



# Forest and Nature School Handbook



**Collingwood, Wasaga Beach, Creemore and Meaford, ON**

# **Free Spirit Forest and Nature School**

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# WELCOME TO FS FOREST AND NATURE SCHOOL!

## Our Story

At the forefront, Free Spirit Forest and Nature School is a place where we nurture connection with self, others and the Natural world. We are a not for profit community-based program that provides outdoor educational and experiential programs for children aged 18m-12+ where students join us one day a week.

Our roots began in 2016 in Collingwood. We began with 1 day a week and quickly grew. Within two years, we were running 5 days a week of core programming, and now run a number of additional nature-based programs, camps, workshops and more. We have expanded to include new locations as well in Creemore, Meaford and Wasaga Beach.

Our core program operates during regular school hours and we spend the majority of the day outside, immersed in nature regardless of the weather or the season, where learning is unhurried. We have small student to teacher ratios, with a curriculum that is largely emergent, student-led and play-based. And while we do have core routines and teachings, our focus is to find the spark in each child and tend to that to help it grow.

We know that the land we are using and the history of it is integral for our program and our learners. We recognize and acknowledge that we meet, learn, create and play on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee and Huron-Wendat peoples, as well as the traditional lands and treaty territory of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation. We acknowledge all others who traditionally were connected to these places and thank you as original caretakers of this land who have lived and continue to live here since time immemorial. We are dedicated to honouring Indigenous history and culture and committed to moving forward in the spirit of reconciliation and respect with all First Nation, Métis and Inuit people.

## What is Forest and Nature School?

Forest and Nature School (FNS) is an educational approach that has existed worldwide since the 1950's. It made its way to Canada in 2012 with the establishment of Forest and Nature School Canada. The primary goal is to provide children with regular and repeated access to a natural space, with a largely emergent, student-led and play-based curriculum. At FNS, children are understood as competent learners that help forge their own program. Children spend the majority of the day immersed in various outdoor settings where things are unhurried and there is space for independent reflection, collaborative creation and risky play. They enjoy the freedom to explore, build, play and engage with one another. The settings can vary – urban parks, forested areas, riverbeds and more – with various age groups interacting together throughout every season of the year. Activities are guided by a number of things and are as varied as the children who attend them and the environments in which they are rooted. (Adapted from Forest and Nature School Canada).

## Mission

Our mission is to foster rich outdoor learning experiences for children ages 18m-12+ using a whole-child approach that will not only develop a deeper connection with nature, but also a sense of belonging in nature.

## Vision

Our vision is for everyone to connect with themselves, others and nature in meaningful ways where we understand that play and learning are synonymous. As a complement to traditional school, homeschool or unschooling systems, we would like to see all children in local forests, creeks, beaches, and mountains, with a skilled mentor who understands the power of play and child-directed, emergent learning. Moreover, our vision is to see how this connects to community building and a more sustainable world.

## Why Forest and Nature School?

The benefits of FNS are endless and help develop the whole-child – socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive skills. It allows education in a different context where children can carry out a range of practical, achievable activities. Going along with our values and principles, researchers have found that children continually engaged in outdoor settings typically experience an increase in their confidence; capacity to learn (motivation, understanding and concentration); communication, problem-solving and social skills; physical literacy and emotional well-being. There is also a ripple effect through the community with children bringing what they have learned, and are passionate about, home and to their social networks. (Murray and O'Brien, 2006)

## Why Outside?

We spend our days in the woods and creeks, where children learn through their own exploration – and it's developmentally appropriate! Keeping it local gives students an appreciation of all the wonders of their own backyards. As we immerse our learning-community in the same outdoor settings on a regular basis, students develop a lasting connection with (and respect for) nature.



## Locations



### **Collingwood** **Bygone Days Heritage Village** 879 Sixth Street

This 86 acre property on the outskirts of Collingwood offers tons to explore. Complete with multiple forests, ponds, a sugar shack and heritage village, the adventure never ends. We even use a 19th century school house and prospector tent as our home bases!

### **Wasaga Beach** **Free Spirit Headquarters** 28 Sunset Court

This wonderful mixed forest of oak and towering pine is nestled beside the Nottawasaga River. It is the perfect backdrop for discovery and adjacent to the Provincial Park, this impressive green space is eager to be explored!



### **Meaford** **Memorial Park** 179 Grant Ave

Right in the heart of Meaford lies 30 acres of picturesque park and woodland walking trails. With access to the adjacent acreage and Workman's Creek, we've got loads of room to wander! Even more, this wonderful green space runs along the beautiful Georgian Bay shoreline. It's Nature's ultimate playground just waiting to be uncovered!

### **Creemore** **Sequel Inn** 3476 Garden of Eden Road

Located on the grounds of the beautiful Sequel Inn, this is truly 50+ acres of paradise! The wandering and exploring is endless along the Noisy River and through these mixed forests of the Niagara Escarpment!





## (A)typical day

While we do come into each day with a plan, as an emergent-based, student-led program, it is difficult to have a set schedule. With child passions at the forefront, new opportunities and changing weather, it's hard to say what each day will bring! We strive to accomplish our core routines and reflections every day, but otherwise we could be building shelters one day, while another day could see us uncovering critters in a pond. We may be rock climbing, or paddling a river, or jumping into the role of a busy bee pollinating flowers. Maybe it's maple syrup, orienteering, bird watching or trees – our day follows student-led interests. That being said, a typical day would unfold something like this:

**8:45 AM:** Arrive – Exploratory Play, Tinkering, “Inspiration of the Day”

**10:00 AM:** Opening Circle (Check-in, Song and Gratitude)

**10:30 AM:** Snack

**After Snack:** Exploration/Experiential Learning

**12:30-1ish PM:** Lunch and Exploratory Play

**1:15 PM:** Exploration/Lessons Continued

**3:00 PM:** Wrap-up – “Story of the Day” (Debrief)

**3:30 PM:** Pick-Up

## Teacher Qualifications

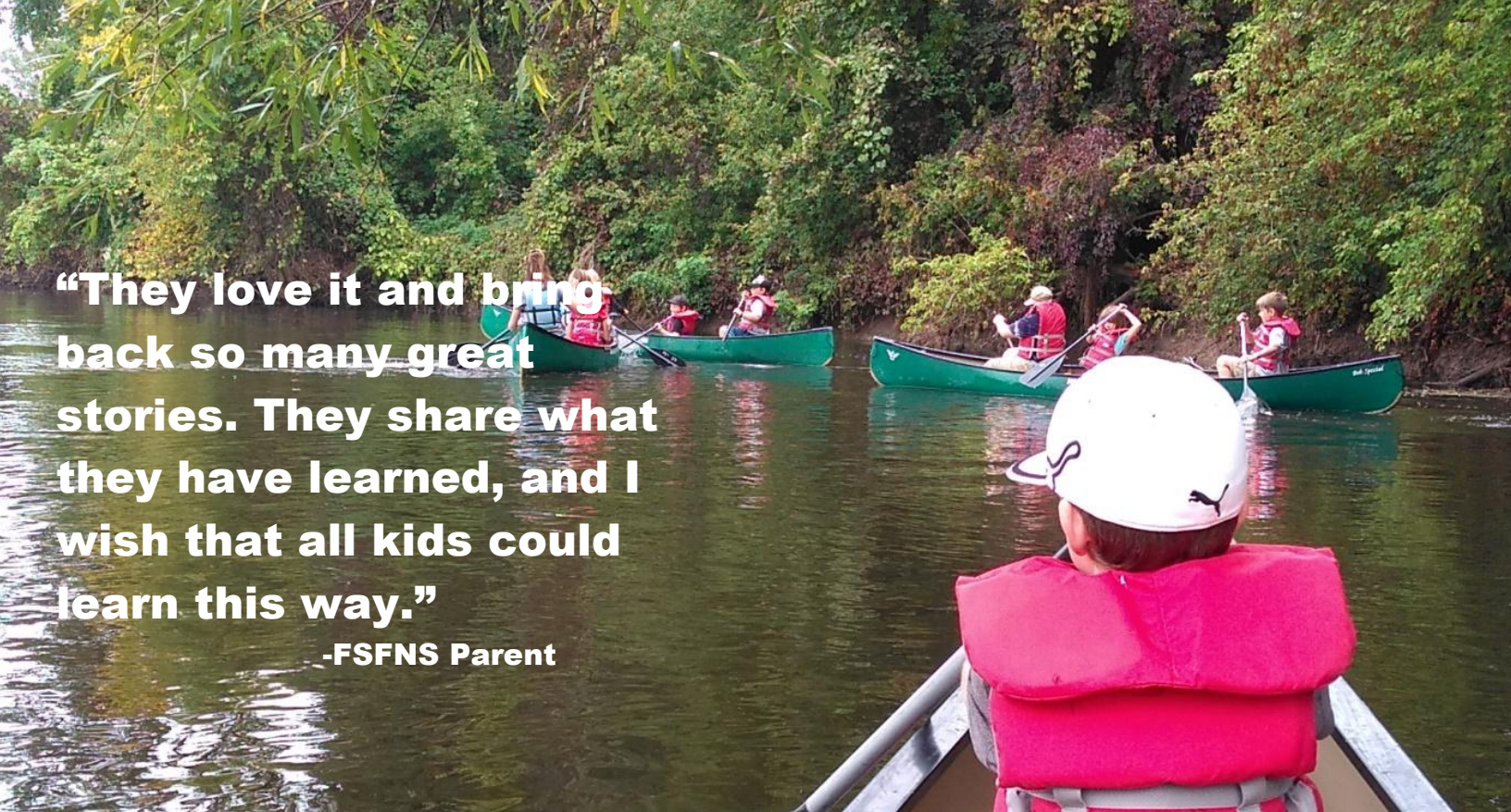
Our passionate team of mentors are typically Forest School Practitioners, Ontario Certified Teachers, and/or Early Childhood Educators, all with specializations in Outdoor and Experiential Education - of course, we also value lived experience! Get to know them better by checking out their bio's on our website.

## Role of the Educator

At FNS, children are viewed as competent and capable learners engaged in their own process. Thus, the traditional role of the teacher is re-written. This involves guidance and support and allows children the space, time and opportunity to explore their own interests. Teachers are not “experts” and learn alongside students with a strong emphasis on observation. The facilitator sparks engagement, keeps everyone safe, builds community, and draws out learning – but also knows when to just get out of the way and let it happen! In it's simplest form, our mentors are Story Catchers and Question Askers.

## Role of the Child

While educators always have a rough plan for the day, we know that children will intuitively lead themselves to the experiences and learning they seek. Each day is different and through their play they are creating deep connections with the natural world and each other, while developing social and physical skills, and inevitably recognizing themselves as an important part of a larger whole. In other words – being a kid.



**“They love it and bring back so many great stories. They share what they have learned, and I wish that all kids could learn this way.”**

**-FSFNS Parent**

## LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

**Children have the innate desire to ask questions, learn, explore, discover, and experience their surroundings. FNS supports learning through an experiential pedagogical framework that is child-centered, play and place-based, and roused through inquiry and an emergent curriculum. This also includes a challenge by choice approach to engagement and supporting risky play for healthy development.**

### Core Competencies

Given the nature of our program and learning approaches, we remain flexible as it's inevitable that plans and teachings will change on the regular. Be that as it may, over the course of our sessions we are guided by the following core competencies:

**Emotional Intelligence (Connection with Self)**  
**Building Community (Connection with Others)**  
**Nature Connection**  
**Outdoor Skills**  
**Play (and Physical Literacy)**  
**Reflection and Gratitude**  
**Creative Arts**

### The Art of Questioning

At FNS, there are certainly times for giving information, giving instruction and sharing answers. However, our main goal is to ignite curiosity. And we do this in a simple way – ask questions!

Children ask questions all the time and can be very passionate about them. As mentors, we remember that they may not be asking for an answer, but rather that we are genuinely curious alongside them.

We've come to know that answers can bring a swift end to curiosity and even rob children of their experience to really understand what they are showing so much excitement over. Hence, a good timed question can go a long way and even opens up many other questions to get enthusiastic about. In a nutshell, we start with children's natural curiosity, and then try to extend the learning as far as we can.

### Whole Child Approach

FNS encompasses a holistic approach to learning. The three domains of the whole child development include Physical, Social-Emotional, and Cognitive. Please note that the domains are interrelated and influence one another (Bushnell and Boudreau, 1993).



### **Social/Emotional**

Including the child's emotional regulation, healthy attachment, self-image, ideal self, self-esteem, confidence, self-awareness, self-concept, managing strong emotions, self-efficacy, teamwork, community building, relationship with others (acceptance, love, kindness, ability to read others), social skills and competence, empathy, trust, perception, inclusion, empowerment, reflection, pushing comfort zones, connection to land, nature appreciation, sense of agency, and cultural appreciation.

### **Physical**

Including the child's fine and gross motor skill development, manipulation of objects, relationship with others, spatial awareness, organizing, interpreting and responding to sensory information, skill acquisition, perception and decision making, physical literacy, visualization, and pushing comfort zones.

### **Cognitive**

Including the child's decision making, higher ordered thinking, critical thinking and problem solving, deep knowledge and understanding of activity, intrinsic motivation, concentration, pushing comfort zones, emotional intelligence, eco-literacy, local knowledge and identification development, nature appreciation, empowerment, reflection, cultural appreciation, imagination, and planning.

## **Experiential Learning**

This is the process of learning by doing. It is typically a hands-on approach to learning where skills, knowledge and experiences are acquired. It can also involve guided reflection throughout.

## **Emergent, Inquiry-based and Student-led Learning**

At FNS, learning is a dynamic and emergent process. Each day differs dramatically from the last. Students drive the learning process while teachers support them. Thus, we uncover the curriculum as we go with student interests at the forefront. We value the process over the product.



## Play-based Learning

We know that play is valuable in and of itself, but it's also a marvelous vehicle for learning! Play theorist Bob Hughes (2002) said, "Play is a biological necessity that puts the child in the driving seat." and created a taxonomy for all the different types of play (Hughes, 2002) - see Appendix 1 for more info and examples.

### Risky Play - Unpacked

For children, outdoor play is a basic need and inherent to play is the necessity of risk. Risky play takes many different shapes, but always involves pushing limits and comfort zones in a thrilling and exciting way. It's about testing oneself – and finding out what happens.

During risky play, children not only experience an element of danger – actual or perceived – but they also **risk receiving the potential benefits**. Risky play is integral to whole-child development, well-being and health. It helps children develop self-esteem, confidence and their socio-emotional self. Risky play helps develop physical literacy in children and foster cognitive skills. Moreover, it helps children learn how to independently manage risks and be safe - this is why it is so important! At FSFNS we engage children in six categories of risky play (Sandseter, 2007):

#### Play at Great Heights

Ever notice that if there is anything to be climbed, kids will climb it? Playgrounds, trees, slopes or rock walls at Metcalfe, it will be climbed.

#### Rough and Tumble Play

Think back to when you were a kid – fencing with sticks? Wrestling with friends? Rolling around in snow? This type of play is a balance between play and real fighting.

#### Play with Dangerous Tools

Saws, knives, hammers and drills. Whittling or cutting firewood. Though supervised, these are potentially dangerous and we learn to respect and use these tools with care – and never before 10 AM (too sleepy!) or after 2PM (again, sleepy time).

#### Play with the Chance of Getting Lost

This happens when children are given a chance to be alone, disappear and even perceive being lost.

#### Play at Great Speeds

Paddling a river, or riding a bike – the risk of crashing or flipping or just simply falling off.

#### Play near Dangerous Elements

Water, cliffs, rocky trails and forests are all part of our landscape and where we play every day.

### What Risky Play Isn't

Letting children do whatever they want  
Ignoring children as they play in their environment  
Being far away from the child  
Not stepping in when a child is doing something that is not safe

### How We Support It

Provide guidance, communicate and use positive language  
Focus on 'as safe as necessary' over 'as safe as possible'  
Provide time, freedom and space for good play  
Are aware that some children may need longer to feel confident engaging in an activity  
Encourage the children to help each other  
Weigh up whether the benefit of challenge is greater than the potential for harm



*Getting comfortable  
being uncomfortable*



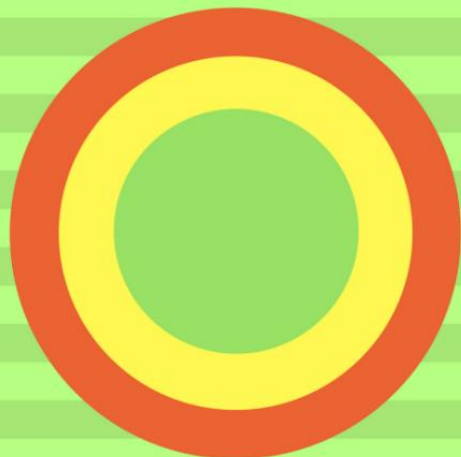
Comfort Zone



Growth Zone



Panic Zone



We encourage **regular small steps** into the growth zone - that's where the learning happens. But not so big as to trigger the panic zone!

### Place-based Learning

Our program is rooted in what is local – our community, our unique history, geography and cultures. This occurs anytime and anywhere that helps personalize learning for our students. This could be at our sit spots, special areas of the forest we explore or while on a field trip to a familiar location. It happens in the form of repetitive visits to the same spaces, and develops deep connection with direct experiential contact.

### Process, not Product

We strongly believe that there is no final destination or end result we are trying to achieve – that learning and connection happens through work and play. Our process is *unhurried*.

### Challenge by Choice

At FSFNS, we adhere to the concept of Challenge by Choice, where students are presented with an opportunity (or challenge) and they are empowered to decide how they will participate or engage in the activity. We encourage students to challenge themselves and participate fully in the experience at-hand however fully respect the decision of the child and their personalized level of engagement. All students are asked to add value to the experience by finding a way to contribute to the group's efforts that is meaningful and authentic for them. This enables students to feel comfortable expanding their comfort zone by moving into their growth zone, without stepping into their panic zone. This is the zone of optimal development, where great opportunities for growth, connection and learning exist.

## Planning and Observation

We always have a plan at FNS – if only so we know just what we are deviating from. Some days unfold following planned themes and ideas, and others go in the opposite direction. Given the nature of our program and the learning approaches mentioned above, student-led interests can take us just about anywhere. Students set goals in the morning, generate ideas and these help guide our day. Therefore, rather than having a strict plan, the educator's role is more observation and reflection. A great teacher knows the right questions to ask, when to intervene or step back and how to draw out the learning.

## Tool Use

At FSFNS, students are provided the opportunity to engage with various tools throughout the day. These opportunities are presented by experienced mentors who have a thorough understanding of the specific tool and can ensure a safe, successful and soon-to-be mastery experience of the equipment. Educators closely supervise tool use and review safety practices frequently. It is important to note that there must be high-trust with the student in order to operate the tools. Some tools include: hammer, hand drill, knives, ropes, hatchets and hand planers.

## Storytelling

Every day at FSFNS there are opportunities for storytelling – myths, legends, poems, children's books, personal stories and more. Storytelling broadens horizons, invokes understanding and empathy, encourages creativity, and listening, and so much more. Oral storytelling is a way to spark interest and invoke learning, and share ideas. Students are encouraged to tell stories of their own as a way to express their emotions, enhance imagination and entertain us with experiences.



## Music

Music is at the centre of community and we use this universal child passion as a mentoring tool. We've got some old favourites and also create new ones as need be! We'll use different instruments as these songs not only gather and help facilitate the flow of the day, but can help impart information - and are fun too!

## Loose Parts

Loose parts are any open-ended materials that can be moved, redesigned, constructed, combined together or broken apart by the learners (Kable, 2015). They can be natural (stumps, stones, twigs) or synthetic (buckets, baskets, boxes, rope, balls). The essence of loose parts is to empower students to expand their creativity and sense of play - which can be directly correlated to the amount of variables in an area (LECS, n.d.). Students are able to manipulate and adapt our loose parts to suit their needs and change their environment, cultivate their curiosity, and combine them with other material to support their imagination. It is often an open-ended, self-directed experience.



**“Mom, I feel like I am in a dream  
when I am at Forest School  
because it is just so much fun.”**

**-FSFNS Student Age 5**



**POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**



## Terms and Conditions

In order to participate in pre-registered programs, registration must be completed in full online before attending the program (<http://fsforestschool.com/>). Parents and Guardians will sign a waiver during registration and will be provided with payment options.

FSFNS reserves the right to terminate a contract (with a refund for days not attended) if it is deemed that the program is not a good fit for the child.

## Refunds Policy

Refunds will be determined on a case by case basis and are not given unless there are extreme circumstances that prevent a child from participating in Forest and Nature School.

1. Refunds will not be given if a day's program is canceled due to inclement weather.
2. A child who is absent or leaves for a portion of the day due to illness, injury, expulsion or any other reason will not be refunded any portion of that day's program fees. If the child is unable to return for the remainder of the semester, a refund may be granted for the remaining days.
3. If a refund is issued, it may be subject to a \$50 administrative fee. In some cases, refunds can be used toward a future session.
4. Two weeks' notice is required if you decide to leave the program. You may be refunded the remaining balance (less the two weeks), minus any administrative fees. You will be charged the regular day rate for the numbers of days attended up until that point.

## Illness Policy

Prevention is key and we want to keep our community as healthy as can be. If any of the following cases occur, we ask that parents/guardians keep their child at home and only allow them back at Forest and Nature School a minimum of 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided (this is true for staff and volunteers as well):

Temperature over 101°F (38.3°C);  
Vomiting; and/or  
Diarrhea (watery, profuse stools)



If a student becomes ill at FSFNS, parents/guardians or emergency contacts will be contacted and the student will be sent home.

Students who are affected by communicable disease (measles, mumps, flu, strep throat, viral pneumonia, covid-19, etc.) must have their health care providers consent prior to returning to FSFNS. In the case of an outbreak of a communicable disease, parents/guardians will be informed via email.

## Absent/Sick Days

If your child is sick, will be absent or late, please let us know asap via text or phone call. We do not receive emails the morning of Forest School. If we don't hear from you, and your child is absent, we will call you around 9:30 AM. See our Refund Policy for more information.

## Food Policy

At FSFNS, students are required to bring their own lunch, snacks and water bottle (can be refilled at our home bases) for each day of programming. This ensures students can attain proper nutrition, while following personal dietary preferences and restrictions. We encourage families to pack **a littler-less lunch** that is easy to carry in a backpack as all garbage must be packed out. During Winter months,

consider thermoses for hot snacks and beverages. Students **may not share food** with other students. On special circumstances, snacks may be provided by FSFNS or parents. We also do a fair bit of foraging and consume wild edibles on the regular (this is done with extreme care and we are very particular with what we teach, using professional knowledge and research - and is always optional for students). In these instances, all allergies and intolerances will be considered.

The FSFNS dry spaces and surrounding areas are considered a **nut-free zone** due to the potential for life-threatening allergies. Please ensure that nuts are not packed into lunches. However, given that FSFNS takes place in public environments, we are unable to guarantee a fully nut-free environment, but do our best to mitigate this. Students with severe nut-allergies should have an EpiPen on them, and an additional EpiPen with staff at all times.

### Child Privacy Policy

All steps will be taken to protect your child's privacy. Any personal data you give to us will be only used for the purpose agreed upon. We will not share your child's health information with third parties, unless legally required to do so. A binder labeled "FSFNS Policy" will be kept on-site that will include student name, allergies, health concerns and emergency contact information for quick access during an emergency. While off-site, an electronic version of this information will be kept on a FNS practitioner at all times.

Upon registration and enrolment, you will be asked to sign a media release consent form. Photos will only be shared once consent has been given and for the purposes agreed upon, such as program promotion (website, Facebook, Instagram, local newspaper, promotional videos and parent updates) and/or the parent app. Consent can be withdrawn at anytime by contacting us via email. Please do not hesitate if you have any questions regarding the privacy of the information you have provided.

### Child Protection Policy

Preventative measures against child abuse will be taken at all times, and FSFNS staff understand and recognize their duty to report suspected child abuse immediately in accordance with the Child and Family Services Act.



## Behaviour Management

At FSFNS, we are proactive in our behaviour management by ensuring a safe space for all children. Our behavioural management system is implemented in a positive and consistent manner and designed to help our students learn appropriate behaviours. By providing the space, tools and opportunity for children to manage their own behaviour we believe we can help children develop self-control, self-confidence, decision making skills, and the ability to communicate their needs effectively. We always consider the specific needs of the child and want to ensure that FSFNS is a safe place where children can work through some big feelings if needed. In general, when dealing with unwanted behaviour:

1. We focus on the unwanted behaviour, not the child
2. Consider the specific needs of the child
3. Work together to come up with solutions
4. Review our “full values contract” or any personal commitments previously created with the student

## Prohibited Behaviour

We have a zero tolerance policy for any type of abuse (physical, verbal, sexual, neglect of child, corporal punishment, etc). We maintain a safe environment for each child at all times and all employees, students and volunteers are expected to ensure that no harm comes to any child. A child must not be humiliated, (physically or verbally, through sarcasm, taunting, teasing, etc) at any time.

Although we try to allow space for big feelings to be worked out, there are occasions when a child may need to be sent home for the day. In the event that a child needs to be sent home, parents/guardians will be notified immediately and expected to come and pick up their child. There will not be a refund for that day’s schooling. This is fairly rare and would only happen when all other ideas are exhausted. These behaviours include, though are not limited to:

1. Any of the above prohibited behaviours
2. Significantly impeding on other children’s experience or the ability for the program to be successful
3. Disregarding personal safety or putting others in danger; threatening others
4. Continued disrespect and failure to follow set limits
5. Running away or needing constant 1:1 supervision

We know that sometimes inappropriate behaviour can occur and we are willing to work through this with the help of the parents/guardians. For the most part, we work on a three-strike system, but everything is case by case. We reserve the right to ask at any time that a student not return, or take a break for a session (please see our Refund Policy).

## Risk Management

We believe that there is an inherent value to risk. Learning how to assess and navigate risk is an important part of healthy child development and a fundamental practice within FSFNS (see Risky Play). For this reason FSFNS educators co-assess and co-manage risk with students on a daily basis, so that students learn to acknowledge, manage and overcome risks, in order to be exposed to the benefits of risk, rather than the hazards. FSFNS educators conduct daily and seasonal site risk assessments on site, as well as dynamic activity-based assessments. All activities that our students partake in are subject to an Experience Risk/Benefit assessment.

## Water Guidelines

Water is an important part of our programming, but comes with inherent risks. This policy includes swimming and water-based activities (kayaking, canoeing, paddleboarding, etc.):

1. Students **must wear lifejackets at all times** during water activities
2. Maximum Teacher/Student ratio 9:1 (Ages 6-11), 5:1 (Ages 4-5)
3. A fully stocked, waterproof first aid kit must be readily accessible
4. Swimming area clearly defined, free from hazards and suitable water temperature
5. Stay together when doing a paddling sport, each boat equipped with appropriate emergency gear
6. Teach appropriate skills beforehand
7. One or more buoyant rescue aids are readily accessible

## Tick Prevention

As we spend most of the day outside and in potential tick areas, it is important for us to work together to ensure the safety of our students and children. The best defense is regular tick checks and appropriate clothing. Please refer to our "Tick Guide" for more information (see Appendix 2).

## Fire Use

Students will have many opportunities to build and create fires. This includes lighting them with matches or other means (magnesium and steel, bow drill, etc.) Strict guidelines are in place around fires and students must earn this privilege through skill development and trust.

## Field Trip Policy

We believe that place-based education incorporates the community at large and throughout the semester students may have chances to venture off property to explore or experience activities we may not have available on site (ie rock climbing). This opportunity will include travel in our vans and thus we will need your car seat if your child requires one. Field Trips are a privilege and if a student cannot manage being off site they will be asked to stay back or not attend the following one.

## Emergency Procedures

All staff and volunteers are familiar with emergency procedures that FSFNS executes when needed. A copy of the procedures, including emergency phone numbers, is carried by an educator at all times in the

emergency/first aid kit. At minimum, all educators have Standard Level “C” CPR, with some staff having Wilderness First Responder (WFR) or more. Educators will always carry a cell phone.

Briefly, in the event of an emergency, the educators will:

1. Determine the nature and extent of the emergency.
2. Make sure all members of the group are accounted for and safe
3. Assess the casualty and have another adult call **911** and relay:
  - i. Nature of Emergency
  - ii. Details of injured person(s)
  - iii. Address (Send an adult if possible to meet ambulance and direct them to location on property)
  - iv. Inform emergency contact of person, then Principals of School and Board Members as soon as possible
  - v. Ensure an appropriate adult attends the hospital with them, taking any relevant medical documentation (ie Health Card, Allergies)
  - vi. Ensure the remainder of students receive appropriate support
  - vii. Principals will continue to liaise with emergency services until incident is over
  - viii. As soon as reasonably possible, fill out Incident Report Form
4. If the casualty is the FNS instructor, other instructors/volunteers will follow emergency plan

### **Inclement Weather Policy/Closure**

As an outdoor school our goal is to operate during (and appreciate) all types of weather. However, living in Southern Georgian Bay, we are confronted with extreme weather conditions, especially during Winter months.

While we do not have set conditions for closures, if we believe there is a significant risk to student safety and/or concerns about program delivery we will shut down. Usually, this involves severe cold, wind chills, and/or transportation concerns. If the school is shut down for any reason, we will let people know as soon as possible by email, no later than **7:15AM the day of**. We will subsequently follow up with texts and phone calls to ensure everyone is notified. In this event, please refer to our *refund policy* – we will try to accommodate a make-up day as much as possible. Of special note, **we tend to operate during Bus Cancellations**.

### **Extreme Weather**

FSFNS staff will consult the forecast throughout the day and any weather related safety concerns will be considered in all decisions for programming purposes (ie. distance travelled from main building, whether we venture off-site, time spent outside). In the event of potential thunder and lightning, students will stay close to shelter. During thunder and lightning, participants will remain under shelter until 30 mins after last storm activity. Should we not be near shelter during a storm for an unforeseeable reason, staff will facilitate lightning position with students.

In the case of extreme cold (-30C or below) or extreme heat (30C or above), the time spent outside will be limited, based on age, gear and ability (potential for school closure as well). Staff will visually monitor students for frostbite, hypothermia, heat exhaustion etc. and verbally monitor students by facilitating body scans, which the students will become comfortable executing on their own (ie. self-check). In the event of high winds or wind gusts, we will stay clear of forested areas and other overhead hazards.

### **Drop-off and Pick-up**

FSFNS requires a written or verbal authorization from a parent/guardian for other people who may pick up their child or be contacted in case of an emergency (must be over 16 years old). Parents/Guardians

must notify FSFNS before changing the usual pick-up routine. Should an unauthorized person come to pick up a student, that child will not be released into the care of the adult until verbal consent has been given via telephone. FSFNS recognizes all parent's rights to access their child regardless of marital status. Please know that access/information will only be denied when there is a written separation agreement or a legal court order provided to FSFNS directing us to do so. Drop-off is 8:45AM and pick-up is 3:30PM unless otherwise arranged.

## Staff : Student Ratios

We pride ourselves on maintaining low ratios to provide a quality program for our students:

Chickadees (Ages 4-5): maximum 6 students : 1 staff

Painted Turtles (Ages 6-7): maximum 8 students : 1 staff

Snowy Owls (Ages 8-11): maximum 10 students : 1 staff

Blue Herons (Ages 12+): maximum 12 students : 1 staff

## Volunteers

Volunteering could take the form of an ongoing weekly volunteer placement, the sharing of a passion or skill with our groups, a multi-day shadow of alternative education, or any other ideas and suggestions. All of our volunteers are 16 or older, will have been arranged by our FSFNS staff, must have a clear Vulnerable Sector Check and have read and reviewed our Handbook to become familiarized with expectations.

Interested in sharing a skill? Need your 40 hours of community service? Want to learn more about our educational approach? Check out this link for more details and to apply:

<http://fsforestschool.com/volunteer/>

## Staff and Volunteer Responsibilities

The responsibilities of our staff and volunteers include, but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring the physical and emotional safety of students.
2. Assessing and managing risk.
3. Creating a positive, welcoming space and community where everyone feels safe, and a program which supports our core values, mission and vision.
4. Modeling good behavior and respect for others and the natural world.
5. Co-conspiring in play with students and observation.

## Parent/Guardian Responsibilities

1. Ensuring all forms and fees are submitted prior to your child's attendance at our program
2. Ensuring your child is equipped with the proper clothing, outerwear and other supplies for the season and length of the program (please see Clothing and Equipment)  
***We are outside all day, in all weather. Learning only happens when we are comfortable and therefore if students arrive with less than adequate clothing, they will be asked to return home to get proper clothing before joining our program.***
3. Open communication with teachers and providing staff with any information that would assist us in meeting the needs of your child.
4. Following all policies and procedures outlined in this handbook.

## Hand Washing and Drinking Water

All staff and students are asked to wash their hands with soap and water, or use hand sanitizer, prior to eating and after using the washroom at FSFNS. They will be able to refill their water bottles on site.

### Toileting Procedures

Washroom facilities are located on-site. They are checked, cleaned and re-stocked regularly. FSFNS follows Leave No Trace principles as best as possible when students need to use the washroom away from our main facilities. In most cases, they are encouraged to do a “nature pee” or “water a tree” in private areas, away from other students, play areas, and water sources. For other needs, students will dig a cat-hole in a more remote location. Staff are prepared with hand washing kits and materials needed to do this successfully. All students **must be able to use the washroom independently** and are required to always bring an extra change of clothes.



### Preparing for FNS: Clothing and Equipment

Learning can only happen when we are comfortable, so please ensure your child is set up for success. Below is a list of recommended clothing and equipment. Due to the nature of our program, **a student who is not dressed appropriately for the conditions will be asked to**

return home to change.

Everyday, each season:

- Lightweight long pants, socks and closed-toed shoes**

*While we have never had a tick on a child at our school, we do operate in areas that ticks could exist. This also helps protect against harmful plants.*

- Durable Backpack**

*One that they are comfortable wearing and carrying that can hold all their things - we often have a "lunch out" away from home base especially with the older groups.*

- Lunch and snacks**

*Litterless if possible, and peanut-free.*

- Water Bottle (filled)**

*Can be refilled at school*

- Extra clothes (especially socks and shoes, underwear [in case of accidents])**

*Feel free to bring an additional bag that is labeled and filled with extra gear that comes and goes home each day.*

- Medication (if required)**

- Cloth mask and buff**

*If required.*

**Optional Gear:**

- Personal Hand Sanitizer
- Bug Repellent/Bug Net
- Sunscreen
- Favourite Field Guide
- Binoculars
- Flint and Steel, Compass, etc.
- Carving Knives (Older Kids, preapproved by teacher)

**Spring and Fall**

- Rain gear (waterproof boots, pants, jacket)
- Long light pants/shirt (*Tick/Hazardous Plant Protection*)
- Sun hat
- Lightweight clothing
- Bathing suit, towel (*you'll have a heads up if we plan on swimming*)
- Closed-toe shoes
- Rain Boots/Winter Boots
- Warmer sweater or jacket
- Gloves (2 pairs)
- Layers (see below)

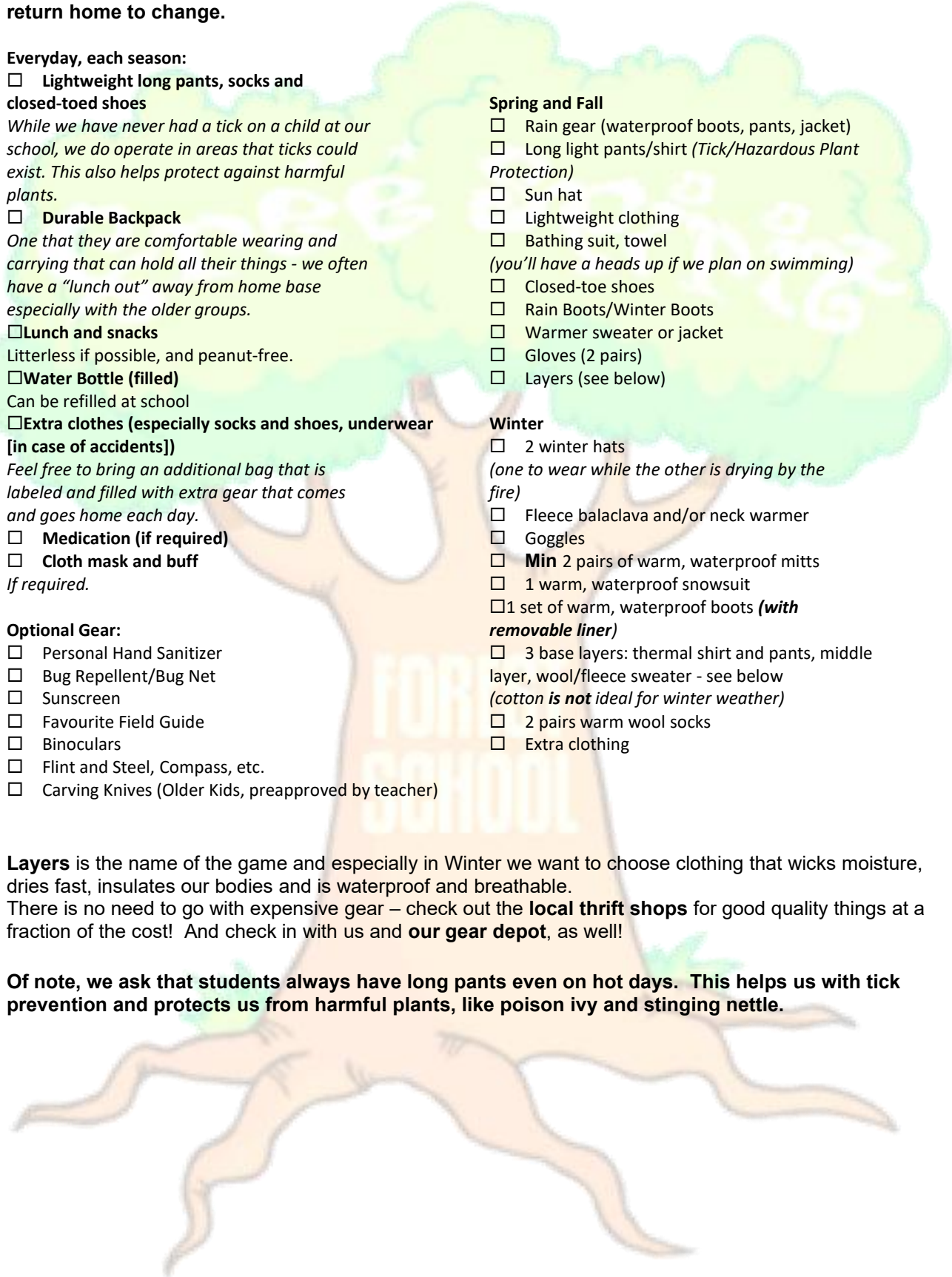
**Winter**

- 2 winter hats (*one to wear while the other is drying by the fire*)
- Fleece balaclava and/or neck warmer
- Goggles
- Min** 2 pairs of warm, waterproof mitts
- 1 warm, waterproof snowsuit
- 1 set of warm, waterproof boots (**with removable liner**)
- 3 base layers: thermal shirt and pants, middle layer, wool/fleece sweater - see below (*cotton is not ideal for winter weather*)
- 2 pairs warm wool socks
- Extra clothing

**Layers** is the name of the game and especially in Winter we want to choose clothing that wicks moisture, dries fast, insulates our bodies and is waterproof and breathable.

There is no need to go with expensive gear – check out the **local thrift shops** for good quality things at a fraction of the cost! And check in with us and **our gear depot**, as well!

**Of note, we ask that students always have long pants even on hot days. This helps us with tick prevention and protects us from harmful plants, like poison ivy and stinging nettle.**







## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

### Sustainability

Much of our focus here at FSFNS is on environmental education and awareness where we strive to create not only a respect for nature, but a **love and sense of belonging in nature**. Accordingly a lot of what we do takes place in wild, natural spaces and we certainly *do* have an impact on our surroundings. Mitigating this is a balance (and an imperfect one at that) where we try and determine an *acceptable level of impact*. Our first step is education and we try to follow the 7 Leave No Trace Principles closely. Below are some examples of how we try to encourage a low environmental impact. In practice, these usually come in teachable moments, where students weigh out options and feel empowered to make a choice.

### Leave No Trace Principles

#### Plan Ahead and Prepare

We think of this as “Know Before You Go!” and encourage students to be prepared for anything! This can help us address any safety concerns, help us achieve the other LNT principles, and allows for a more enjoyable time. It empowers students to take control and builds self-confidence, leadership and teamwork skills.

#### Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

Though we don't overnight camp (yet!), we often will set up camp sites for the day, tear them down and return things to the way they were. We have previously established areas that we use to minimize impact, and rotate through these campsites to give the areas a “rest”.

#### Dispose of Waste Properly

At minimum we pack out what we pack in! Better yet, we leave areas even cleaner than before we entered.

#### Leave What You Find

“Can I keep it?” This experience usually begins an interesting conversation where we (together) weigh the options and make a decision about “keeping nature”. When we acknowledge this connection and explore it together, children are usually pretty good at letting nature be nature, or putting it in a special place and adding it to our class map, or taking a photo and looking at it later.

Sometimes we do take things back to the classroom so we can study it and use it as a sample so we don't have to take others, like bee hives and feathers. Sometimes, after our thorough dialogue, students *will* decide to take something

special home, and that's okay. For us it's about a balance and understanding. We believe it is important to reinforce student's interest in nature and empower their connection to, and curiosity for, it.

#### Minimize Campfire Impacts

We have campfires almost every week in our designated fire pits. Once in a while, we'll practice LNT fires and return our area back to how it was beforehand ensuring that we choose our site appropriately to minimize impact. We'll even use pie tins to ensure no plants are harmed when we make small, practice fires.

#### Respect Wildlife

A few years ago we shut down one of our campsites (now known as Ducky's Campsite) because a Mallard made its nest there. We avoid areas known for nesting at certain times of year (ie. bank swallows), practice catch and release while fishing, and generally observe animals from a distance. We do get close to insects, and do our best to not interfere. We've even seen students impose their own limits when catching frogs by washing their hands, having short time restrictions on how long they can stay in the bucket, or holding them close to the ground. In this way, it's not a complete “hands-off” approach, but a respectful approach.

#### Be Considerate of Other Visitors

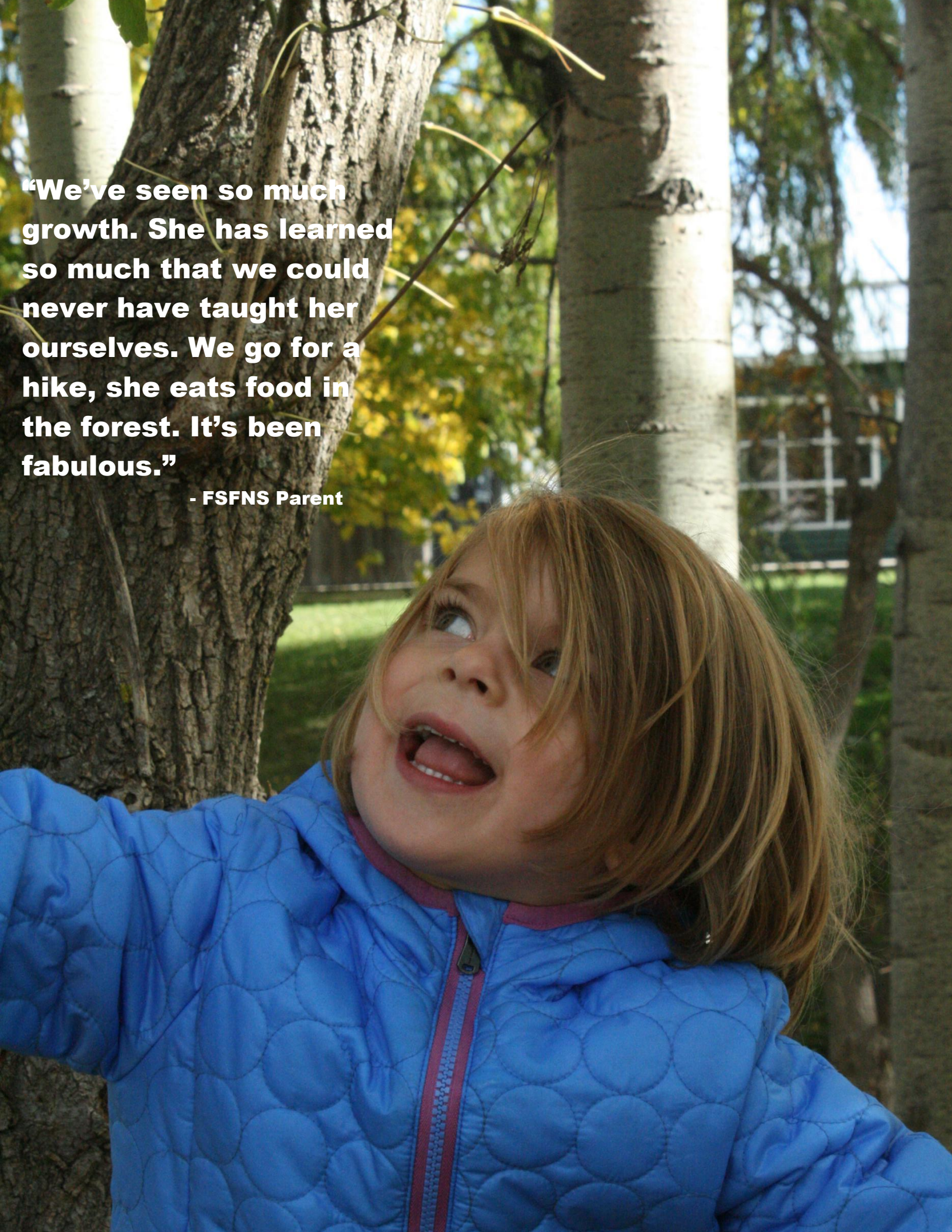
Other people use some of our public areas often. We follow these principles to ensure others have the opportunity to love this place like we do. We always strive to be inclusive of people and courteous – the students love when given the opportunity to take people on tours of our special areas. (Source: LNT Canada)

## Acceptable Level of Impact

This idea of an “acceptable level of impact” is all subjective. It’s a dynamic process that happens in the moment that’s inclusive of everyone and everything around – and it’s a continuously open dialogue. It’s about role-modeling and nurturing our student’s (and our own) ecological identities. It’s about discovering our connection, values and sense of self in nature. It’s an appreciation and sense of belonging – and it looks different for everyone.

Also, sometimes it’s just about **FUN**. When it comes down to it, we know that people won’t protect what they don’t love or know. And how can we truly know something without really getting into it?!



A young child with blonde hair, wearing a blue quilted jacket, is looking up at a tree trunk in a forest. The child's mouth is open, and they appear to be speaking or reacting to something. The background shows other trees and a fence, suggesting an outdoor setting like a park or schoolyard.

**“We’ve seen so much growth. She has learned so much that we could never have taught her ourselves. We go for a hike, she eats food in the forest. It’s been fabulous.”**

**- FSFNS Parent**

## INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY

### **Making it work for everyone.**

FSFNS aims to lead with a spirit of compassion, deep reflection and understanding, and we begin this effort by honoring the truth of the history that brings us to where we are today. Thus, we resolve every day to recommit to doing what we can to root out barriers to participation in our programming and the outdoors, and to move towards a more just and equitable community and organization. While this work is ongoing, our mission of creating meaningful connections with Nature for everyone will never be fulfilled until we can overcome this.

Our organization still has a lot of work to do in our community and this is just the beginning. Take a look below for how we are gently tackling this prevalent diversity gap to make nature-connection programming more accessible to everyone and improve representation in our program so that all families feel safe and included in the outdoors.

### **Sliding Scale Payment System**

We structure our program fees through a sliding scale system in an effort to create equal access opportunities to the resources of this land and our program. By using a sliding scale, we are practicing economic solidarity: we're cooperating with all FNS Families to create a more equitable and inclusive community. We're committed to making sure that financial challenges are not a hindrance to access participation in our programs. This means that you decide the price that is best suited for you to pay for your participation in our programs.

When you pay for an FNS Program, you are contributing to our mission of connecting all children with nature, themselves and others. You make it possible for us to focus on becoming a space where all children can be together. As a not-for-profit, after covering our costs, all extra funds go directly into bridging financial gaps and funding various bursaries and scholarships (see below).

### **Indigenous Tuition Program**

Indigenous people are welcome to attend the FSFNS core program free of charge, if desired.

We do not believe that Native communities should pay for access to their own land. As a predominately settler-led organization, it is a privilege for us to live and work here on these ancestral lands and we thank you as original caretakers of this land who have lived and continue to live here since time immemorial. We know that past and present systems in place - which some of us at FSFNS have largely benefited from - have hurt you and that we can never repay our debts. We are honored by your presence at FSFNS and should you choose to attend, we thank you for supporting our organization and school.

### **Community Bursaries**

The natural world should be a place of healing and enjoyment for all. FSFNS recognizes that barriers to safe spaces exist and as an organization we are constantly learning about how to be a better, more effective ally. Oppressive social structures, systemic racism and historical trauma are certainly at work in keeping BIPOC, LGBTQ2+ and others from having a meaningful connection to the natural world and/or accessing programs like ours. Let's work together to improve these conditions in our community and support your learning as well.

A partial or full tuition reduction is available to those who have experienced marginalization in the outdoor industry, if you choose. We acknowledge the courage it takes to attend a program in a field that has

traditionally been (and continues to be) exclusive and marginalizing of so many valuable people. If you have felt this or otherwise consider yourself to be fit for this, please apply.

### **Al's Legacy (Financial Aid Bursary)**

Our friend Al was actively involved with Free Spirit for many years. In 2009, Al was taken from our community much too early, no doubt while doing what he loved - being in the outdoors and connecting others to nature. To this day, his sense of adventure and wonder in the wilderness is not forgotten. He brought so much joy, playfulness and passion wherever he went and his energy was simply contagious, along with his desire to learn... at least outside of the classroom, as his mom has shared with us!

We are committed to providing programs for all families who see value in our programming, regardless of income and ability to pay. With funds raised by Al's family, as well as through special events, business sponsorship, our sliding scale pricing and private donations, we are able to help support students and families participate in FSFNS through tuition reduction and scholarships. To date over \$30,000 has been given in financial assistance through this fund - and while barriers to accessing our programs continue to exist, this bursary is in place to ensure that income level and access to wealth is not one.

### **Michael C. Moore Bursary**

We are grateful to the Moore family for their generous allowance and encouragement for us to run our programming on their land. It is a beautiful space that significantly enhances our students' Nature connection. In honour of their generosity, we offer a full bursary awarded to one student annually for participation in our Meaford program who may not otherwise be able to attend programming.

### **Used Gear Depot**

Getting suited up for the outdoors, particularly for each season, is expensive. One of the often neglected pieces of the inclusion and equity equation in the outdoors is a hard look at economic access. We are constantly building up our gear depot/lending library for outdoor clothing and gear in hopes of overcoming this obstacle. If your child needs anything, please check with us first. If your child has outgrown something and you wish to gift it to the depot, we will gratefully accept all donations. Thanks!





## General Communication

Free Spirit Forest and Nature School staff are very open to feedback, questions, and concerns from students and families. Regular, timely and open communication is important to us. We are happy to connect briefly during drop-off or pick-up to address any questions or concerns. Should questions arise that cannot be fully answered during this time, please email [fsforestschool@gmail.com](mailto:fsforestschool@gmail.com) or contact Kim and Matt Simpson directly at [705-606-1508](tel:705-606-1508).

Please be sure to notify us via email or text ([705-606-1508](tel:705-606-1508)/[705-606-0134](tel:705-606-0134)) if:  
Your child will be late or absent (text or call the morning of please)  
Your child has contracted a communicable illness  
Your child is being treated for lice

Parents are emailed on a regular basis for specific information about upcoming events (field trips, change of program plans, etc.). Please ensure we have your current email address on file.

Parents will be given a link to our Homeroom App to stay up-to-date with Photos and Stories from their child's day at school. Additionally, we post some exciting discoveries and adventures on our Instagram and Facebook pages: Free Spirit Forest and Nature School.

## Emergency Communication

In the event of an emergency that involves your child, parents/emergency contact provided will be contacted by telephone at the earliest reasonable time. In the event that weather/road conditions make travel to/from FNS dangerous for staff/participants and programs need to be canceled or closed early, parents/guardians will be notified by email, then text and telephone (at the latest 7:15 AM; please see our Snow Closure Policy).

## Concerns and Grievance Policy

Your concerns, questions, and feedback are very important to us - we see it all as an opportunity to grow. Should you need anything please contact staff by phone, email or in person during drop-off and pick-up times. We are looking forward to building relationships and working alongside you and your child as we begin this nature journey together. Our school Principals will handle most matters, but if you'd like you can also direct your feedback to our Chair of the Board – Jennie at [freespiritours@hotmail.com](mailto:freespiritours@hotmail.com)





## APPENDIX 1

Type of Play	Our Definition	Example
Adventurous (Risky) Play	Arguably the most important part of our program, see our Risky Play section for more details!	Paddling down an unfamiliar stream for the first time, or climbing a new tree.
Communication play	This is play that uses words, signals or nuances.	Creating a group song and dance.
Creative play	This is inventive play, focused on spontaneous creation.	Using loose parts to build an epic empire.
Deep play	This is play where children face their fears and step outside of comfort zones (physical and emotional).	Caving and Rock Climbing for certain, or even being in a group can be an emotional risk for some.
Dramatic play	This play is focused on acting out events that are not part of normal, everyday life.	Storytelling and puppetry around the fire.
Exploratory play	This is play that is tied to the natural world and is a huge focus at FNS as students are constantly exploring.	Almost everything we do! A pond study with a bunch of creatures, or simply flipping over a log.
Fantasy play	This is play that is totally unreal; a magical world created.	Creating fairy homes where the fairies hold magical powers in the forest.
Imaginative play	This style of play lets go of the typical “rules” that govern our world – this occurs quite often at FNS.	“Let’s pretend…” is a key phrase with imaginary roles of people or objects.
Locomotor play	This is active, physical play – another staple of FNS.	Climbing, hiking, tag, survival… you name it.
Mastery play	This play is focused on feeling in (and taking) control of physical elements in the environment.	Damming a stream, gaining a new skill or balancing on a log
Recapitulative play	This is a huge part of FNS in which we participate in and replay aspects of human evolutionary history.	Developing our campsite with shelter building and a community fire.
Rough and Tumble play	This is common play among kids, and is focused on testing physical limits (within the context of safety guidelines)	Think: stick-sword fencing or chasing games.
Social play	Almost all of our programming is this form of play. It includes any play that is interactive with others, in which all people involved abide by the same customs and rules.	Establishment of a “concrete factory” where children take on various roles, from potters to clay harvesters to working the kiln (fire).
Socio-dramatic	This type of play gives students the chance to jump into the role of real (or potentially real) experiences.	The epic saga of “Aden” the dog, and how he ran away for a day and half.
Symbolic play	This plays uses natural (and unnatural) objects that represent someone, something or ideas.	Opening up a “Store” that sells tree bows and sticks for shelters in exchange for snail shells.



## APPENDIX 2

### Tick prevention

Since we spend most of the day outside and in potential tick areas, it is important for us to work together to ensure the safety of our students and children.

If a tick is a carrier of disease, it can pass the disease on to us as hosts. That disease may be Lyme. Transmission is more likely after the tick has been latched on for a number of hours, but transmission is possible after just a short while. All it takes is infected saliva to be passed on. If Lyme is transmitted, there may be signs right away, or there may not. Some folks have very little reaction, and some have a negative impact for the rest of their lives. We need to work together to prevent this.

### **The best defense is regular tick checks and appropriate clothing.**

During the prime season, our teachers will do a superficial check of all the children at the end of class each day. **It is up to you as parents/guardians to do a more thorough check.**

#### **Here's what we do:**

Teach our students about ticks and tick safety.

We insist that our students dress appropriately. It makes it harder for ticks to find food if they land on us (and helps prevent Poison Ivy, too.)

We model tucking pants into socks to make it tougher for a tick to find skin if it does climb on.

We have bug spray, both with DEET and natural alternatives, available for families to use if they do not have their own. We also carry tick removal kits.

We take sit down breaks in places that tend to be more bare and rocky, rather than brushy and grassy. If we find a tick, we bag it and take it in to be tested.

#### **Here's what you can do:**

Proper Clothing - avoidance is key:

- Lightweight long pants (preferably a lighter colour to see ticks better)
- Socks and closed-toed shoes
- Hats (remember: kids are closer to the ground!)
- Long sleeves
- Tuck in pants

Apply bug spray around ankles, wrists, neck line and on clothing.

**Do a thorough check of your child every day!** Ticks like warm, moist places: arm pits, behind ears, on the scalp, behind knees, belly buttons, in the groin, etc, **but can be found anywhere.**

Remove outerwear, give it a shake and do tick checks before climbing into vehicles.

Baths on Forest School days are a good idea. This will wash off any ticks that are still crawling around.

Putting clothing in the dryer on high for 10 minutes will kill any ticks on the clothing.

Check out Health Canada for more details and how to remove ticks

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/lyme-disease/removing-submitting-ticks-testing.html>

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**YOUNG  
AND  
WILD**