

Parent Handbook

In our Forest and Nature Programs, learning is grounded in place and play, guided by the child's curiosity, and shaped through inquiry and discovery.

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Land Acknowledgement

The Land we are gathered on today has been lived on and cared for by many Indigenous and Métis Peoples. We play, learn and grow on Treaty Lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation as well as the Traditional Territory of the Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat and Anishinabek. This Land has always been a place of learning, where stories, knowledge, and traditions have been shared for generations.

To honor our relationships with them, with each other, and with nature, we must do our best to be kind to the Land, the water, the plants, the animals, and all the wonderful things we see today. We recognize that caring for the Land is part of our responsibility in maintaining these relationships.

Our Commitment to Reconciliation

We recognize that reconciliation is ongoing work. At our Forest and Nature Program, we commit to Call to Action #63, which calls for age-appropriate education on Indigenous histories, perspectives, and contributions. We will:

- **Learn from the Land** by centering Indigenous Knowledge and teachings in our programs.
- **Build relationships** with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and community members to ensure authentic learning experiences.
- **Foster critical thinking** by encouraging children and families to ask questions, reflect on history, and explore ways to move forward together.
- **Acknowledge** the past and present impacts of colonization and actively seek ways to decolonize our practices.

We are grateful to be on this Land and to learn from its teachings. Through our actions, we will take the path towards Truth and Reconciliation. We hope to nurture respect, understanding, and a deep connection to the Land for generations to come.



Forest and Nature Program Mission, Vision and Values

Our Mission

Our Forest and Nature Programs create rich, place-based learning experiences that empower children to explore, inquire, and build a reciprocal relationship with the Land. Through play, risk-taking, and hands-on discovery, we nurture a sense of belonging, environmental stewardship, and wonder for the natural world.

Our Vision

We envision a world where children and families form deep, lifelong connections to nature, where the Land is both teacher and community, and where learning is joyful, immersive, and rooted in curiosity, respect, and stewardship. We strive to cultivate Brave Spaces where children feel empowered to take risks, embrace challenges, and develop the confidence to be lifelong learners.

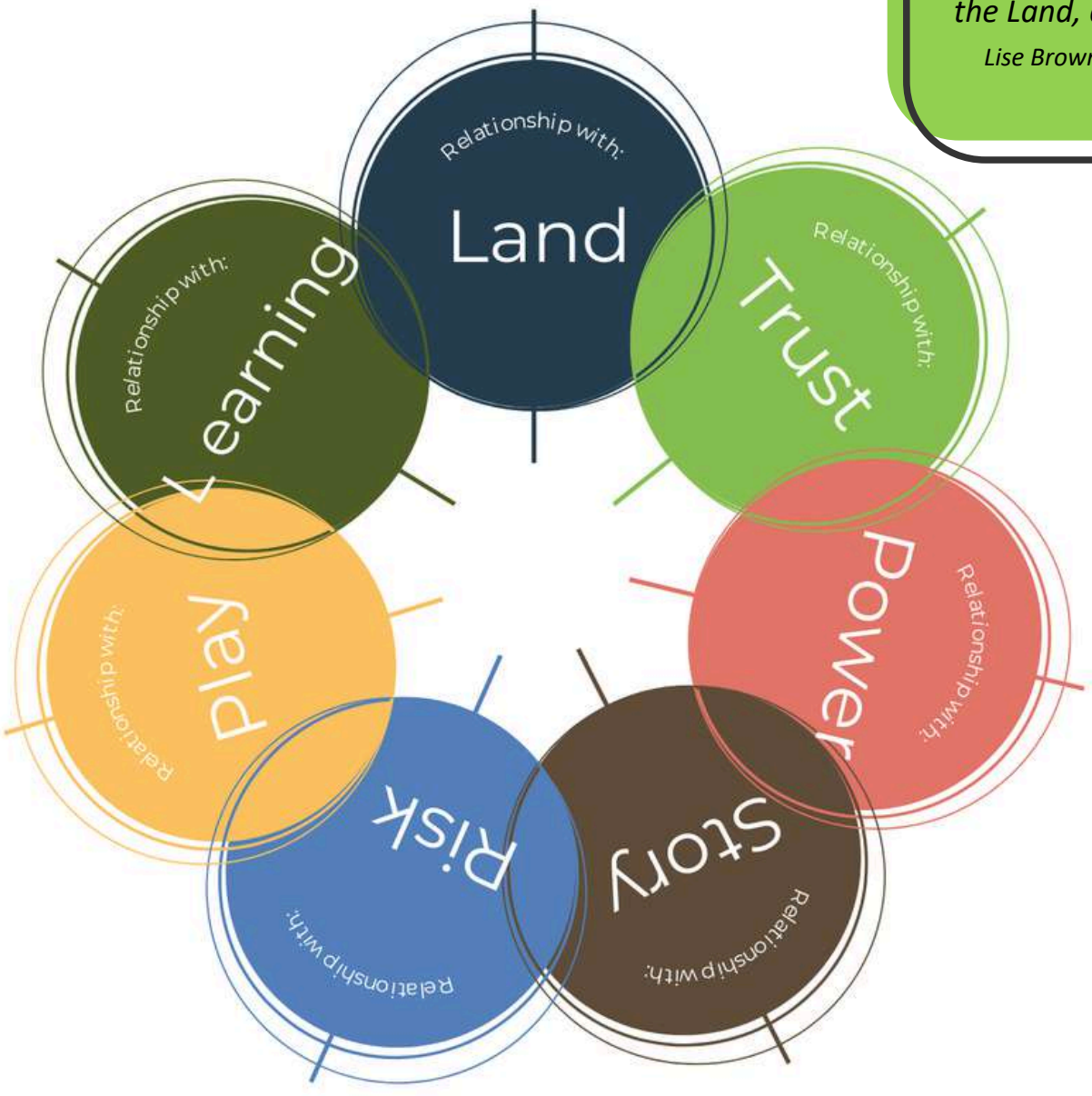
Our Values

1. **Reciprocity with the Land**: We foster a deep relationship with the Land, learning from it and giving back in gratitude.
2. **Inquiry & Exploration:** Curiosity leads the way as children engage in self-directed discovery, fostering a lifelong love of learning.
3. **Risk & Resilience:** We embrace safe risk-taking as a path to confidence, problem-solving, and growth.
4. **Belonging & Inclusion:** Every child, family, and community member has a place here, with their identities and cultures honored.
5. **Stewardship & Sustainability:** We nurture an ethic of care for the natural world, recognizing our responsibility to future generations.
6. **Indigenous Knowledge & Ways of Knowing:** We listen, learn, and integrate Indigenous perspectives, honoring the wisdom of Knowledge Keepers.
7. **Play as Learning:** Play is the foundation for deep, meaningful learning and connection to the world around us.
8. **Brave Spaces for Growth:** We create environments where children feel safe to take risks, express themselves, and navigate challenges with support and care.

The Heart of Our Practice

At OPCC we actively weave the 7 Relationships of an Ethical Forest School into our daily flow. It holds space for the learner in relationship with Land, community, self, and more. These relationships guide our intentions and actions each day, reminding us why we do this work. Rooted in respect for Indigenous worldviews and ethical ways of being, this framework invites us to slow down, listen deeply, and nurture learning that is grounded, meaningful, and relational.

> *"Relationships are at the heart of ethical practice—between learners, the Land, and all living things."*
>
> *Lise Brown and Adrian Alphonso*



Acknowledging History

The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) and Forest School Canada were founded within a white settler framework, shaped by Eurocentric ways of thinking about outdoor education. As an organization currently led by settlers and headquartered on the Treaty Lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation as well as the Traditional Territory of the Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat and Anishinabek, we recognize that our programs were not initially co-created with Indigenous Peoples. This means we have, at times, imposed a settler colonial way of engaging with the Land, benefiting from systems that continue to perpetuate colonization.

Acknowledging this history is an essential step in our commitment to change. OPCC is actively working to centre and honour Indigenous voices by building authentic relationships, listening to Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, and taking meaningful action to decolonize outdoor learning. This includes learning from Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating to the Land.

We are committed to ensuring that our work does not continue to cause harm and instead fosters respect, reciprocity, and responsibility in all our relationships—with the Land, Indigenous communities, and each other.



About OPCC

Oakville Parent-Child Centre (OPCC) has been serving the Oakville community since 1980. As a not-for-profit centre, we offer a variety of programs and services including parent-child drop-ins, parenting support and workshops, licensed childcare and resource libraries. OPCC is the EarlyON Child and Family Centre provider for Oakville. The mission of OPCC is to support, nurture and empower children and their families as they learn and grow together.

Program Overview: Daily Flow

Our Forest and Nature Class is rooted in the guiding principles of Forest and Nature Schools in Canada, as outlined by the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. Through immersive, Land-based experiences, children develop curiosity, confidence, and a deep connection to the natural world.

Gather: We gather as a community in the grassy field beside our Satellite location, meeting outdoors to begin our day. Each session starts with a warm welcome, group check-in, and an invitation to wonder, whether through shared stories, artifacts, or provocations inspired by nature.

Explore: From there, we set out to explore the Indian Ridge Trail, a beautiful landscape of flowing creeks, grassy meadows, and towering trees. On the trail, children hike, play, engage in inquiry-based exploration, and use natural materials to create, learn, and imagine. The rhythm of the day is shaped by the children's curiosity, seasonal changes, and our reciprocal relationship with the Land.

Recharge: We return to our gathering space for lunch, reflective activities, and community-building before wrapping up our time together.

Root: We close our session with a community circle around our flame, giving thanks to the Land, each other and the 7 Relationships, creating roots of knowledge and gratitude.

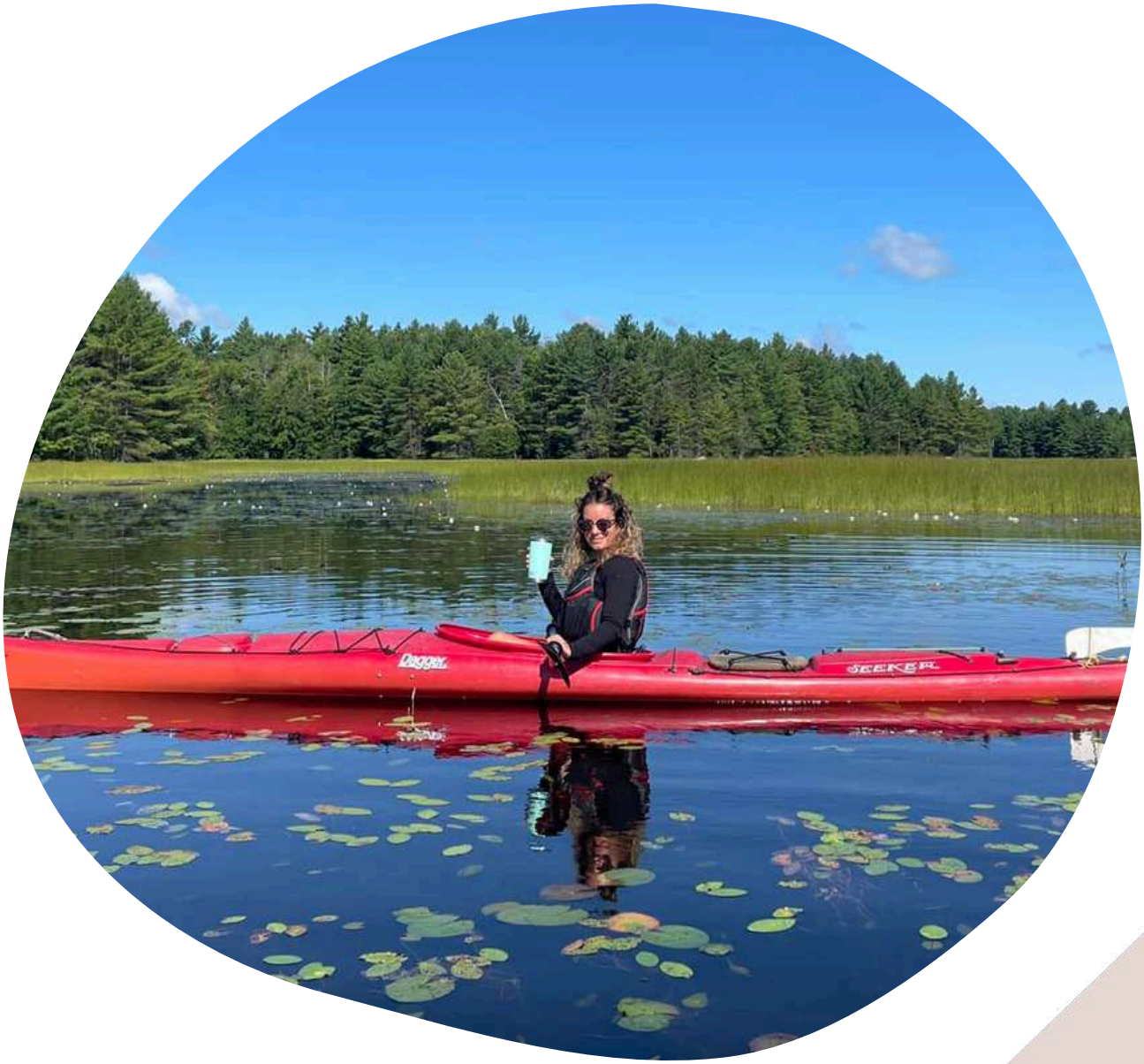


Educators

Program Lead: Kalli MacKeen

Kalli is an OCT-certified Primary/Junior/Intermediate teacher, equipped with her Outdoor Education qualifications. A true nature enthusiast, she finds solace and adventure in exploring the great outdoors. She has lived off grid and off the land for different seasons of her life, immersing herself fully in the rhythms of nature. Kalli has hiked, camped, and kayaked across the globe, embracing the diverse landscapes and ecosystems she encounters. Her passion for outdoor exploration fuels her teaching philosophy, as she believes in the transformative power of hands-on experiences in nature.

- Educators have First Aid and CPR training.
- All staff have cleared Vulnerable Sector Checks
- Forest and Nature programs are also supported as needed by our RECE instructors and the administrative team at OPCC.



Policies and Procedures

Ratios: A minimum of two educators (Program Lead and a Program Assistant) will be facilitating the program, with a third educator added as needed. Our group size will never exceed 15 children.

Arrival and Departure: Parents are greeted at the entrance door by a staff member. Each day upon arrival, children will be signed in on the sign-in sheet; please indicate who will be picking up your child for departure time. Please be available to collect your child by their pick-up time. In the interest of safety, we cannot allow a child to leave the centre with someone we do not know. Your child will only be released to those people designated on your registration form. We require that any new authorized pick-ups provide photo identification at departure time. In the event of extenuating circumstances, changes to the designated authorized pick-up list for your child must be submitted in writing from a parent or guardian to info@op-cc.ca.

Late Fee Policy: If you anticipate being late, please arrange for an alternate pick up.
To respect the schedule of our Educators, OPCC has a late fee policy in effect. **A late fee of $1.00 per minute, per child will be charged after the end of the program time**.
This fee will be charged to your credit card on file and will be confirmed with you when the late pick up takes place. Repeated lateness may be cause for your family to be withdrawn from the program. Please note: we do not issue receipts for late payments.
Should you be late, every effort will be made to reach you and your emergency contact person. If we have not been able to contact someone to pick up your child after 90 minutes from the end of program time, a call will be placed to Halton Children's Aid Society for consultation.
There is no exception to this policy.

Cancellation: A $25.00 withdrawal fee is charged for withdrawal from this program. 14 days written notice is required for withdrawals. If 14 days written notice is not given, the program fee will be withheld. The 14-day period commences on the date written notice is received by OPCC. If the 14-day notice is received, the program fee will be ***returned less a $25.00 administration fee***. OPCC holds the right to terminate care immediately if any of the following situations occur; nonpayment of program fees, chronic late pick up and/or other extreme situations.



Weather: Educators will continually monitor the weather and adjust the program accordingly. In the event of a thunderstorm, all participants will remain indoors until at least 30 minutes after the final lightning strike. We will not enter the forest during periods of high winds and will instead remain in the field space or classroom. Extreme heat or cold will result in shorter outdoor sessions with indoor breaks.

Snacks and Lunches: Please pack **nut free** snacks/lunch for your child. If your child has an anaphylactic allergy to another food item, indicate this on your registration. We will request that families refrain from sending snacks containing that ingredient as well. Sharing snacks is not permitted.

Photographs: During the program, staff may take photos of the children engaged in activities for documentation These photos will only be used for this program and may be shared through email to the families at the end of the week. Please indicate preference of photo consent during registration, online, as prompted.

Allergies and Medication: The centre will not administer any medication (prescription or non-prescription ie. Tylenol etc.), except in the event a child requires emergency medication in response to an allergic or life-threatening condition. If your child has an epinephrine auto injector or a rescue reliever inhaler, please contact the Program Lead to complete the required forms. This package must be completed before your child can start the program. If there are any changes in a child's medical condition, it is the parent's responsibility to contact the Program Lead immediately. OPCC, at the discretion of the Executive Director, may refuse to undertake responsibility for administering medications or procedures which staff does not have the expertise to administer.

Refunds: Please ensure that your child is healthy before attending our programs. Refunds are not issued in the event of illness. If you are unsure if they should attend, please give us a call.



Environmental Considerations

When visiting the trails, environmental considerations include the presence of **ticks, poison ivy and urban wildlife.**

Poison Ivy

Leaves of three, let them be! Poison ivy can be tricky to identify. It has three leaves growing from a central, woody stem and can be a small plant or a large vine. Leaves are green to red, and can be smooth or ridged. It grows along the sides of trails, in forests and wetlands. Risks: poison ivy produces an oil called urushiol. When you brush against any part of the plant, the oil can produce a painful, itchy, red and blistering rash. The oil can transfer to skin from clothing and pet fur.
Read more: https://ontarionature.org/demystifying-poison-ivy/



Be Prepared: Wear long pants and running shoes, stay on the trails and wash clothes or skin that may have come in contact with poison ivy with soap and water as soon as possible.



Ticks

Ticks are small arachnids with 8 legs that range in size from a poppy seed to a small grape when fully engorged. There are two commonly seen tick species in Ontario: the blacklegged (deer) tick and the American Dog Tick. **Risks**: blacklegged ticks have been known to carry Lyme disease, a bacterial infection spread by the bite the can also affect pets. Remove ticks carefully, being sure to remove the mouth parts, and clean affected area.
Read more: https://www.halton.ca/For-Residents/Immunizations-Preventable- Disease/Diseases-Infections/Lyme-Disease

Be Prepared: Wear long pants and running shoes, and spray exposed skin and clothes with insect repellent containing DEET. Stay on the trails and shower or bathe after spending time outdoors.

Wildlife

The forests and trails are home to many creatures, including raccoons, skunks, coyotes and more! **Risks**: raccoons are subject to an illness called distemper, which can be transmitted to unvaccinated dogs. Watch for abnormal behaviour such as staggering or friendliness towards humans. Coyotes can become aggressive, especially during pupping season. Skunks will spray if they feel threatened. Do not touch, feed or move wildlife, including young, sick or injured animals, and avoid animals that are behaving strangely. Read more about urban wildlife here: https://www.oakville.ca/environment/wildlife-biodiversity.html



Be Prepared: Stay on the trails and practice hazing to scare off coyotes. Use the Town of Oakville's wildlife reporting tools as needed.

Tick Awareness & Tick Check Protocol

Preventative Practices

Each morning at sign-in, families will find a Tick Awareness Table with resources and tools available to help prepare children for the day outdoors. This may include:

- Tick information resources
- Lint rollers
- Tick patches
- Suggestions for protective clothing and daily tick prevention

Families are encouraged to dress children in long sleeves, long pants, closed-toe shoes, and light-coloured clothing when possible to help make tick checks easier.

Camp staff will not apply DEET or other insect repellents to children unless specifically provided and requested by caregivers





Tick Checks During the Day

Throughout the day, educators guide children through regular tick checks as part of our outdoor learning routines. These checks are done in a calm, age-appropriate, and educational way so children can begin learning:

- What ticks look like
- Where ticks like to hide
- How to independently check their clothing and bodies

At the end of the program day, lint rollers are available for families to use before leaving camp to help remove any loose crawling ticks from clothing and gear.

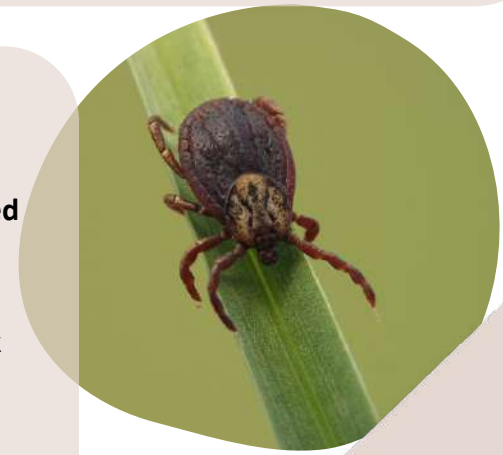
If A Tick Is Found

Camp staff are trained in tick awareness and have tick removal tools and resources available onsite.

However, **if a tick is found attached to a child, caregivers will be contacted and asked to come remove the tick themselves or pick up their child for removal and further monitoring.**

This approach allows caregivers to make informed decisions regarding tick removal, medical follow-up, and any next steps that may feel appropriate for their family.

We encourage families to continue a full-body tick check at home after each Forest and Nature Camp day.



Child Guidance Approach

Our Forest and Nature Programs are committed to creating a warm, caring, and respectful environment where every child feels safe, valued, and supported. We believe children thrive when they are met with consistent, developmentally appropriate expectations that foster a sense of security, respect, and responsibility.

We guide children using positive, strengths-based approaches that encourage self-awareness, problem-solving, and respect for others. Our methods include:

- **Redirection** – Gently guiding children toward acceptable choices when faced with challenging behaviors.
- **Natural and Logical Consequences** – Helping children understand the impact of their actions in a meaningful, age-appropriate way.
- **Limit Setting** – Establishing clear, consistent boundaries that support both individual and group well-being.
- **Modeling** – Demonstrating respectful communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills.
- **Providing Choices** – Empowering children with decision-making opportunities that build confidence and autonomy.
- **Anticipating Conflict** – Thoughtfully preparing the environment and transitions to reduce frustration and promote positive interactions.
- **Positive Reinforcement & Encouragement** – Recognizing and celebrating children's efforts, resilience, and cooperation.

By prioritizing respect, connection, and gentle guidance, we create Brave Spaces where children can explore, take risks, and develop the social-emotional skills they need to navigate their world with confidence.

If a difficult situation arises with the child, educators may discuss appropriate solutions in co-operation with the parent. Any disciplinary practice based on negative control technique is not allowed. The provision of Prohibited Practices forbids corporal punishment and other harmful disciplinary practices to protect the emotional and physical well-being of children. These practices are never permitted in our centre. If the child guidance strategies outlined above and collaboration with the parent/guardian are unsuccessful at ensuring the safety and well-being of every child, the child may be removed from the program.

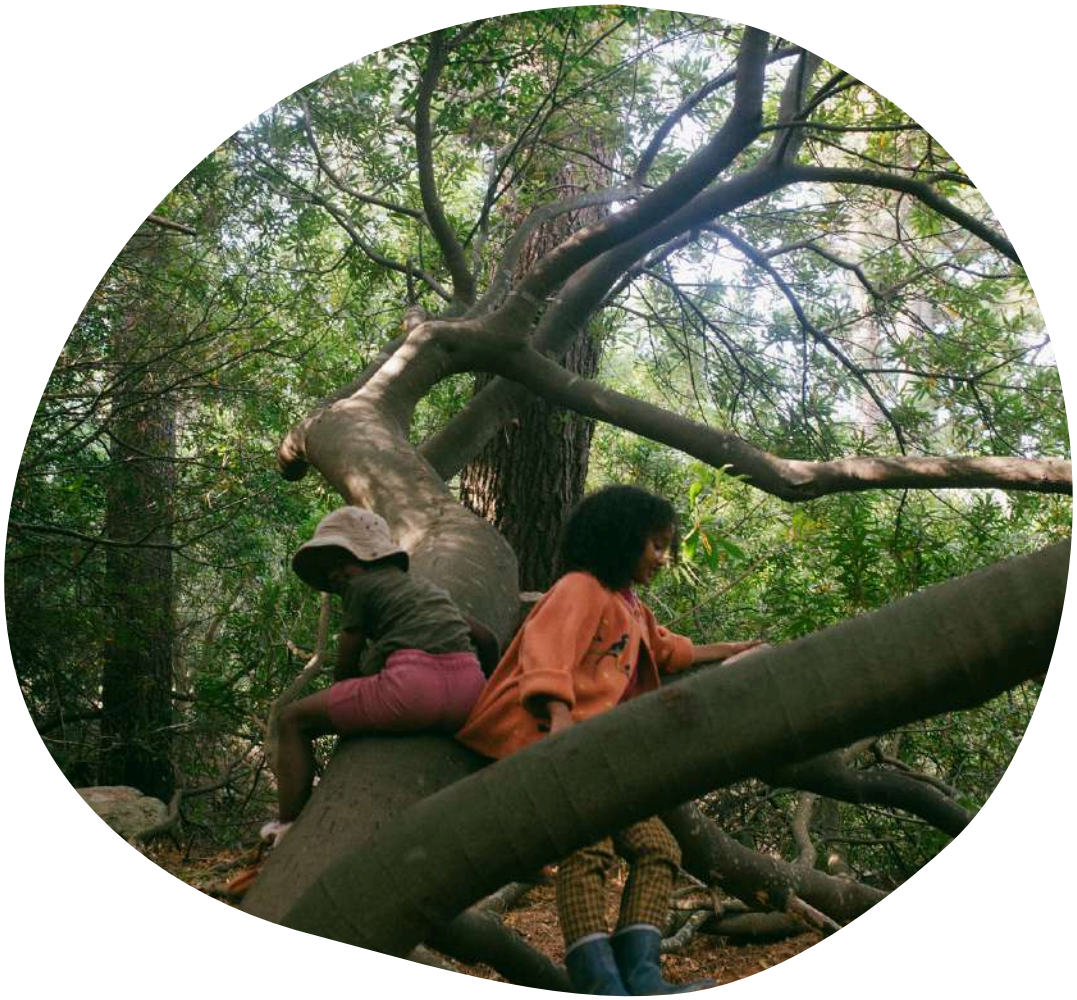
Risky Play

The Value of Adventurous Play: Risky play is highly valuable for children's development, particularly in outdoor settings, as it promotes numerous benefits supported by research. Physical development, emotional resilience, problem solving and decision making skills are all heightened, empowering them deeply to help their confidence bloom.

We balance risk with safety by:

- Conducting dynamic risk assessments for all activities and sites.
- Matching challenges to each child's age, ability, and readiness.
- Teaching children how to assess and manage risks themselves.
- Providing adequate supervision and safety equipment when needed.

Learn More: Stretch your understanding and gain more confidence in Risky Play by visiting our Parent Guide of Risky Play on our website.



Emergency Management

In the event of an emergency, we will evacuate the children to our safe place and once children are settled safely, parents/caregivers will be notified.
Our safe place is NSR-Main site, 461 North Service Road West, Unit #17

Note: all directions given by emergency services personnel will be followed under all circumstances, including directions to evacuate to locations different than those listed above.

As soon as possible, OPCC must notify parents of the emergency situation and when the all-clear has been given. Where emergencies have occurred that did not require evacuation of the centre, OPCC must provide a notice of the incident to parents.
If normal operations do not resume the same day that an emergency situation has taken place, OPCC will provide parents with information as to when and how normal operations will resume as soon as this is determined. If staff, parents and/or children have experienced distress from a crisis situation that occurred at OPCC, then the Executive Director/Manager will support and work with the appropriate agencies to assist in the recovery process to ensure help is given to those that require it. Please contact the Manager if you have any questions at any time.

Incident/Accident Forms: OPCC must complete an Incident/Accident Form in cases of injury. These forms are shared with the parents and must be signed by the parent at pick-up and given a copy. The original forms are then kept in the child's file.

Serious Occurrence: A severe situation or injury warrants immediate attention and action. It is the responsibility of the educators to report immediately any occurrence, or suspected occurrence, to the Manager and/or the Executive Director. A report will be completed by the Manager/Executive Director, and the occurrence will be reported to the Board of Directors.

Concerns about the Suspected Abuse or Neglect of a child: Everyone, including members of the public and professionals who work closely with children, is required by law to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. If a parent/caregiver expresses concerns that a child is being abused or neglected, the parent will be advised to contact the local Children's Aid Society (CAS) directly. Persons who become aware of such concerns are also responsible for reporting this information to CAS as per the "Duty to Report" requirement under the ***Child and Family Services Act***. **Health Care Policies and Guidance:** OPCC's policies and procedures relating to childcare are taken from Halton Region Public Health guidelines and regulations.

Preparing for Time on the Land

"There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing."

In Forest and Nature programs, we embrace all kinds of weather as opportunities for learning and play. Preparing well helps ensure your child stays comfortable, safe, and able to fully enjoy their time outdoors.



Warm Weather Prep:

- Light, breathable layers
- Sunhat
- Sunscreen (applied before arriving)
- Reusable water bottle
- Sturdy, closed-toe shoes (or sandals with straps)

Wet Weather Prep:

- Waterproof rain jacket and rain pants
- Rubber boots (room for warm socks if chilly)
- Extra socks and mittens in a waterproof bag
- Mid-layer (like fleece or wool) to stay cozy under rain gear

Cold Weather Prep:

- Base layer (non-cotton, like wool or synthetic)
- Insulating mid-layer (fleece or down)
- Waterproof outer layer (jacket and snow pants)
- Insulated boots
- Warm hat, mittens (not gloves), and neck warmer
- Extra mittens and socks in backpack

What To Pack:

- Child-sized backpack
- Full water bottle
- Nut-free snack and lunch
- Extra socks or mittens (items that get wet or damp quickly)
- Ziplock or wet bag for dirty/wet clothes
- Any seasonal extras labelled (e.g., bug spray, sunscreen, hand warmers)

Tools On the Trail

We use a variety of tools in our play and learning, including:

- ropes
- tarps
- bungee cords
- spades & shovels
- hammocks

Each offering opportunities for creativity, problem-solving, and connection with the Land. Before introducing any tool, we review safety procedures together and introduce them through a gradual release model. We check in regularly with learners to see how they're feeling and ensure they are ready to use tools responsibly. Our community agreements include *"sticks need space"* and *"ropes stay off our bodies,"* helping keep everyone safe while allowing room for meaningful risk-taking and discovery.



> "Nature is a tool to get children to experience not just the wider world, but themselves."
> - Stephen Moss

Communication

We take pride in our programs being a space where both children, families and educators take turns in the leading and the learning.
Feedback, dialogues and documentation will be shared at the end of each program.

Please connect with us

This handbook has been designed to provide you with detailed information regarding our Forest and Nature programs.
If you have any questions or concerns, please give us a call at 905-849-6366.

