

Nature Preschool at Ijams Nature Center

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Nature Preschool?

A nature-based preschool is one that uses the outdoors, nature, and natural materials as a regular focus in most activities. In addition, there is emphasis on teaching environmentally conscious practices. Most nature-based preschools are based on play, providing ample opportunities for child-led explorations in nature.

At Ijams Nature Center, the 300 acres of meadows, forests, creeks, and wetlands will serve as the main classroom. The goal is to provide children with child-led and experiential education that was the hallmark of childhood in decades past. Ijams hopes to bring nature exploration back into the lives of children so that they can dig in the dirt, roll down hills, scramble up rocks, make mud pies, build dams in the water, climb trees, and plant seeds. These are the types of daily discoveries that children will find at Ijams Nature Center's Nature Preschool.

Are the students outside in all weather?

Ijams Nature Center's Nature Preschool philosophy has children learning and engaging with the outdoor environment regardless of weather. In rare instances of severe weather including thunderstorms, heavy rain, heavy snow, strong winds, and/or severe temperatures, an indoor private learning space is available. In addition, children will have access to the indoor space throughout the day if they need to rest or prefer to spend some quiet time inside.

Won't my child catch a cold if they are out in the rain?

Illness is the result of viruses and bacteria, not inclement weather. As long as children are dressed in appropriate clothing, they are able to be outside exploring and not suffer negative effects from the elements. In actuality, spending time outdoors can help increase a child's immune system. Exposure to beneficial bacteria found in the soil can encourage the growth of healthy gut bacteria, which reduces the rate of food allergies and improves digestion. Similarly, children that spend time in a wider variety of environmental conditions become fit, strong, and resilient.

Isn't it dangerous?

While it is true that children often do get hurt playing outdoors, the actual risk of serious injury is relatively small. The majority of injuries sustained include bumps, scrapes, bruises, and the occasional broken bone. In fact the number one cause of injury, and even death, in children under the age of 5 is automobile accidents, yet almost all of the children will travel that way to get to Nature Preschool.

The risks of nature play are minor compared to so many other dangers that children routinely face, but what about the benefits? Research has found a remarkable range of positive impacts from frequent, unstructured play in rich, diverse natural settings. These benefits cover the entire realm of holistic child development: physical, social, emotional, intellectual, creative, and spiritual.

The bottom line: children need risk. It is a powerful catalyst for growth that helps them develop good judgment, persistence, courage, resiliency, and self-confidence. Remove risk from children's lives, and parts of their growth may stagnate. Kids learn their capabilities, their vulnerabilities, and their good decision-making skills through real life experiences – sometimes happy, sometimes harsh, but always instructive.

To minimize the risk of serious injury, risk assessment protocol and regular inspection routine will ensure that the level of risk presented is reasonable for the intended audience. A risk management plan will involve conducting regular safety inspections, documenting any incidents, and maintaining accurate inspection and incident records for evaluation.

Will my child learn to read?

Early literacy begins early in life with exposure to rich language experiences. In Nature Preschool this is accomplished through reading, storytelling, singing, and journaling. In addition, children are introduced to a wide and varied vocabulary as they discuss their activities, experiments, and discoveries. Games that utilize matching and phonics also help children develop the groundwork for language development.

Will my child learn math?

Math, as well as other STEM learning, happens organically in nature. As children collect leaves and stones, they are practicing shape identification, colors, sorting, and grouping. Cooking and baking teach children about measurements, including fractions and parts of a whole. In addition, hands-on activities like sand/water tables, nature blocks, and other manipulatives allow children to practicing sorting and measuring, as well as comparisons such as light vs. heavy and big vs. small.

As children explore nature, they are spontaneously engaging in STEM experimentation as well. For example, as children build a seesaw with logs, they are learning about fulcrums, levers, weights, and measures. Climbing a tree is a lesson in gravity and leverage. And an examination of spiderwebs can teach valuable lessons about geometry.

Will my child learn about respect?

Respect for self, each other, and the environment is at the heart of Nature Preschool. Teachers demonstrate respect through modeling appropriate behavior and helping children understand their choices and the implications. Children are taught to discuss their emotions and brainstorm possible solutions for conflict. Children are also taught to care for their environment through gardening and cleanup activities around Ijams Nature Center.

How is discipline handled?

The Nature Preschool at Ijams Nature Center first seeks to minimize the need for excess discipline through the establishment of comfortable routines and clear behavioral expectations. When necessary, teachers employ the principles of conscious discipline, which inspires behavior changes from within the child, rather than applied to them. Conscious discipline focuses on respect, strengthening relationships, and clear expectations. In addition to working with the children, a strong and mutually respectful relationship with parents and caregivers is paramount to maintaining a positive learning environment.