



Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center

NATURE BASED PRESCHOOL

PARENT HANDBOOK



Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center, PO Box 122, Mystic, CT, 06355

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Located on Pequotsepos Road, Mystic, CT

Our Philosophy

The DPNC Preschool's early childhood education through nature-based program closely aligns with our mission and offers a unique opportunity for children to grow in nature.

Nature plays a vital role in the emotional, social and cognitive development of young children. Childhood experiences in nature help stimulate curiosity and interest in the world around us, and help us grow intellectually in our desire to better understand the world and our place in it. The woods, meadows and wetlands surrounding DPNC serve as a living classroom for our preschool. It is an ideal place for children to learn through direct experience and play. Our children spend time outdoors everyday, where they can fully engage all their senses in a safe and nurturing environment.

Children's free expression in the natural environment allows for the development of a lifetime of skills. By building nature forts and fairy houses children learn *creative expression*, *problem solving* and *spatial awareness*. By hiking on trails, climbing over logs and hopping off rocks, children develop *balance*, *strength* and *coordination*. By handling and observing plants and animals, children learn *empathy* and *respect* for others.

Curriculum

Our curriculum is a comprehensive blend of environmental education and traditional, play-based preschool standards. We use the natural world as the guiding theme when we present science, art and music, math, language and literacy, dramatic play and other curriculum areas. In this way, we address each child's total development with an interesting and hands-on program that teaches children to love the world around them.

Our Goals

Our preschool aims to foster the growth of whole, well-rounded, happy children, and to inspire an appreciation for the natural world and a lifetime environmental ethic. To accomplish this, we will provide children with daily opportunities to develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically. We also continually strive to achieve the following goals that align with the Connecticut Framework for Preschool Curricular benchmarks:

- ❁ To allow each child the ability to establish a sense of confidence, responsibility, self-discipline and social grace through experiences in the natural world, the classroom and with other children.
- ❁ To instill a deep sense of wonder and a desire for self-directed learning through thought-provoking, interesting and meaningful outdoor experiences.
- ❁ To cultivate the physical and mental health of the child by providing opportunities to develop motor skills, healthy eating habits and self-help skills in a safe, secure, developmentally appropriate and challenging atmosphere.
- ❁ To create an environment where children are given experiences that will inspire their curiosity and naturally improve their ability to question, reason and recall new things.

The Program

The Nature Center Preschool provides an integrated environmental education curriculum for mixed age groups of children from 3 to 5 years old. The program runs from 8:30am to 12:30pm.

Children may attend a two-day program on Tuesday and Thursday, a three-day program on Monday, Wednesday and Friday or a full, five-day program.

Our Daily Schedule

8:30 am Welcome to School: Children are greeted in the classroom or outside in the play-yard. They have free time to explore materials, games and themed activities, greet friends, and observe animals while making a gentle transition from home to school.

9:30 am Circle-Time: Children gather to discuss the theme of the week. They participate in songs, fingerplays, stories, puppetry and exploration of related natural materials. Twice a month, the children will participate in a music session with a professional music teacher.

10:15 am Snack time (Outside whenever possible)

10:45 am Outside time: Explore, hike, pond dip, pretend play, observe and listen, and play games.

12:00-12:30 pm Pick-Up Time: Parents may pick their children up between these times. Children will play outside or choose from our sand/water tables and arts and crafts activities.

Application

Applications are accepted at any time. Applications are maintained on a wait list for the year of projected entry. **Current Nature Center membership is required as the application fee.** Applicants who are not current members should include the \$50 family membership fee with their application. Application fees are applied to a year-long family membership to the Nature Center and are **non-refundable**. Applicants should be aware that spaces at the preschool are limited and are filled on a first-come, first-served basis. Applying to the program does not guarantee your child a spot in the program.

Enrollment

Children must turn 3 years of age on or before December 31st in order to be admitted to the program in September. For admission at any other time the child must have passed their 3rd birthday. *Children must be toilet trained and self-sufficient.* Every child is required to have a physical (within one year) and a corresponding health record, signed and dated by his/her pediatrician. In addition to tuition, each family must maintain a current Nature Center membership at the family level.

Enrollment for returning students and their siblings begins in February. Returning children have first priority for enrollment each year, followed by siblings of DPNC preschool students. New student enrollment begins in March and is processed on a first-come first-served basis, starting with children on our wait list, with an effort made to create a balance of genders and ages in each class. In order to maintain continuity in the classroom new student enrollment for the current year will end in March.

Tuition

Upon notification of placement in the program, a **non-refundable** deposit, equal to 10% of the annual tuition, is required within 10 days. This fee is applied to your tuition and will serve as your last month's payment.

Mon/Wed/Fri	Annual tuition \$3600
Tue/Thu	Annual tuition \$2500
Mon-Fri	Annual tuition \$6100

Annual tuition is payable as one lump sum or in 10 equal installments. Installments are due on the 15th of each month. The first payment, whether lump sum or installment, is due August 15. If a student's tuition installment has not been paid by the end of the month in which it is due, that student may not attend school, and another child may be admitted to fill the vacancy.

Withdrawal

Both the parents of enrolled children and the Nature Center reserve the right to remove a child from the program if the arrangements are not satisfactory. If withdrawal or dismissal is necessary, a one-month notice will be required/provided and tuition will be due during this time. If one-month notification is not given then one tenth of the annual tuition will be due for each month in which your child has attended school and for the following month. Any partial month counts as a whole month. If you have prepaid more than is due, the balance will be refunded.

Arrivals and Departures

Drop-Off: Arrival time is between **8:30-9:00 am**

Pick-up: Pick up is between **12:00 and 12:30 pm**

We have provided drop-off and pick-up time "windows" to allow flexibility for your schedule and to allow your child time to acclimate to the classroom. *Please respect the drop off period.*

Arrivals before 8:30am prevent teachers from preparing properly for the day and arrivals after 9:00 am may prevent the group from moving into the next activity.

An adult must accompany your child to and from the classroom every day and must sign them in and out.

*Your child looks forward to your return; therefore **children should be picked up promptly by or before the 12:30 pm closing time.*** We usually arrive back from our hike at 12:00pm. Please let us know if you will need to pick your child up early.

If a child has not been picked up within 15 minutes of the designated closing time, a staff person will:

1. Call the child's parents or legal guardian at the work and home phone numbers.
2. If they cannot be reached the staff will call the emergency and/or alternate contacts listed on the emergency cards.
3. If every effort to reach caregivers has been made and the child has not been picked up, the Stonington Police may be called to assist.

Under no circumstances will a child be released to anyone other than those adults listed on the "permission to release" form without prior approval from the child's guardian.

School Closing

The Nature Center Preschool will follow the Stonington Public School for emergency delays and cancellations. In the event of inclement weather, we will close if the Stonington Public Schools close. We do not follow the Stonington Public school schedule for early closings or for teacher professional development days. The Nature Center Preschool will make independent decisions regarding these conditions. *Parents will be contacted by phone as soon as possible in the event of an early dismissal.* School days cancelled due to inclement weather will not be made up at the end of the year.

1 hour delay: The preschool will open at 9:30

90 min delay: The preschool will open at 10:00

Parental Involvement

Parents are welcome to visit the classroom at any time and are encouraged to participate in family programs, presentations, and field trips. We encourage you to participate in the education of your child. Each fall a "Back to Preschool Night" will give parents a chance to meet other parents and learn more about their child's daily activities.

Communication

Good communication between parents and the school will ensure that our program meets your expectations and the needs of your child. Weekly activities are posted on the parent board at the sign-in table and monthly newsletters will be sent home. We provide a mailbox for each family and use these to provide information regarding our classes. Please check your box each day. **We encourage you to discuss any questions or concerns you have with the teachers and director.** *When children are present please be aware that in order to ensure the safety of the children and offer our full attention to your concerns, we ask that you reserve discussion of detailed matters for after school hours. We are happy to schedule time to talk with you at the end of the school day, or any other time that proves convenient for you.*

Contacting us during the school day:

If for some reason you need to contact us during the school day you may call the preschool at 860-536-2856 and speak to us directly or leave a message. If you have a need to contact us immediately and we are not in the building, you can contact the main desk at DPNC at 860-536-1216 and the staff will contact us on the trail.

Attendance:

Please call the Nature Center Preschool at 860-536-2856 to let us know if your child will be absent or late for any reason.

The Cycle of our Year

The Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center is non-denominational. Our yearly calendar and curriculum will focus on seasonal changes that occur in nature. Through crafts, games, a nature table and other activities we will highlight the Earth's cycles as they occur throughout the year.

Birthdays

Birthdays are a wonderful and special time for children. We celebrate each child's birthday by baking a special snack and acknowledging the child in story and song. If you would like to participate, please speak with the head teacher at the beginning of your child's birthday month.

Health Policies

In order to provide for the health and comfort of all children and staff involved in the program, parents will be contacted to pick their child up from school if he/she exhibits any of the following conditions:

- * Fever, vomiting or diarrhea
- * Suspicious rashes
- * Lesions or wounds with bleeding or oozing
- * Conjunctivitis
- * Lice or other infestation
- * Constant coughing or runny nose
- * Conditions requiring one-on-one care
- * Any contagious illnesses reportable to D.P.H.

The child may return to school after illness if they meet the following conditions:

- * No fever, vomiting or diarrhea for 24 hours.
- * Taking of antibiotic medication for contagious infection for 24 hours prior to return.
- * Free of open, oozing skin conditions.
- * Appropriate treatment of infestations.
- * In the event of a reportable contagious disease, we will require a note from a healthcare provider stating that the child is no longer contagious.

Most importantly, your child should feel well enough to participate in all activities, including outdoor time.

What to wear

Because our program encourages children to develop a comfortable and healthy relationship with nature and the outdoor environment, we will spend a large portion of everyday outside, year-round. We expect the children to get dirty as a natural part of their explorations, therefore your child should wear seasonally appropriate, washable, play clothes at all times. For example, in winter your child should have a hat, gloves, warm jacket, boots and snow pants. A waterproof raincoat with a hood and boots should be provided for rainy days, please do not bring umbrellas. In the warmer months, bug spray/sunscreen should be applied outside or at home before arriving at school. Sandals, flip-flops and other slip on shoes are not appropriate for outdoor exploration. ***Please bring an extra change of clothes to leave in your child's cubby and a pair of slippers to wear indoors.***

What to bring

Your child may bring special treasures, books, found objects and any other nature oriented materials to share with the class. *Please do not allow your child to bring toys or other objects except on specified days.*

Snacks

The Nature Center will provide a snack and drink of water, milk or 100% fruit juice in the morning. Children will have access to water at all times. We will provide wholesome, healthy snacks, which are low in sugar and organically produced whenever possible. Candy and soda will not be permitted. Snack schedules will be posted regularly.

Due to life threatening food allergies in our student population, we ask that you do not bring food into the preschool at any time.

Medication

The Nature Center will provide medical care as permitted by Basic First Aid Certification. Emergency medications, Benadryl, "Epi-Pens", and inhalers, will also be administered as needed. Emergency medications must be given to the teacher, in advance, with a completed medical authorization form that is signed by the child's parent *and* physician.

Please inform the Head Teacher of any known or suspected food allergy your child may have.

Accidents & Emergencies

Due to the active nature of our program minor accidents, bumps and bruises will occur. All staff members are trained in Basic First Aid and CPR. In the event of a minor injury your child will be treated with first aid and the incident will be documented and reported to the parent at the end of the day.

Staff members are always prepared to deal with first aid concerns. The staff will carry a first aid kit and cell phone and/or walkie-talkies to aid in communication in the event of an emergency while on the trails.

In the event of a medical emergency staff members will call an ambulance and then contact the child's parents and doctor. If it is necessary to transport your child to the hospital, a staff member will remain with your child at all times.

Mandated Reporting

As a licensed preschool provider, the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center is obligated by law to report any suspected cases of child abuse and/or neglect to the State Department of Child and Families.

Discipline Policy

The Nature Center is committed to the health, safety and enjoyment of all of our students. Times will arise when discipline is necessary; when they do we always discipline in a logical and gentle manner with a focus on positive behavior. Approved methods for resolving conflicts include:

- * Using positive guidance
- * Setting clear limits
- * Redirection to another activity
- * Using natural and logical consequences in response to negative behavior

The teachers focus on *preventative discipline* and will continually model proper behavior for the children. The children will be given clear instructions as to how to behave within the classroom, with other children and with materials.

Occasionally, the need will arise for *corrective discipline* in order to maintain a peaceful classroom. A child, who is having trouble focusing, is disruptive or otherwise interfering with the normal flow of the classroom will be encouraged to talk about their feelings. The teacher will make an attempt to have the child come up with solutions for resolving the issue causing the problem. If a child is continually disruptive or aggressive, attempts will be made to *redirect* the child to another suitable activity. They will be asked to choose an activity in another area and may be offered *limited choices* to refocus their attention if talking does not result in better self-control.

A time-out may be used as a logical consequence for continually disruptive behavior. Time-outs are intended to allow the child to regain self-control. In the event of a time-out the child will be asked to sit on a chair in a quiet area of the classroom. The teacher may ask the child to remove themselves from the group, or if necessary the teacher may remove the child from the group calmly and with as little disruption as possible. The child will be told why they have been removed from the group and allowed sit quietly for no more than one (1) minute per age of the child. A timer will be provided to allow the child to self-regulate their time-out. The staff will continually supervise children during any disciplinary action. After the time-out the child will be reminded of the proper behavior and welcomed back into the group.

Under no circumstances will teachers use physical contact, abusive or humiliating words to discipline a child. No child will be physically restrained unless it is necessary to protect the health and safety of the child or another child or adult.

Staff

Davnet Conway Schaffer (on temporary Leave of Absence)

Preschool Director and Head Teacher

Davnet has taught early childhood programs at the Nature Center for the past ten years and has many years experience teaching environmental education to children of all ages. She has a B.S. in Environmental Science and an M.S. in Oceanography. She is licensed by the State of Connecticut as a Designated Head Teacher in the preschool environment and has a Montessori Early Childhood Teaching Credential from AMS. In addition she is a trained *Full of Joy* Children's yoga teacher. A few of her favorite pastimes are yoga, painting, trail running and hiking. She lives in Stonington with her family and a small menagerie of animals, which join her occasionally in the classroom.

Mary Jo (Mame) Courtney

Preschool Teacher – Interim Preschool Director

Mame has many years of experience working with young children. She was the Director of Early Childhood Education at DPNC when her children were young and she created many classes that are now permanent additions to our programming. Mame has BS degrees in Psychology and Biology from Simmons College in Boston and is a trained *Full of Joy* Children's Yoga teacher. Mame loves nature and enjoys bringing her cultural and artistic creativity to the preschool program. She lives in North Stonington with her two youngest children.

Katie McCann

Preschool Teacher

Katie has experience and training in special education and early childhood development as well as over eight years experience in the childcare field. She holds a BA degree in History and Chemistry from the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Katie has two children, Emma and Will, who are both Nature Center Preschool alumni. A native of Boston, Katie enjoys traveling to the Cape, hiking, and fly-fishing with her husband. She lives in Pawcatuck with her family.

Suzanne Burns

Preschool Teacher

Suzanne is a graduate of Springfield College with a degree in Environmental Science. She has been working as an educator for the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center since March 2008. Suzanne enjoys gardening, volunteering for many children's causes and hiking with her family. She currently lives in Mystic with her children, husband and many pets.

Lori Edwards

Preschool Teacher

We are excited to welcome Lori Edwards as the newest addition to the preschool team. A former homemaker for the Visiting Nurses Association, Lori has spent the past three years teaching at Hilltop Montessori Nursery School in Mystic. Lori has a Montessori Early Childhood Teaching Credential from AMS and is currently working towards a degree in Early Childhood Education at Three Rivers Community College. In addition, Lori is a certified EMT by the State of Connecticut. Lori has a deep love of nature and enjoys birding, softball and volleyball. A native of Mystic, Lori has two grown daughters and now lives in Gales Ferry.

Kim Hargrave

Director of Education

Kim has headed the educational programs and Summer Nature Camp at the Nature Center for many years. She holds a degree in Natural Resources from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In addition to her love of teaching environmental education programs to all ages and groups, Kim enjoys hiking, snow shoeing and vegetable gardening with her family. She lives in Ledyard with her husband Jason and children Andrew, Fisher and Emily.

Substitute Teachers

Nature Center teaching staff may substitute in the classroom as needed. In addition, parent and student volunteers may be present in the classroom at various times.