. We cultivate a calm, empathetic atmosphere with clear expectations for all participants. Children are given ample opportunities to make many choices throughout their day. Adults are always available to model or facilitate appropriate strategies for children to solve social problems, such as sharing or including peers in group play.

As mentioned in the Special Accommodations section on page 9, the majority of the Preschool Day is spent engaged in open-ended nature play during which a teacher does not restrict children's activities unnecessarily. Such choice and freedom typically result in children being intrinsically motivated to learn and grow. At times, teachers may proactively limit choices to ensure a safer, more productive atmosphere for children. This is done after teachers routinely observe the children to become aware of triggers that may predict challenging behavior. Triggers may include particular events, activities, interactions, or other contextual factors unique to an individual child. Through close observation and assessment of the function of the child's behavior, teachers are better equipped to develop individualized plans for each child's success.

Whenever a child is having a hard time controlling their behavior, adults assist in a calm, helpful manner. We practice conflict resolution that encourages children to identify and express what they are feeling to become more emotionally literate and empathetic. We help children understand the connection between their behavior and consequences. Our response to behavior is centered around positive

reinforcement. Other methods of discipline include setting clear rules, redirection, reminders of expectations, and encouragement. Depending on the circumstances, teachers may use verbal and/or nonverbal cues (such as a picture or a hand signal), a slight touch, or directing whole group attention to the desired behavior. During redirection, teachers may give students additional choices that fulfill the child's needs in play while still maintaining the safety of the class.

Techniques that are NOT used include physical punishments, withholding of snacks, bribery, psychological abuse, derogatory remarks, coercion, threats, or any other methods that may frighten or humiliate children.

We communicate regularly with parents/guardians about their child's growth and interactions with others. At times this means sharing observations of unsafe or challenging behavior. In bringing such concerns to your attention, we ask for your help in providing clear consistent guidelines and expectations with your child as the safety and well-being of all is our top priority. You know your child best and may have insight into approaches that may help your child be successful at school.

If, after collaborating with parents/guardians to address concerning behavior, a student is not responding to our typical intervention strategies within 6-10 classes\*, parents/guardians will be required to attend a conference in which we will create an Education Support Plan designed to meet the child's unique needs. These plans balance the needs of the entire class with the supports necessary for individual children to be successful. The plan will



## DISCIPLINE CONTINUED

include a scheduled follow-up meeting to discuss the plan's success or any needed changes to occur 6-10 classes\* after the Plan is created. The full plan may be revisited as needed.

Some behaviors pose a greater safety risk for other children and staff and require a more immediate response to ensure the safety of the class. This includes but is not limited to eloping, severe or targeted aggression, or frequent dangerous use of materials. In these instances, parents/guardians will be required to attend an in-person conference about the severity of the behaviors and to create an Education Support Plan before returning to school. This meeting will be required after the first instance or within 6 classes\* if no improvement is seen after initial parent/guardian notification, depending on the severity.

The ultimate goal of our discipline policy is for all children to be a loved, celebrated member of our learning community. Thus, exclusion from activities or the program are used only when all other efforts have been exhausted or when they pose a serious safety risk to students and staff. If the consistent implementation of an Education Support Plan does not result in improved behavior within 6-10 classes\* or the behaviors pose a significant safety concern to the child, other students, or staff, The Nature Preschool may require the shadow of a family member or trusted adult and/

or the student to take a break from class for a period of 1 school day to a full week, depending on the severity of the behavior. Such a decision will be made in consultation with the family. During any break of at least a day, staff will seek out additional support and parents must meet with staff prior to the child rejoining class. Upon re-entry into the program, if the concerning dangerous behavior continues after a period of 6 classes\* with no sustained improvement, a Continued Attendance Meeting will be held and attended by the Director, at least one classroom teacher, Irvine's Director of Education, and parents/guardians to explore the ability of the Preschool to continue to meet the needs of the child. If the decision is made to terminate enrollment in The Nature Preschool, the Preschool will make an effort to assist the family in accessing alternative school placement and/or services.

The Nature Preschool complies with all federal and state civil rights laws and will consider exclusion and expulsion only in the most dire of circumstances based solely on the safety of the child and other children and staff in attendance.

If your child has a diagnosed disability, learning difference, or speaks another language, please make sure to communicate that with us as it may relate to behavior. For more information, please see the Special Accommodations Section on page 9.

\*Number of classes is dependent on a child's class schedule and severity of the behavior.

# ILLNESS

*\*These policies and procedures are subject to change during an epidemic or pandemic. Irvine Nature Center reserves the right to change these policies (including requiring face masks or additional exclusion rules) with little notice in the interest of student and staff health and safety. Such measures will be implemented in coherence to CDC, MSDE, and local health department recommendations and best practices. Families will be notified of any changes through an Addendum to this Handbook.*

THE NATURE PRESCHOOL takes precautions to prevent the spread of illness by maintaining a clean environment, providing substitutes for staff, setting clear limits on the health of children in attendance and spending lots of time in the fresh air and digging in the dirt. Frequent hand washing is also an important habit that prevents the spread of illness. To keep all children and staff healthy, we need your cooperation! This means keeping your child home if you suspect they are sick or if they are experiencing any of the symptoms in the box below.

Recovering children are more likely to pick up a new illness. Keep in mind that we spend time outdoors daily, **so if your child is not well enough to go run, play, or go outside, please keep them at home as there is no option for your child to stay indoors.**

If students are exposed to a contagious illness such as chicken pox or strep, notices will be posted and sent home within 24 hours of us being notified. Per law, we will not disclose the identity of the sick individual.

In addition, for the safety of all children, if we are notified that a child enrolled in the preschool becomes ill with a vaccine-preventable disease, non-immunized children will be excluded from the program until the health department deems the period of exposure and risk has passed. The Director will reach out to those families within 24 hours of the notification.

We make annual contact with the Baltimore County Department of Health to keep abreast on the spread of illness or outbreaks of communicable disease.



## PLEASE KEEP YOUR CHILD HOME WHEN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CONDITIONS ARE PRESENT:

- Fever of 100 degrees Fahrenheit OR when your child has had a fever in the last 24 hours (fevers tend to rise as the day progresses)
- Significant respiratory distress (e.g.: chronic or continuous coughing/wheezing)
- Lice or other infestation
- Cuts or wounds with bleeding or oozing
- Diarrhea or vomiting within the last 24 hours
- Stomach Ache
- Symptoms of unknown origin, such as a rash
- An illness during its contagious stage such as "pink eye"
- Your child requires one-on-one care OR more care than staff can provide without compromising the health and safety of other children in the class.

**If any of these symptoms are present during drop off, or if your child is not feeling well, the teacher will request that the child go home to prevent the spread of illness.**

\*Additional conditions may apply during an epidemic or pandemic. Please see the appropriate Addendum.



## ILLNESS CONTINUED

### GETTING SICK AT SCHOOL:

If your child becomes ill during class and requires more care than the staff can provide without compromising the health and safety of other children; or if a child's condition is suspected to be contagious and requires exclusion, they will be isolated from the group to rest comfortably with a familiar caregiver. You will be contacted immediately to pick them up. If we cannot reach you, we will call the other contacts listed with your emergency information. Sick students should be picked up within 30 minutes of caregiver notification.

### ABSENCE DUE TO ILLNESS:

If your child must miss a class due to illness, please send a message to "Staff & Admins" on brightwheel. For more information, please see "Communication" on p. 19.

If a child is absent for more than three days due to acute illness, MSDE requires a doctor's note clearing your child to return.

### MEDICINE AT SCHOOL:

Please be advised that staff will not carry or administer medication to students without appropriate state-required paperwork completed by the guardian and signed by the child's physician. This includes EpiPens and inhalers! If your child has a prescribed EpiPen or inhaler, please ensure the additional required forms are completed. All medication must be in its original container with your child's name clearly on it. Medication is kept in teachers' trail bags at all times during the school day.

## TICKS

### PLEASE CHECK YOUR CHILD FOR TICKS AFTER CLASS EVERY DAY

TICKS ARE PART OF NATURE, unfortunately an unpleasant part. They can carry diseases like Lyme and Anaplasmosis. To keep children as safe as possible from ticks, we do frequent “spot checks” during class and when we return from our hike at the end of class. We also use lint rollers on clothing and sit on sheets while participating in activities outdoors. With students we discuss a few key points about ticks such as what they look like and what to do if they see a tick. Teachers carry “tick kits” in trail bags to ensure safe removal of a tick if one is attached. Dressing children in long sleeves and pants that are light colored, and tucking pants into socks are some ways to prevent ticks from getting onto children’s bodies. Ticks are very tiny, especially deer ticks. We strongly encourage you to check for ticks every day after class. We also recommend a bath or shower for children after class. You can find more information on the Tick Prevention and Response handout or at the Center for Disease Control & Prevention’s website.

## POISON IVY & BEES

OUR TEACHERS IDENTIFY poison ivy and steer clear of it on the trails. Please call your physician if you are suspicious of any rash your child has.

Bees are celebrated at The Nature Preschool! They are the unsung heroes of the food chain. We encourage children to respect, but not touch, our buzzing friends. In the unlikely event of a sting, we will monitor the child’s condition and notify parents.

*NOTE: If your child requires an EpiPen if stung, please give one to your child’s teacher at the start of the school year, along with the state-required paperwork signed by a physician. Medication must be kept in the original prescription box.*



# EMERGENCIES & SAFETY

ALL STAFF MEMBERS are trained in First Aid and CPR. In the event of an accident that requires medical attention beyond basic first aid, we will do one of the following:

- Call guardians and emergency contacts to collect the child immediately to seek medical attention; or
- If severe and immediate help is deemed necessary, we will call 911 and a staff member will accompany the child to the emergency room until guardians arrive.

All teachers carry radios and have emergency contact information in trail bags. Key staff members in the building also use radios to relay any important safety information to teachers.

In the case of a weather-related emergency while indoors, students will shelter in place in their classrooms away from windows. Staff regularly monitor the weather and adjust plans and activities accordingly. If weather occurs unexpectedly or quickly, teachers are informed via radio to take shelter. They will either take children back to the Center, time permitting, or take shelter in another structure.

In the case of a fire, classes exit quickly and safely out of the nearest exit and convene in the Bauer Drive Glen.

If we must evacuate Irvine’s grounds we will meet at Jemicy School directly across from Irvine’s main entrance.

For information on our emergency procedures in the case of an intruder, please contact the director directly. We do not publish this information in order to protect the safety of students and staff.

If any of the above instances were to occur, families will be contacted by staff to notify them of the emergency and any changes to pick-up procedures for that day. After any major safety event, families will also be provided with a full recap of the event once it is safe to do so.

**\*Irvine uses [airnow.org](http://airnow.org) to monitor air quality and will take the following precautions during poor conditions.**



<b>ORANGE</b> (AQI 101-150)	Outdoor time possibly limited. Vigorous outdoor activity discouraged. All individuals closely monitored for signs of distress and bring classes indoors if needed.
<b>RED</b> (AQI 151-200)	Outdoor time limited. Vigorous activity restricted (no long hikes or running for example). Closely monitor all, especially those at heightened risk. Staff and students encouraged to wear KN95 masks outdoors.
<b>PURPLE</b> (AQI 201-300)	Classes kept indoors with windows closed.

## SAFETY DRILLS

We conduct regular safety drills as required by MSDE to help prepare students in case of an emergency. Every effort will be made to keep these activities straightforward. We do not want to frighten the children, but we do want them to feel prepared and calm in case of an emergency.

## BUILDING ACCESS

Doors to classroom areas are set on timers to be unlocked during arrival and pick-up only. Interior classroom doors are locked whenever students are present.



## SNOW & EXTREME WEATHER

IRVINE NATURE CENTER RESERVES the right to cancel or end a class early due to emergency weather conditions based on concern for safety of families and staff. If inclement weather makes driving conditions dangerous, we will delay or cancel class. Irvine Nature Center determines its own closings and delays. Any decision to cancel or dismiss class early will be made by Irvine’s Deputy Director. Safety will always be our top priority. There will be no make-up days or refunds in tuition, due to closures, delays, or early dismissals.

**If Irvine closes due to extreme weather, all ECE classes will be canceled. If Irvine delays opening due to weather, please see the chart to the right for class start times. There will be no Early Bird Care on days when there is a delayed opening. Dismissal times stay the same.**

In the event of a delayed opening, please give your child a snack before class. We will not provide snack on short days.

In the event of severe weather developing after arrival, Irvine Nature Center reserves the right to dismiss early to ensure the safety of students, their families, and our staff. Such early dismissal will be done only in extreme circumstances. **On days that The Nature Preschool dismisses early or Irvine closes early, there will be no Fern Club AfterCare.**

When weather is questionable, please check brightwheel for a message from the directors regarding class delays or cancellations. As always, please do not come to class if your location is not yet safe for travel. For any weather-related questions, please contact the Director directly. You can also check Irvine’s website, [www.ExploreNature.org](http://www.ExploreNature.org), Irvine’s social media pages, or tune in to WBAL or WJZ for a weather update.

IRVINE DELAYED OPENING	PRESCHOOL OPENING
till 10	10:30
till 11	Full-day: 11:30 Half-day: canceled

# ENROLLMENT & PAYMENT INFORMATION

ENROLLMENT is for the duration of the program: September through May. Children must be three years old and toilet-proficient before attending. Applications are accepted year-round and placement is first come, first served. To enroll a new student, fill out the online application form and submit it with the application fee. If space is available, we will send an enrollment contract. Within 10 business days you must sign and return the contract, along with your non-refundable down payment of 10% of the annual tuition.

**PRIORITY ENROLLMENT:** Current students returning to The Nature Preschool, siblings of returning students, and families seeking Aftercare receive priority enrollment. Within those priorities and in general admission, applications and contracts are processed in the order that they are received. Priority is given as follows:

- 1) Current re-enrolling students (see more information below)
- 2) Siblings of re-enrolling students (through mid-February)
- 3) Families seeking AfterCare (through March)

**RE-ENROLLMENT:** Families interested in enrolling their child in a second or third year at the Nature Preschool must submit an Intent to Re-Enroll form every year. This form will be provided in December prior to the year in consideration. The Intent Form must be submitted by the due date on the form in order to be considered with priority. A contract will then be offered. All rules regarding contract due dates apply.

**WAIT LIST:** We do our best to place your child in your preferred or second choice time slot. If we are unable to do so, we will contact you to offer alternate openings. If we are still unable to enroll your child, we will place them on a wait list. If an opening arises, we will notify you.

**CONFIRMATION:** Once enrollment is confirmed, you will receive a copy of the signed contract along with all related enrollment paperwork. These items must be completed and returned by August 1 of the year your child begins school.

**SIBLINGS:** Siblings enrolled in The Nature Preschool receive a \$200 discount to one child's annual tuition fee. Please note, each sibling must submit an application with a nonrefundable application fee as a new student.

**PAYMENT:** Each family is responsible for tuition regardless of their child's attendance. There is no reduction in tuition for missed days or for canceled school days due to an emergency or inclement weather. The Preschool does not offer make-up classes.

Tuition for our calendar year (September - May) can be paid annually or monthly. Please note that you are billed on the first day of each month. This payment is automatically applied to your credit card unless you have indicated you wish to pay by check or use our online payment system. Contact the Education Program Coordinator for questions about billing.

**FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE:** The Nature Preschool participates in the Maryland Child Care Scholarship (CCS). Families are responsible for any balance remaining after the CCS is applied, not just the copay. In addition, a small tuition assistance fund is available through the Woodpecker TAP. Please contact the administration for more information.

**Tax Identification Number:** 52-1231286

*NOTE: There is no reduction in tuition for missed days or for days classes are closed or cancelled. There are no make-up classes.*





## EXPLORE, RESPECT, PROTECT

AS A PRESCHOOL FAMILY you automatically have a [Pacesetter Membership](#) to Irvine and we encourage you to visit Irvine outside of class time. There are many [events](#) that are free or discounted for members. You can also visit the Exhibit Hall, Outdoor Classroom, hike the trails or have a picnic.

Please refrain from using the tent and fern rooms as these are reserved spaces. Please remember to follow any rules that are observed during class time. Class rules include: be kind, be good to the Earth and animals, use respectful voices and gentle hands. Irvine Nature Center also loosely practices the “leave no trace” motto.

Please remember the Exhibit Hall and Aviary are open for people to enjoy and interact with nature in a safe space. Maintaining a quiet indoor voice helps provide a nurturing space for both guests and our animal ambassadors. The Outdoor Classroom and trails are perfect for boisterous loud play! The Outdoor Classroom is open to the public after 11am on class days.

We encourage you to join us in our efforts to care for the earth, just as she cares for us, and to think and act sustainably. Please...

- refrain from leaving cars idling in the parking lot unless during extreme heat or cold
- carpool when possible
- pack snacks and lunches in reusable containers (see the Gear List for ideas)
- send in repurposed items (check newsletters for what we are gathering)
- look for gently used gear instead of buying new





## CONTACT INFORMATION

**MAIN LINE TO IRVINE NATURE CENTER 443-738-9200**

### WHO TO CONTACT

**If you have questions or concerns about your child’s day:** your child’s teachers using brightwheel using “Staff & Admins”

**If you feel that your concerns are not being addressed or if you have questions about policies:** the Director of the Preschool using brightwheel’s “Admins only” or email.

**If you are unsure if your child should attend due to possible symptoms or a possible exposure to illness:** contact the Director of ECE directly. You can use “Admins only” if you are not comfortable sharing health information with teachers. In health related messages, please be specific and provide appropriate dates, symptoms, and whether or not there was a known exposure to anyone in the household. Thank you.

**If your child is going to be absent for any reason:** contact “Staff & Admins” on brightwheel.

**If you are running late or there is a change in pick up for your child that day:** contact your child’s teachers via brightwheel using “Staff & Admins”.

**If an urgent matter arises during the school day:** call the Preschool administrators directly or contact them through brightwheel.

**For questions about tuition payment or to update credit card information:** contact the Education Program Coordinator. Our tax identification number is 52-1231286. Preschool families may make a credit card payment online using [this link](#).

**For grievances to which you feel you have not received a satisfactory response:** contact the Deputy Director of Irvine.

<p><b>KATIE ROONEY</b> DIRECTOR OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION &amp; THE NATURE PRESCHOOL</p>	<p>PREFERRED: “ADMINS ONLY” MESSAGING ON BRIGHTWHEEL <a href="mailto:RooneyK@ExploreNature.org">RooneyK@ExploreNature.org</a> M-F 9:30-4, Office: (443) 738 9223</p>
<p><b>ALEXIA SAVOLD</b> ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE NATURE PRESCHOOL</p>	<p>PREFERRED: “ADMINS ONLY” MESSAGING ON BRIGHTWHEEL <a href="mailto:SavoldA@ExploreNature.org">SavoldA@ExploreNature.org</a> (443) 738 9216, M-F 10-5</p>
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<p><b>BROOKS PATERNOTTE</b> DIRECTOR OF IRVINE</p>	<p><a href="mailto:PaternotteB@ExploreNature.org">PaternotteB@ExploreNature.org</a> (443) 738 9212</p>

**FOR TEACHER CONTACT INFORMATION, USE BRIGHTWHEEL.**





 Nature Preschool   
at Irvine Nature Center

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