



Growing Wild Forest School

Family Handbook

2023-24

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:

We meet Monday through Friday. Days during Fall and Spring Sessions are 4 hours long, from drop-off at 8:00 AM to pick-up at 12:00 PM during the Morning Program and 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM during the Afternoon Program. Days during Summer Session (camp) are 5 hours long, from drop-off at 9:30 AM to pick-up at 2:30 PM.

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

2023 Summer Camp Sessions **June 19-August 18**

Week 1 June 19-23: Excellent Elements

Week 2 June 26-30: Wild Weather

Week 3 July 3-7: Wizards & Faeries (No camp July 4th)

Week 4 July 10-14: Plants & Herbs

Week 5 July 17-21: Talking Trees

Week 6 July 24-28: Bugs & Spiders

Week 7 July 31-August 4: Beautiful Birds

Week 8 August 7-11: Furry Friends

Week 9 August 14-18: Reptiles & Fish

2023-2024 School Year Sessions and Breaks

FALL SESSION: August 29-December 19

First Day Fall Session: August 29

No School: Labor Day September 4

No School: Teacher Work Day: Tuesday, September 19

Fall Break: October 2-6

No School: Teacher Work Day: Wednesday October 18

No School: Teacher Work Day: Friday November 10

Thanksgiving break: November 22-24

Last Day Fall Session: December 19

Winter Break: Dec. 20-Jan. 2

SPRING SESSION: January 3-June 7

First Day Spring Session: January 3

No School: Teacher Work Day: Monday February 19

No School: Teacher Work Day: Wednesday March 13

Spring Break: April 1-5

No School: Teacher Professional Development: Thursday-Friday April 18-19

No School: Teacher Work Day: Friday May 24

No School: Memorial Day: May 27

Last Day Spring Session: June 7

Summer Break: June 10-14

Weekly Camp Sessions Begin: June 17

No Camp: July 4

2. Inclement Weather Policy:

We closely monitor local wind speed, heat index, electrical storm activity, windchill, and ice and snow, and we will cancel school if conditions are unsafe for driving or for playing outside among big trees.

We will cancel school for unsafe wind conditions, lightning in the area, heat index

of 95 degrees F or higher, and windchill of 22 degrees F or lower. Teachers will inform parents that school is delayed or canceled for the day via text message by 7:00 am at the latest. ***We do not reimburse for weather-related closures.***

In case of unexpected lightning or dangerous wind, teachers bring children into the outdoor-access basement stairs of the church and call parents to pick children up.

3. Enrollment, Schedules, and Tuition:

An application link will be posted on our website during the designated enrollment period. The application is hosted by Curacubby, our childcare administration platform, and new families will be required to create an account in order to submit. There is a one time application fee of \$35 to be added to our system. Once the enrollment period has closed, 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**, and families are responsible for all tuition payments as outlined in the Enrollment Agreement. Families will be given the opportunity to make schedule change requests for the following session during the designated priority enrollment period. Adding additional days to a child's established schedule may be accommodated if our schedule allows.

We strongly prefer that families enroll for at least 2 consecutive days to maintain consistency for the children. Registration priority is given to families enrolling for three or more days per week.

To reserve your child's place for Fall, Winter, and Spring Sessions, the first month's tuition is due as a deposit. There is a deposit needed for each session to confirm your spot moving on to the next session. 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 Curacubby platform by the requested deadline.

Fall and Spring Session:

2 half-days a week: \$340/month

3 half-days a week: \$510/month

4 half-days a week: \$680/month

5 half-days a week: \$850/month

Summer Session:

5 half-days a week: \$350/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 Curacubby, 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 Curacubby 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 "forestships" for families in financial need.

Please note that refunds will not be made for days missed due to weather, Covid quarantine, illness, or other personal reasons. We also do not reimburse for withdrawal from the program with less than 30 days notice--families will be responsible for all outstanding payments.

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, but with adults nearby. Teachers observe children's themes

of play and areas of interest, and support those with materials and stories tying into the seasonal changes surrounding us each month.

5. Proper Clothing:

Children will get dirty in forest school, 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 can be found here:

- [How to Dress Your Child for Growing Wild Forest School \(1\).pdf](#)

During warmer months when days are above 60 degrees, we permit children to go barefoot if they choose at Base Camp. 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.

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 and volunteers 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, as we have several children who have life-threatening peanut allergies.** We sing a gratitude song, and discuss our ideas for the day. Teachers have spare seeds on hand, in case children need more food than they brought with them and refill water if needed. Children may leave the snack blanket when they have returned their food containers to their backpacks.

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 and volunteers 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 and volunteers 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 in ongoing conversations, and formally 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 (Good Manners):

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 able to notice and communicate their toileting needs. Teachers are always available to help children adjust their clothing, if needed. Children "water trees" by urinating at the edge of the woods, and teachers can also help children who choose to dig a hole in the woods for #2. We also have a covered composting toilet for #1 and #2.

Children wash hands 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 backpacks must be small enough for a child to carry on their own when packed. 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, but must live in the backpack during the school day. We ask that other toys stay home or in the car. Children may bring one stick or rock home per day from the forest.

Toys from home can be briefly brought out to show classmates, but they live in backpacks throughout the day. The forest is a big place, and it's easy for toys to get dirty, broken, or lost.

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.

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 Curacubby 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 health. 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 "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". The walls are not for climbing. 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.

Our **fire** agreements are: that we may sit or kneel on the stone fire ring, but we do not stand on 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, hatchets, 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 circle.**' Cutting small twigs and branches with garden clippers or loppers is allowed with leather gardening gloves on, and with an appropriate 'blood circle.' 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 circle' 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 circle, 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.

Tools that require a blood circle include vegetable peelers, hand saws, and knives. 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. More physically integrated children may use the hatchet with an appropriate "bubble," always swinging over a shoulder.

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 occasionally 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.

17. Splashing and Swimming

The Greenway provides access to Hominy Creek, and in warmer months, we go to a small beach and get in the water. Swimming is contingent on water quality, which we check regularly with SwimGuide and RiverLink. Children may only go knee-deep in the water until a teacher is also in the water with them. Teachers will inform parents by 7:00 a.m. if we intend to splash that day, so that parents can pack a swimsuit and towel.

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 ‘study,’ 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 get to hold a teacher’s hand for a while. 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 holding a teacher’s hand 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 Paypal Giving Fund link listed on our website, for sharing with extended family members and friends.