

Summary of Practices



Teaching

Nature-based preschools promote whole-child development and build a foundation for environmental literacy. Teachers allow for extensive outdoor play and learning and create a caring, stimulating, and safe environment where every child is regarded as a valuable, unique, and capable contributor to the learning community.

Focus Area

Practice

Goals of the Curriculum

1. The curriculum is guided by best practices in early childhood education and environmental education.
2. Teachers have different areas of expertise, and meet regularly to plan as a team.
3. Teaching practices and curriculum are based on current research and theory.

Role of Nature in the Curriculum

1. Teachers familiarize children with the plants, animals, and natural features and phenomena in their surroundings.
2. Teachers support and encourage children's play and investigations with natural materials.
3. Classroom activities cross boundaries between indoor and outdoor learning environments, and between different types of outdoor environments.
4. Teachers promote learning from season to season, supporting children's understanding of patterns and changes through the seasons.
5. Teachers model care and concern for nature and the environment.
6. Human communities are considered part of, and dependent upon, the natural environment.
7. The entire learning community engages in environmentally friendly practices.

Focus on Outdoor Learning

1. Outdoor learning is a central feature of the program, with frequent, regular opportunities for outdoor play and learning in natural spaces.
2. Teachers and children are dressed appropriately for the weather, and teachers demonstrate positive attitudes about experiencing various weather conditions.
3. Teachers develop and maintain teaching materials designed or adapted for outdoor use.

Emergent, Play-Based Curriculum

1. Children's interests and abilities direct learning opportunities and assessment.
2. Teachers emphasize opportunities for individualized learning across learning environments.
3. Children's inquiry is used to encourage higher-order thinking, and the inquiry process is allowed to continue for as long as children's interest remains.
4. Teachers provide a daily routine that allows for flexibility.



Teaching *Continued*

Focus Area

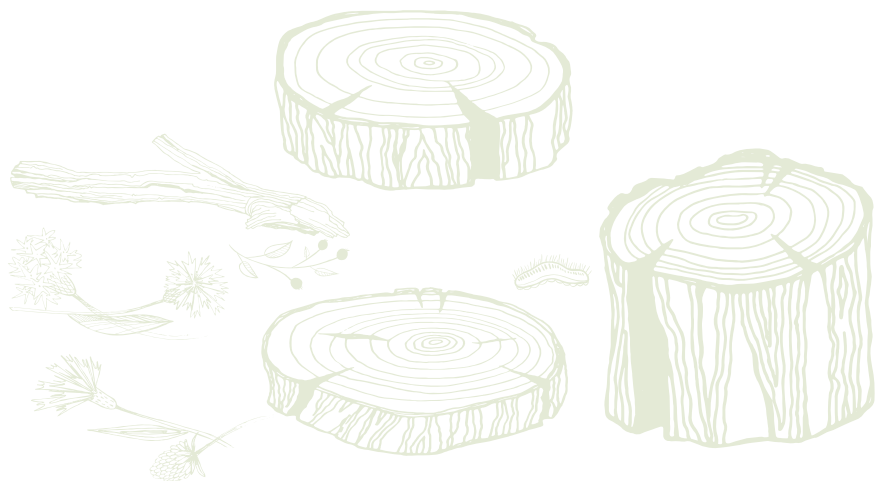
Practice

Community of Capable Learners

1. Teachers are co-learners with children.
2. Teachers encourage and support children's developing abilities to take care of their own needs and safety.
3. Teachers support and encourage children to be change agents in the learning community and the broader community.
4. Teachers provide opportunities for child-child interactions to promote collaboration and conflict resolution.
5. Teachers provide an environment that values diversity and sustains children's cultural identities.
6. Teachers modify the curriculum and environment to individualize learning opportunities and scaffold learning for all children.

Documentation and Assessment

1. Children's progress in both standard early childhood developmental domains and domains that relate to the development of environmental literacy are included in assessment measures.
2. Teachers document and assess children's learning through observation and artifacts so as not to interfere with children's learning experiences.
3. Teachers engage children in documenting their own individual and group learning so children can process and reflect on their own learning over time.
4. Teachers use documentation and assessment to inform the emergent curriculum.
5. Teachers regularly share documentation and assessments with parents and caregivers.





Environments

Learning environments in nature preschools are designed to meet children’s developmental needs and promote children’s active engagement with nature. Outdoor environments may include bounded play spaces, which are more managed, and more wild spaces. Most programs also include indoor spaces, which also promote nature connections.

Focus Area

Practice

Universal Elements

1. Natural and environmentally friendly materials are used as a primary source for construction, play, and learning.
2. Environments are designed to accommodate the flexible and changing nature of the nature-based curriculum.
3. Environments are designed or modified as needed to accommodate the needs of every child in the program.
4. Activity centers provide predictable spaces that promote learning in all developmental domains through interactions with natural materials, other children, and teachers.
5. Spaces provide for children’s transitions between activities, whether through transition spaces, transition routines, or both.
6. Programs are attentive to the need for storage of gear and materials in indoor and outdoor environments.

Managed Outdoor Spaces

1. Landscape features promote connections to nature and support growth in all developmental domains.
2. Outdoor areas are large enough to support a variety of uses of the space.
3. Outdoor areas are designed for comfort and ease of use.

Wild Outdoor Spaces

1. Teachers consider the affordances that wild spaces may offer for play and learning in selecting sites to visit.
2. Wild spaces are selected and used in ways that maintain the ecological integrity of the site.
3. Access to wild spaces is offered as frequently as possible.
4. Children are offered access to a diversity of local ecosystems.
5. Wild spaces may require trails or other features that allow children to access and explore the area safely and with minimal damage to the ecosystem.

Indoor Environments

1. Architectural decisions promote children’s connections to nature.
2. Classrooms are arranged and decorated in ways that promote nature and the role of the child in the curriculum.
3. Classroom materials encourage and support exploration of the natural world.



Safety

Learning to negotiate risk is an important part of early childhood development, but risk is only healthy insofar as it is managed, to the appropriate degree, by a knowledgeable and attentive adult. Nature-based programs manage hazards in the environment, and create environments and experiences that allow children to take risks that are individually and developmentally appropriate as they engage with the natural world.

Focus Area

Practice

Safety Training and Professional Expertise

1. Teachers and administrators are trained in adult and pediatric CPR and first aid (or other skills mandated by the state in which the program operates) and possess other training as appropriate to the program's location and activities.
2. Programs rely on outside experts as needed to provide guidance in maintaining a safe program.

Pre-Program Planning

1. Regular site assessments of outdoor environments identify hazards and plan for the removal or mitigation of hazards in the environment.
2. Programs develop benefit-risk assessments that examine benefits and risks of activities in support of the curriculum and develop policies for managing risk in activities.
3. Programs develop and communicate emergency policies.
4. Programs develop policies and procedures for protecting the health and hygiene of children and teachers in outdoor environments.
5. Programs secure, maintain, and use safety gear appropriate to the program and its activities.
6. Children and teachers are equipped with clothing that is appropriate to the activity and weather conditions.
7. Safety practices are informed by and communicated to parents and caregivers.

Safety in the Field

1. Teachers help children build risk management skills that are appropriate to the children's developmental stage and abilities, and to the program's activities and settings.
2. Teacher-child ratios ensure adequate supervision, particularly in wild outdoor environments.
3. Boundaries set in outdoor and wild spaces ensure teachers maintain a line of sight and auditory connection.
4. Programs employ strategies that ensure effective supervision.

Post-Program Practices

1. Programs regularly schedule time to evaluate and adjust safety practices as needed.
2. Safety incidents (such as injuries or emergencies) are promptly reported to parents or caregivers, teachers, administrators, and appropriate state agencies as required, and are reviewed to determine whether policy changes are needed.
3. Safety-related curriculum and teaching strategies are reviewed for effectiveness and adapted as needed.



Administration

Program administration turns a nature preschool’s philosophy into policy and makes that philosophy visible to program staff, families, and the community. Nature-based program administration pays careful attention to the unique considerations of outdoor teaching and learning, promotes equity and inclusion in the program, and honors teachers and teachers’ work.

Focus Area

Practice

Staff Qualifications and Professional Development

1. Teaching teams include expertise in early childhood education, environmental education, and outdoor safety.
2. Program directors help round out teaching teams’ expertise and also are qualified to provide overall program administration and leadership in a nature-based setting.
3. Program staff is reflective of and responsive to the community and cultures the program serves.
4. The program demonstrates commitment to ongoing professional development to enhance the knowledge and skills of teachers and administrators.

Policies and Procedures

1. A “School Handbook” is available to current and prospective families and caregivers to gain an understanding of the goals and policies of the program.
2. A “Staff Training Manual” is available to all staff members and includes all the information included in the “School Handbook” as well as other content specific to operating a nature-based preschool program.
3. School policies and procedures are reviewed and updated on an established schedule and as needed.

Program Evaluation and Improvement

1. Programs are licensed when possible.
2. Programs use available tools to assess and improve program quality.
3. Programs employ systems to regularly observe and evaluate teacher performance.

Equity and Inclusion

1. Programs maintain an inclusion policy that commits to meeting the needs of all young children.
2. Programs actively promote their commitment to equity and inclusion.
3. Early intervention, supports, and resources are readily available to children, families and caregivers, and teachers.
4. Programs are culturally inclusive and responsive, emphasizing the value of diversity and working to promote equity.

Community Engagement

1. Programs employ a community-based approach that connects the school community to the wider natural and cultural community.
2. The program develops positive relationships and communication with parents and caregivers.
3. Nature-based programs partner with appropriate organizations to meet program and community goals.
4. Volunteers enhance the school community as appropriate to the program.
5. Programs maintain positive relationships with boards, executives, institutions, or other individuals or groups who have decision-making authority over the program.