

# Down to Earth Forest School

## *Parent Handbook*

### **School Location**

Mary S. Young Park  
19900 Willamette Dr, West Linn, OR 97068 at Main Shelter Area  
[Map of park](#)

### **Contact**

Heidi McKay (Executive Director) 503-544-4455  
[downtoearthheidi@gmail.com](mailto:downtoearthheidi@gmail.com)

### **School Day**

- School starts at 9 a.m. and ends at 1 p.m. for the preschool class and 2 p.m. for elementary class
- Drop off begins at 8:55 a.m., and pick-up at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. respectively.
  - If you are going to be late to school it can be hard to find your child's class—we are a truly child-led program and every day is different and unfolds authentically—so finding us may require some hiking.
  - If you are running late at pick up time please contact another family with a child in your child's class to arrange for support, if nobody can be contacted then reach out to your child's teacher to make arrangements.
- Students will remain on school grounds or within the designated bounds of the outdoor learning environment during school hours.
- Students should not have technology with them at school unless prior arrangement has been made with the child's teacher.

### **Tardy/Absence Policy**

- Daily attendance has a strong effect on the child's connection with their class and with the natural world. Even on inclement weather days we encourage you to send your child to school as this is the foundation for building resilience.
- If pick up and drop off times become an issue for your family and your teacher there will be a verbal warning, after which a written warning is made via email. If these two forms of communication do not result in more timely pick-up and drop-off we will begin invoicing you late fee charges.

## Releasing Students During School Hours

- In order to protect the student's class time, we ask that you avoid pulling your children early from school when possible. Please give teachers one days' notice, by email or phone, to release your child early from school. Most days we wander quite far from our pick-up location making it difficult to arrange early pick-up.
- When dropping off or picking up early in the field, be prepared to walk to meet the group so that a lesson does not have to stop, nor a teacher be removed from the group.

## Adverse Weather and Emergency Closures

In the event of inclement weather or other emergency that requires school closure, parents will be notified as soon as possible. An email and text will be sent to families when a late start or closure decision is made. If snow starts falling after students arrive and on the rare occasion we have to close mid-day, you will receive a phone call to come pick up your student.

## Parent Expectations

Down to Earth Forest School holds parents and guardians to the same high standards of behavior and conduct to which we hold our students. We are a village and we seek to create a positive, safe, and respectful environment for all involved.

- Communicate with respect, honesty, and integrity.
  - Offensive or profane language, harassment, disruptive or bullying behaviors, threatening behavior, verbal abuse, or physical violence will not be tolerated.
- Complete registration, forms, and pay school fees on time.
- Attend all required parent-teacher conferences and school gatherings.
- Know and abide by and support the school's policies, as outlined in this handbook.
- Respect the privacy of staff, children, and families within the organization as appropriate.
- When you have questions, comments, or concerns, please share them with staff members and refrain from voicing your frustrations to other parents or publicly on social media. We are a small local, female owned business and we rely heavily on word of mouth. If there are concerns that cannot be resolved between teachers and parents, DTE will hire a mediator to help us in finding a solution.

## Student Rights & Responsibilities

- All students have the right to pursue their curiosities, interests, and passions with the responsibility to demonstrate what they have learned.
- All students have the right to learn in a way that works best for them with the responsibility to learn in a way that is safe, non-disruptive and productive.
- All students have the right to have their beliefs and feelings respected with the responsibility to respect the beliefs and feelings of others.
- All students have the right to be listened to with the responsibility to listen to others.
- All students have the right to build community in a safe space with the responsibility to act accordingly in that space.

## **Gear and Attire**

- Students need to wear outdoor and weather appropriate attire as we go out in all conditions (rain, snow, or shine!).
- A change of dry pants, underwear and socks in a plastic bag on wet days is encouraged, especially for those kids who tend to like getting wet or are prone to accidents.
- Sturdy outdoor shoes are recommended.
- A day pack that fits your child and is convenient to carry.
- Writing utensils and any notebooks or equipment required by your teacher.

## **Food and Water**

- Students need to bring a large and variety filled lunch with them each day. Students eat more in an outdoor setting than when sitting in a classroom environment. Please refrain from sending them with juice, chips, cookies or things with a lot of sugar.
- Water bottles are required and are refilled throughout the day. Please make sure the water bottle fits their backpack and is not too large or heavy.

## **When to Stay Home**

Children who show signs of illness should not be in school. This is for your child's health as well as that of the other children and families in our school community. A child should not come to school if they have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Fever over 100 degrees. Your child should be free of fever for at least 24 hours before returning to school
- Diarrhea (more than one abnormally loose stools per day)
- Nausea or vomiting
- Severe cough/ cold symptoms (excess mucus, sneezing, coughing, runny eyes)
- Skin or eye lesions or rashes that are severe, weeping, or pus-filled

If your child contracts a communicable condition such as chicken pox, measles, pinworms, lice, impetigo, pink eye, etc., report it to the school immediately so that other families may be alerted to possible exposure. No mention will be made of the child or family's name in any notification.

## **Parent/Staff Communication**

We strive to provide families with clear communication throughout the year. Teachers often provide quick check-ins about students at drop off or pick up. You are welcome to email staff directly with any questions, comments, or concerns throughout the year. We encourage any and all thoughts and feedback and want to hear them, that is how we grow our program to be better and meet the needs of our families!

## **Photography**

Students are sometimes photographed by teachers and other staff for classroom and school use. Photographs may be used on the school website, social media, and in school publications. Families wishing not to have their child photographed or wishing to exclude their child's photograph from specific uses may update this information by sending an email to the child's teacher.

## **Behavior Expectations and Accommodations**

We recognize that students come from a variety of backgrounds and all have different needs. Our ability to make accommodations to our behavioral expectations is based on whether those accommodations allow us to meet the above priorities. Depending on our ability to make accommodations within that framework, Down to Earth Forest School may decide that the student's interests will be served better in a learning environment different from the one the Forest School can offer.

Our behavior progression (for elementary program, preschool—skip to volunteer opportunities)

1. Setting expectations clearly and early. This allows students to know what the limits are and engage with questions before the activity even begins.
2. Redirect to purposeful activity. If the behavior persists, have a private conversation and problem-solve with students.
3. Set clear guidelines, and make agreements with student about their behavior; this includes agreeing on potential consequences/outcomes for different choices as well as a clear timeline for improvement.
4. Check in with student on progress periodically.
5. If the behavior persists in a situation where these steps have been followed and we are still facing behavioral challenges, we will schedule a longer sit-down and would now focus on our escalated behavioral interventions.

### ***First Intervention (for school age program)***

When a student does not respond to redirection or continues to demonstrate the same problematic behaviors for safety or social situations, we will have a three way conversation between parents, teacher and student. Our goal in this conversation is to identify the behavior that is causing a disruption in the group, and to make an agreement with the student about expectations we have for being present in the program. This conversation may include steps that we can take to help them meet expectations, as well as ways that they are going to adjust behavior so they can continue to participate.

- If the student is unable or unwilling to make an agreement or understand their behaviors' impact, depending on the impact of their behaviors this may escalate to the next intervention.

If a student poses a danger or threat to themselves, other students, or our staff, they may be sent home for the day. Depending on behavior, this may be followed by an additional meeting with staff.

### ***Second level of Intervention (for school age program)***

Student misses a day of class. This may be called for when a student continues to demonstrate unsafe or disruptive behaviors despite parent conversations. This will also happen if a student cannot follow agreements made with parents and teacher(s).

- When students return they must be able to articulate how they are going to follow our guidelines for safety and participation. Example: "I should not have run away into the forest. When I am frustrated I will take space where you can see me."

### ***Third level of Intervention (for school age program)***

If after multiple suspensions from school the student continues to exhibit behaviors that would result in further disciplinary actions (see above) the school reserves the right to expel students from the Forest School to maintain the integrity and safety of our programs. Depending on the severity of behavior, the student may be asked to not return to any Down To Earth programs.

### ***Serious Misconduct***

Some types of behavior violate our schools code of acting respectfully within the school community as well as to our spaces and tools. Serious misconduct will be immediately accelerated to an Intervention. Some examples of serious misconduct include but are not limited to:

- Physical or emotional harm including abusive/ bullying language or intentional violence
- Messages either in person or electronically meant to harass or intimidate
- Racial, ethnic, or religious harassment
- Sexual harassment or any harrassment or unwanted attention regarding any person's identified or perceived sex, orientation, gender or presentation
- Vandalizing the school or its property
- Stealing or intentionally damaging another's property
- Violating rules related to academic honesty, responsibility and safety that have been communicated to students orally or in writing
- Lying to a member of the staff or administration
- Intentional damage to technology present at school

### **Academic Standards**

Through progress reports, parent teacher conferences and other communication Down to Earth Forest School will make sure that families stay up to date with students' levels of academic progress. If teachers or families feel that a student is falling behind the class in subject comprehension we will work with families to help identify student needs.

- If the student is more than one grade level behind in a given subject we may request that the family seeks outside tutoring in that subject
- If teachers at Down To Earth Forest School think that your student may need additional assistance in multiple subjects we will work with families to get outside learning evaluations so we can better support them.
  - Depending on student needs, Down to Earth Forest School may decide that the student's interests will be served better in a learning environment different from the one the School can offer.

## Volunteer Opportunities

A school is a community of families, and a strong community engages all its members. Down to Earth Forest School invites families to contribute and volunteer in ways that fit your schedule. While we do require a specific twice a year volunteer obligation, there will also be other opportunities to help out, including:

- Setting up before community events
- Accompanying the class on special field trips (for elementary only)
- Coming into the class to share important events in your family (introducing a new sibling, talking about a cultural celebration or holiday your family observes, sharing your work or passions with our students)
- Park clean up days

Keep an eye out for emailed invitations to help out in the classroom or with other school tasks. You can also always let us know if there is any area in which you are particularly excited to volunteer.

## Preschool Philosophy

At Down To Earth Forest School we collaborate, support and build a wider community of connected and intentional people all with the goals of caring for the earth and caring for people. Down to Earth Forest School does not follow one particular educational theory. Some theory concepts we appreciate and integrate are Waldorf education with the emphasis on children being outside often and for extended periods as well as using nature as toys and the concept that young children cannot comprehend many adult concepts as they are still in somewhat of a dream-like state.

*“Receive the child in reverence, educate them in love, and send them forth in freedom.”* –Rudolph Steiner

Friedrich Froebel was the German inventor of Kindergarten. He said *“The purpose of education is to encourage and guide man as a conscious, thinking and perceiving being in such a way that he becomes a pure and perfect representation of that divine inner law through his own personal choice; education must show him the ways and meanings of attaining that goal.”* Down to Earth Forest School wants to guide your child to discover and realize their best self. We do this by using the forest as our teacher as we integrate ourselves into the natural life cycle. Because the children are in the same forest regularly they will begin to observe changes and their sense of wonder will be stimulated. They will slowly realize the impact they personally have on the land both positive and negative. For example, as a group of six four year olds we stumbled upon a dead hawk carcass on our daily path. The facilitator asked questions like, how long ago did this bird die? How do you think it died? Who will be a part of the decomposition process of this animal? Etc. We ask a lot of questions at Down to Earth, we want to encourage children to think for themselves and come up with conclusions that best meet their understanding of the world.

*"The name Kindergarten signifies both a garden for children, a location where they can observe and interact with nature, and also a garden of children, where they themselves can grow and develop in freedom from arbitrary imperatives."*

*We pull our ethics from the Permaculture principles which emphasize caring for the earth and caring for people first. Permaculture in the realm of education functions as a set of tools that can guide the children and facilitators to best practices when connecting and interacting in the forest. When challenges arise we can use the permaculture principles to guide or process. For example, if the pond water is flooding an area of the forest we use as one of our classrooms we can view this as a disappointment or respond to change creatively using the permaculture principles of design. Can we use this space now? If so, how can we use this space differently? What is happening to this space now and how does it affect other parts of the forest?*

*"Permaculture gives us a tool kit for moving from a culture of fear and scarcity to one of love and abundance." –Toby Hemenway*

As Down to Earth grows and evolves we may alter our program as new information comes to light and it will make our program even more rich and full. All Down to Earth Forest School community members are aware that growth and change are welcomed. From year to year things in our program may change, just as each person and family change, we will embrace one another. *Change is not pleasant, but change is constant. Only when we change and grow, we'll see the world we never knew.* –Wisdom of The Orange Woodpecker

Practically, we use the Positive Parenting philosophy. We never want to attack your child's ego and always seek to understand the root of the behavior. Parents are our biggest educator about their child, journals between the parent child and the facilitator circulate often to cultivate the healthiest growth from the child.

Down to Earth Forest School was founded out of pure joy. Founder Heidi McKay seeks to share her joy of nature, children and connected communities with each one of you. As the forest and the program change you, we encourage our members to cast their net to their own wider community and share your joys.

*"When you follow your own nature, you automatically and naturally feel for the needs of others. When you are joyful and free, and when you are having fun, you automatically feel your oneness with all other creatures of the universe and you know your place in All-That-Is. And when you are yourself, others look upon you with awe and joy and understanding, and you look the same upon them. And you help every other creature that shares with you the framework of this earth."* –

Anonymous



## Elementary Philosophy

At forest school, we believe that we are raising the next generation of caretakers. These are the children that one day will be the protectors of the earth. They will do this because they have a strong bond with nature that began when they were very young. When students immerse in the forest through play, they cultivate a bond with the earth that can never be broken. Reflect on your memories of playing outdoors as a child. Climbing trees, finding sticks, building forts, splashing in mud, these activities connect us to our world. At forest school, this is what we are all about.

*"It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world."*  
- Rachel Carson

Our school is a community. Every family that joins us becomes part of our forest school family. We care for each other as well as our environment. Each child who joins us at forest school is a whole person, each with their own thoughts, dreams, and interests. We are here to guide each child to discover the joy of life and learning.

School should be a joyful place where children grow and develop at their own pace. Seeds sprout and emerge from the soil when they are ready, and it is the same for our children.

*"To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wildflower  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour"*-William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 1803

We believe that play is the most important work of childhood, and at forest school, that time is protected and cherished. We set the foundation for children to let their imaginations run wild and free. Childhood should be magical, infused with wonder, exploration, and creation. We allow the forest to be our teacher. Each day is a new opportunity to let the magic unfold.

## Elementary Daily Rhythm

The daily rhythm at forest school can be compared to the natural cycle of breathing. Just as we breathe in and out, and each breath builds into the next, our day expands and contracts through our focused and exploration activities.

Sandwiching our moments of focused time between exploration and unstructured play gives students the opportunity to move through their natural cycle of learning.

Here is what a day at forest school might look like:

**Morning circle:** check-ins, songs, stories, academic mini-lessons, decision making about the day's activities.

**Unstructured exploration:** Forest time for students to immerse in play and exploring.

**Academic time:** Independent work and teacher time in literacy, math and writing.

**Lunch/Free time**



**Academic time:** Independent work and teacher time in literacy, math and writing.

**Focused Exploration:** Guided exploration in art & craft, music and outdoor skills

**Closing circle:** Storytelling, songs, recap of the day and goodbyes

## Elementary Curriculum

Academic Curriculum used in the school age program includes but is not limited to:

Oak Meadow Kindergarten through 5th grade Curriculum

Wild Math Kindergarten through 5th grade Curriculum

Handwriting Without Tears

Explode the Code Phonics

Heggerty Phonics

Step up to Writing

Go Math

Academics are built around the framework of the Common Core Standards for your child's grade level but are not limited to these standards only

## Working Together

Down to Earth kids are out in the elements! They are moving their bodies constantly and need to be ready to greet each day with their best self forward. Here is how we can work together to make sure that happens.

1. ***Make sure your children get a good night's sleep.*** A preschooler between the ages of 3-5 needs 10 to 12 hours of sleep each night, and children ages 6-12 should get 9 to 12 hours of sleep.

*What we can do:* We follow the body and nature's natural daily cycle by starting our mornings with a story to inspire the day, then take a big breath of play following that. A time to create follows the outbreath with an in breath and finally afternoon brings a time for internal growth and integration of what they have learned which happens right after pick-up.

2. ***Before bed and before school please refrain from letting your child use electronics.***

Let your little ones dream their own dreams, not ones influenced by what they just watched. Also, before school they need to have fresh open minds, free from attaching the forest to their beloved cartoon characters. We realize how beloved these cartoon characters can become and realize this will integrate itself in your child's play, and that's ok!

*What we can do:* The forest is magical and we want to inspire your child's creative thinking. We tell stories with found objects, we speak about gnomes and fairies who live among the animals, and create wild and unrealistic creatures with clay or paint!

3. ***A healthy meal before bed and before school.*** A belly is like a fire, so before forest school make sure you throw a slow burning log in there to keep their light shining bright the whole school day! Slow burning carbohydrates, proteins and healthy fats are a great way to start your child's day.

*What we can do:* The children are free to eat their snacks from home any time they choose during the school day. We do, however, have a designated time for them to pause and peacefully eat with their friends mid-way through the school day.

4. ***Be a role model.*** Take your kids outside into nature regularly, to show them that this is a family value. Let your children name the plants and share with you what they have learned at school.

*What we can do:* At Down to Earth we roll in the mud just the same! And we get just as deep in the fort being built, song singing and crafting. We understand that your child is watching us all the time and we strive to express that being messy and silly is okay!!

## **Statement Of Inclusion**

*“Down to Earth Forest School is committed to cultivating and preserving a culture of inclusion and connectedness. We are able to grow and learn better together with a diverse community of families and employees. The collective sum of the individual differences, life experiences, knowledge, innovation, self-expression, and talent that our students and staff invest in their play/work represents not only part of our culture, but our ethos as a program. We welcome the unique contributions that each child, family and staff brings in terms of their education, opinions, culture, ethnicity, race, sex, gender identity and expression, nation of origin, age, languages spoken, veteran status, color, religion, disability, sexual orientation and beliefs. Down to Earth Forest School believes our differences as a community are what make us stronger.”*