



**Growing Wild Forest School
Family Handbook
2026-27**

Every day in the forest is a gift, and the staff of Growing Wild Forest School are grateful to share that gift with children. Our school has no walls, and our ceiling is the wide sky; that means the container of our school is held by the adults present. The consistent daily rhythm and set of agreements introduced here help to maintain a compassionate and safe container for young children to play, grow, and learn.

Young children are complete human beings learning how to navigate the world for the first time, and a village of compassionate adults must support them in this learning. This means that parents, teachers, and children are all on the same team. We model and encourage honest communication between all.

1. Schedule:

The group meets at Base Camp, in the backyard of the Unity Church of Asheville. We generally follow the Asheville City Schools schedule.

Growing Wild - Morning Program:

We meet Monday through Friday mornings. Mornings during Fall and Spring Sessions are 4 hours long, from drop-off at 8:00 AM to pick-up at 12:00 PM.

Acorn Adventures - Afternoon Program:

The Acorn Adventures Afternoon Program runs during the school year from 12:00 PM to 3:00 PM on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.

Growing Wild Forest Summer Camp:

Days during Summer Session (camp) are 5 hours long, from drop-off at 8:30 AM to pick-up at 1:30 PM.

2. Inclement Weather Policy:

We closely monitor local wind speed, heat index, electrical storm activity, windchill, air quality, and ice and snow, and we will cancel school if conditions are

unsafe for driving or for playing outside among big trees.

We maintain the right to cancel school for: unsafe wind conditions with gusts of 45mph or above, lightning in the area, heat index of 95 degrees F or higher, and an Air Quality index of 100 or higher. We will no longer cancel school for windchill of 22 degrees F or lower, as we have on campus a heated tent! The Lead Teacher will inform parents that school is delayed or canceled for the day via text message (sent via the Brightwheel Software) as soon as possible. **We do not reimburse for weather-related closures.**

In case of unexpected lightning or dangerous wind, teachers bring children into the safe-zone: the outdoor-access basement stairs of the church, and will call parents to pick their children up as soon as safely possible.

3. Enrollment, Schedules, and Tuition:

Growing Wild Forest School operates enrollment on rolling admission until maximum enrollment is reached.

An application link will be posted on our website:



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TUITION & REGISTRATION

We are now accepting applications for the 2025-26 school year!

Please submit an application and a member of our team will reach out with next steps.

[ENROLLMENT APPLICATION](#)

The application is hosted by Brightwheel, our childcare administration software platform, and new families will be required to create an account in order to submit an application. There is a one time application fee of \$25 to be added to our system. Once the enrollment period has closed (when the program has reached full capacity),

any applications received will be added to our waitlist. Currently enrolled families will always have priority registration for the following session--we will notify parents to submit their requests 4-6 weeks before the current session ends.

Enrollment agreements will be sent to each family during the registration process, outlining the agreed upon schedule and the monthly tuition rate. **Changes to the schedule will not be allowed once the session has started, however,** adding additional days to a child's established schedule may be accommodated if our schedule allows. Families are responsible for all tuition payments as outlined in the Enrollment Agreement. Registration priority is given to families enrolling for three or more days per week.

To reserve your child's place for the School Year Session, a one month's tuition is due as a deposit. To reserve your child's place for Summer Camp Session, a \$100 deposit is due for each week enrolled that will be applied to the balance of each week. **Deposits and fees are non-refundable.** In addition, each family must submit their enrollment forms through the Brightwheel platform by the requested deadline.

Morning Program Fall and Spring Session:

2 half-days a week: \$350/month

3 half-days a week: \$525/month

4 half-days a week: \$700/month

5 half-days a week: \$875/month

Summer Session:

5 days (8:30am-1:30pm) a week: \$375/week

School year tuition is billed on a flat-rate schedule to keep the amount the same from month to month, even though some months have more days than others. Invoices for the following month's tuition are sent by Brightwheel, our third-party accounting platform, **on the 20th of the month.** Payment is due within 7 days, and is payable via credit card or bank transfer through your family's Brightwheel account. A \$15 late fee will be charged on the 27th of the month.

While normally tuition is collected monthly, a 5% discount is offered to families that pay for their entire year at once. A 10% discount is offered for siblings who also enroll. Please contact us directly to inquire about **sliding scale tuition** and if there

any available half-tuition or full-tuition "**forestships**" for families in financial need.

Please note that refunds will not be made for days missed due to weather, Covid quarantine, illness, children being sent home early or asked to leave the program due to ongoing behavior concerns, or any other personal reasons.

We also do not reimburse for withdrawal from the program with less than 30 days notice--your deposit is your *last month's tuition*, so if you do not let us know that you plan to withdraw before billing on the 20th, we cannot apply your deposit to your final month - and no refunds are issued for deposits.

4. Emergent Curriculum:

Growing Wild Forest School uses a best-practices, play-based, child-led, interest-directed emergent curriculum that observes seasonal changes. Crafts, games, and activities that fall within a monthly theme are made available, but are not compulsory. This follows the wealth of development research showing that the best environment adults can create for children's learning is allowing plenty of free play with minimal adult interference, while always with adults nearby. Teachers observe children's themes of play and areas of interest, and support those with materials and stories which tie into the child's interest as well as the observable seasonal changes surrounding us each month.

5. Proper Clothing:

Children will get dirty in forest school, they may be hot in summer, cold in winter, and sometimes they will get wet. Please help children choose clothing for the day that may get dirty, possibly ripped or stained. Also, help children choose clothing (including shoes) that they can put on and take off by themselves, even if it takes them some time; dressing oneself fosters a deeply important sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy. **Please label your child's clothing with their name!**

Guidelines for weather-appropriate dress will be sent to you ~ You may request the following document at any time:

[!\[\]\(0b5e7e25e8775f7e7e80906ada4f0021_img.jpg\) How to Dress Your Child for Growing Wild Forest School](#)

During warmer months when days are above 60 degrees, we permit children to

go barefoot or shirtless if they choose. Children must wear shoes when down on the Greenway trail.

6. Sign In/Out:

Parents/guardians must sign each child in and out every day. Signing in/out must include the child's name, the date and time, and a signature. Please let us know ahead of time if someone new will be dropping off or picking up your child*

*** Anyone picking up a child from GWFS must be added to our Approved Pickup List, and our teachers will *never* release a child to an unverified adult. You can either add a trusted adult to this list by listing them on your Brightwheel account upon enrollment, or letting the teacher know with advance warning that so-and-so will be picking up your child on this date/time, and we will gladly add this adult to the Approved Pickup List.

7. Daily Rhythm:

When the rhythm of a day is consistent and predictable, children can relax into play and learning. Our daily rhythm is a balance of more grounded and quiet "in-breath" activity and more energetic and lively "out-breath" activity, always at about the same times every day.

Teachers arrive 15 minutes before the families are due to arrive. Teachers scout the areas where the day is planned to be, and set up any supplies or structures necessary (rope swings, rain shelters, fire).

Teachers greet arriving families and help facilitate goodbyes, and parents sign their children in with the date and time.

After everyone has arrived, we form our opening circle. We sing each child into the circle by name and recognize any who are absent. We then sing several songs with accompanying body movements, which can be used to assess and develop children's growth and development. These songs change with seasons and/or with children's evolving needs. We also invite awareness of the natural world with all of our senses during this gathering, and share gratitudes.

After our opening circle, we each retrieve our own snack from our backpacks, which is brought from home. **Please be sure to pack a lunchbox full of hearty snacks and a water bottle as children get quite hungry at school!** Including protein rich foods is highly encouraged. ***Please note that we are a peanut-free school.** We sing a gratitude song, and discuss our ideas for the day. Teachers have spare sunflower seeds on hand, in case children need more food than they brought with them, and we refill water as needed. Children may leave the snack blanket when they have returned their food containers to their backpacks, and their backpacks to the hooks.

*****We do not share food from home** at Growing Wild Forest School, unless it is a specific treat that has been vetted by all parents as allergy-safe.

The children are then free to play as they want, before we come back together for the planned activities. This may include walks down to the Hominy Creek Greenway. Group cohesiveness on walks is maintained with previously discussed agreements, songs, and games. Children and teachers communicate over distances using animal calls that mean “show me where you are,” “come back right now,” and “finish what you’re doing, a transition is coming soon.” Teachers monitor group energy and introduce big-energy, organized games when needed. As pick-up time draws near, we pack up our belongings and come back together for a closing circle.

Families are encouraged to socialize with each other at pick-up time. When teachers have connected each child to their caregiver and given information about the day, they separate from the group of families to go over the events of the day and plan for the future.

8. Records:

Throughout the weeks, teachers take note of milestones in each child’s development. These assessments are based on national standards and research, and are noted only via observation. Teachers will introduce group activities that reveal certain developmental milestones, but children will not be formally tested. These observations can be presented to parents informally through ongoing conversations, and formally during *optional parent-teacher conferences* halfway through the school year and at the end of the school year.

Records are confidential and will be kept for a maximum of five years. These include all forms signed, including medication instructions.

9. School Agreements:

Our school agreements are **Be safe, Be gentle, Be kind**. Growing Wild Forest School is based on mutual love, compassion, and respect for the natural world, including each other. This means that we use good manners with all living things. We use kind words and gentle hands with plants, animals, and each other. We especially look for ways to help those who are smaller, younger, or differently abled than we are; this includes plants and animals as well as younger children. We clean up after ourselves and take good care of our belongings and others' belongings.

We believe that compassionate and respectful adults were once children who were given plenty of opportunities to make loving and respectful choices on their own. Sometimes young children are so overwhelmed with a big emotion that they forget to use good manners, and when that happens teachers are there to support them in processing that emotion, then to remind them of our agreements and help them if necessary.

Sharing and turn-taking are not forced in Growing Wild Forest School. Teachers may support children in asking others, "can I use that when you're done with it?" and comment about how good it feels to see someone having fun with something you've shared, but teachers do not force children to share. Children can and do learn to wait until their friend is done using an object before they have a turn. Sometimes it's hard to wait, but waiting for something we want is a skill that must be practiced. This is an excellent space to practice expression of wishes, negotiation, and other necessary social skills!

10. Bathroom and Handwashing:

Children attending GWFS must be out of diapers and fully potty-trained. They need to be able to notice and communicate their toileting needs. Teachers are always available to help children adjust their clothing, if needed. Children can "water trees" by urinating at the edge of the woods. We also have a porta-potty onsite.

Children wash hands or use hand sanitizer after using the toilet and before meals, using a foot-pump hands-free water station with soap. In cold weather, teachers bring warm water or heat some up over a fire for hand-washing.

11. The Backpack

This very important item is the link to home, and to beloved family! Children carry their own backpacks when on walks, so they must be able to carry their backpacks on their own when packed. **Parents should supply a backpack that is big enough to carry all of the gear needed for the day: extra clothes and layers, lunchbox, and water bottle.** Straps that snap across the chest can be very helpful. Backpacks carry a spare change of clothes and socks, a filling assortment of snacks, a water bottle, and perhaps some photos of family and loved ones. A comfort object such as a stuffed animal may come to school; stuffies are allowed to come out of backpacks at school. Children are responsible for keeping track of their stuffies once they come out of the backpack. We ask that other toys stay home or in the car. No plastic toys are allowed at school. Children may bring one stick or rock home per day from the forest.

12. Illness policy:

Please keep your child home if they have any of these symptoms:

- Fever of 100 degrees or above (without the use of medicine)
- Profuse nasal discharge
- A painful, red throat, even if no fever is present
- A deep hacking cough
- Difficulty breathing or untreated wheezing
- Extreme low energy causing an inability to participate
- Complaints of a stiff neck and/or headache combined with any of the above

- Red, inflamed eyes or any discharge from eyes
- Skin rash, unless diagnosed as non-infectious by a doctor
- Open sores that cannot be covered by a bandage
- Diarrhea or vomiting within a 24hr period
- Head lice—child may return after treatment if completely free of lice and nits
- Is on the first 24hrs of antibiotic for any reason

All children must be free of the above symptoms for 24 hours before returning to school.

Please see our [COVID policy](#) for our most up to date COVID procedures.

If your child has a communicable disease (chicken pox, scabies, ringworm, strep throat, pink eye, lice, etc.), please contact us as soon as possible so other parents may be notified about possible exposure.

If teachers see signs of illness or infection in children upon arrival, they will not be admitted for the day. If children become ill during the day, parents will be called and must make arrangements for pick up as soon as possible. We are not equipped to treat children who are ill.

GWFS may close for a period of days or weeks to help stop the spread of highly communicable diseases. Please refer to our COVID-19 Policy for further details about our procedures.

****Please note: we do not reimburse for days missed due to illness or Covid closure.**

13. First Aid and Medications:

Teachers are certified in CPR/First Aid and carry a fully stocked First Aid kit. In case of a minor injury such as a cut or scrape, teachers will administer First Aid and inform parents at pick-up time unless otherwise requested. In case of insect stings or larger injuries, teachers will apply first aid while calling the child's parent for further wishes. If there is a clear and present emergency, teachers will apply First Aid, call 911/Emergency Services, and then call the child's parent.

Upon individual parent request, including written dosage and timing instructions,

teachers will administer medications.

*If at all possible, please administer regular medications to your child before or after their school day. If your child has medications needed during school hours (over the counter or prescription), they will need to be dropped off with the teachers at sign-in time.

***Please ensure the medications are labeled clearly with your child's name, and include the printed dosage instructions.**

There will be a medicine sign-in and sign-out sheet alongside the regular sign-in and sign-out, and the teachers will store medications in the first aid backpack.

No medicines should be left in your child's backpack or lunchbox.

Unfortunately we do not have a climate-controlled space to store medications on-site, so we will need to send them home with your child each day.

Parents will need to complete a Medication Administration Form for each medication. If applicable, they will also need to complete a Food Allergy and Emergency Care Anaphylaxis Plan. Both of these forms are available in your Brightwheel account.

14. Reasonable Risk:

Risky play is any play that involves uncertainty or the combination of fear and excitement that is "thrill." Young children need some amount of risky play for optimal physical, emotional, psychological, and social development. Through this play they gain awareness of their capabilities, including the edges of those capabilities, and within the safe container of the forest school they are able to push their edges at their own pace. Edges can be in very different places for individual children, regardless of age. Teachers are available to monitor each child's abilities and edges, and offer support and redirection when necessary.

Tree climbing:

Children can climb trees at Growing Wild Forest School. Teachers do not physically help children climb up, but we are near the climbers 'spotting.' We only provide physical help climbing down if there is a physical injury or necessity to move quickly. We make verbal suggestions about hand and foot placement to children who are unsure of how to get down, and we allow them to get themselves down in their own time.

Sticks:

The most versatile toy there is! A stick can be a gate, a staff, a wand, a sword, a snake, a cane, a belt, a train, etc... Stick play is an excellent way to gain hand-eye coordination, awareness of one's own body, and the space one inhabits. Children may play with sticks as long as they are leaving a big enough "blood bubble" which is the area of their body with the addition of the stick length. If they hit someone and it was truly an accident, and they do something to atone for the accident, stick play may resume. If they threaten someone or attempt to hit someone intentionally, they lose their 'stick license' for the day and teachers support them in expressing themselves differently.

The Rainbow Web:

Our colorful woven climbing and bouncing platform in the trees has its own set of agreements, all based on the use of good manners. The web is closed for morning circle and for mealtimes. Children stop bouncing when another is climbing onto or off of the platform through use of the phrases "red light" and "green light". When climbing the walls, they must stay at least one arms length from the top for safety. We do not take food, sticks, or hard objects up into the web.

15. Use of tools:

Children in Growing Wild Forest School interact with and use fire and other tools. Their tool use is contingent upon their use of good manners, which is assessed on an ongoing basis. Teachers are always directly next to children using these tools, monitoring them and providing support. If a child loses their stick/tool license they cannot receive their tool license again for that day. Each day starts fresh.

Our **fire** agreements are: our bodies stay outside of the stone fire ring, and we keep our bodies off of the stones. If a stick is smoking or on fire, it stays within the fire ring. Children ask teachers before adding something to the fire. No rowdy play or running occurs near the fire.

Teachers ignite kindling using tools such as lighters, matches, ferro rods ("flint and steel") and hand drills or bow drills ("rubbing two sticks together.") Children who show seriousness may try striking a match with a teacher's hand over their hand, striking sparks with the ferro rods, or using hand drills or bow drills. Teachers help with creating

the “safety bubble” before using these tools, remind children that these and other tools are never to be used without a grown-up, and provide hand-over-hand guidance. Children do not ever use these or any other tools while alone, and they do not ever use lighters even with the teacher's hands over their hands. These and all other tools are kept inaccessible when not in use with one-on-one attention from a teacher.

Teachers talk through fire-tending, involving children in the process of problem-solving a smoky fire, for example. Teachers also talk through deciding if a fire is ready to “eat” more wood, or if it has enough for the moment. With this and other tools, teachers remind children how powerful these tools are, and reinforce the safe techniques and contexts in which children may use them. Lastly, teachers also involve children in the process of putting the fire out at the end of the session.

Our use of **sharp tools** includes darning needles, garden tools, manual drills, vegetable peelers, hand saws, mallets, and knives. These tools are introduced gradually with awareness of each individual child’s physical, emotional, and mental readiness. Technique and preparation of “safety bubbles” are practiced with sticks long ahead of introduction to the real tools.

Children may sit and sew as long as they can track the needle’s location reliably. Children may use garden trowels, rakes, and shovels with awareness of the “bubble” of necessary space created by their body plus the length of the tool, which we refer to as the ‘**blood bubble.**’ Cutting small twigs and branches with garden clippers or loppers is allowed with gardening gloves on, and with an appropriate ‘blood bubble.’ Hand drills can be used to make small holes in cuttings of wood after children show ability to concentrate and apply downward pressure while turning.

Before using more sharp-edged hand tools, children must physically demarcate their ‘blood bubble’ around the place they sit by laying out sticks or pushing away leaves. If a child does not yet have the patience to build their own blood bubble, they certainly do not yet have the patience to use a sharp tool. Children also agree that they always cut away from their bodies and make sure to keep a firm grip on the handle away from the blade. We practice this with soap bars and popsicle sticks, to start.

All tools require a blood bubble. We introduce each of these tools with our hands over theirs as the child shows steadiness and ability to focus. Vegetable peelers can be used to take the bark off of sticks and sharpen them; this practices the motions and awareness necessary to carve with knives. Children who show that they are ready to

use a knife may cut food on a cutting board or carve sticks. Children may use hand saws as long as they can reliably brace the wood they are cutting.

16. Unity Church and The Hominy Creek Greenway:

Our school is fortunate enough to meet in the backyard of the **Unity Church**. We have access to their outdoor running water and their outdoor basement stairs, and we are permitted to leave simple constructions on-site. We use good manners to clean up after ourselves and leave Base Camp tidy, so that church members passing through later in the day are safe.

The Hominy Creek Greenway is public land that is connected to the Unity Church backyard, our Base Camp. Inside a “teacher sandwich,” (one teacher ahead of all the children and one behind them all, always sticking together) we go on walks on this public land. We sometimes encounter other members of the Asheville community, including elders and people with dogs.

Our **dog agreements** are that children must ask teachers and the dog owners if a dog is friendly before approaching the dog to pet them, and teachers closely observe the dog’s body language before saying yes or no. Our good manners with dogs include using walking feet near them, using softer voices, and using gentle hands. If your child has a fear of or allergy to dogs, please indicate that on your registration form and discuss with teachers.

18. Conflict and Discipline:

Conflict is a natural part of the human experience. Children are navigating conflicts for the first time, so all conflicts are opportunities for children to develop self-control and create patterns of respect for themselves and others. At GWFS, we regard all behaviors as communication. Our structure of clear, consistent and age-appropriate expectations and boundaries help foster a safe container for children to work on communicating with each other. When loving and empathetic adults allow young children to try out interactions, make mistakes, and try again, they learn lifelong lessons about building and maintaining relationships while stakes are low due to their age.

GWFS teachers do not interrupt conflicts, but instead help them progress and resolve. We support children by describing emotional expression, suggesting words and courses of action, mediation, and by modeling conflict resolution. Sometimes that involves helping children take space from each other before trying an interaction again.

The word “**discipline**” means ‘to teach’ not ‘punishment.’ All behavior interventions are based in compassion, empathy, and respect for the child learning how to navigate the social world. Teachers never isolate, humiliate, threaten, or use any form of corporal punishment with children. GWFS interventions include modeling appropriate behavior, praise and descriptive positive reinforcement, connection before redirection, identification of needs and emotions, mediation, encouraging self-regulation and taking breaks, and open communication with parents. These are aspects of the Positive Parenting, Gentle Parenting, Conscious Discipline, and Whole-Brain Child systems.

Sometimes children can forget their good manners when overwhelmed with big emotions. When children are having trouble controlling their words or their actions, that indicates that a need of theirs is not being met. Teachers are present to support children in identifying and meeting their needs and those of their friends. They give reminders, and monitor children’s emotions, noticing patterns that may precede misbehavior, and redirecting when those patterns are beginning. If a child upsets or hurts another child, teachers help that child make restitution.

If a child has repeated trouble controlling their words or their actions, they stay with a teacher for 5 minutes. They lose their stick license and are not permitted to use tools. Teachers will inform parents at the end of the school day, and parents are encouraged to share thoughts about triggers and successful behavior interventions at home. The next day is a fresh start, with gentle reminders from teachers about our school agreements.

Growing Wild Forest School is committed to supporting all children in their growth and development, but we will not support one child’s development at the detriment of others. If a child intentionally and consistently tries to hurt other children and ends up taking space with a teacher for the rest of the day, and the behavior issues are chronic and unresolved, the family may be asked to leave the school until the child is older and more able to control their actions.

19. Volunteering and Donations

Parents and guardians are welcome to volunteer with us! Please let us know in advance if you'd like to volunteer with us, and what role you'd prefer: sharing a skill or art during the school day, helping with work on the land, joining our board of directors, or something else. Additionally, we are always accepting donations of new and gently used children's clothing, children's outdoor gear, books, art supplies, garden supplies, pieces of rope in all diameters, toilet paper, hand warmers, etc. We also have our fundraising information listed on our website, for sharing with extended family members and friends.