

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.

We will also rely on parents and guardians to be active partners with us in preparing their child for school. Parents will need to be sure that their child is dressed appropriately to spend extensive time outside, including rain jackets, boots, mittens, hats, and any other necessary clothing. If a child arrives at school improperly dressed, the parents will be called to bring the appropriate clothing or take their child home. It isn't fair for us to keep all the children inside because one child is not prepared for the day.

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.

Some of the ways we encourage literacy:

- We read to them
- We speak in complex language to them; they hear that words have meaning
- We sing together, which emphasizes rhyming and phonetics
- We encourage book handling and model writing
- Story dictations
- Journaling
- Cooking
- We write in front of children
- We use children's names, the most familiar word to them
- We play guessing games involving names, pieces of language and words
- Unlimited writing and reading opportunities, in context, self-motivated
- We play/use different languages in the classrooms

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.

Some of the ways we build math skills:

- Using manipulatives that showcase patterns and sizes
- Counting, within context (counting off during a hike, counting natural items)
- Using weights and measures, which emphasizes comparisons
- Sorting materials (How many leaves are green? How many of the nuts are acorns?)
- Songs with counting
- Pointing out time
- Board games

Will my child be ready for Kindergarten?

Yes! Clearly, we can't guarantee that every child will be able to write the alphabet perfectly or count from 1-100 after completing our program. All children learn and develop differently. But what we can say, with confidence, is that more and more studies are showing that children that have participated in nature preschools are as academically proficient (if not more so) than their academic preschool counterparts by the end of their Kindergarten year. In addition, children that have participated in a nature preschool almost always score higher than their traditional preschool counterparts in the areas of critical thinking and problem solving.

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.

What happens if we see a snake or spiders?

We hope they do! Opportunities to discover and learn about nature are some of the reasons a nature preschool is so exciting for children. Wildlife encounters are wonderful chances to learn how to observe insects and animals safely. Through outdoor explorations, children learn to be respectful of wildlife, but not fearful.

Why have multi-age programs?

Our children range in age from 3-5 years old. A key component of multi-age programs is children teaching children. The younger children often follow the lead of the older children, using new language, practicing new routines, and challenging themselves to try new skills. The older children are provided with the opportunity to gain leadership skills, engage in helping others, and practice explaining, teaching, and sharing.

How will you assess my child's development?

The Nature Preschool and kindergarten staff use a combination of authentic assessment and student portfolios to chart your child's progress, and assess their areas of strength and future goals. We communicate with parents on a weekly basis regarding classroom activities, and in a more structured way at scheduled parent teacher conferences. At the end of the year conference, you will receive a written narrative from your child's teachers and a work portfolio from your child that document your child's growth and development throughout the year.

Where will my child be during the day?

Everywhere! Ijams Nature Center has over 300 acres of forests, meadows, wetlands, and streams—countless opportunities to learn and explore. We believe that attending Nature Preschool is like having a field trip every day! Children will be active participants in selecting which outdoor classroom we will use that day, and how we will explore it. By making students part of the process, we encourage cooperation and problem solving through group discussions.

Ijams Nature Center has over 5 decades of experience taking children into nature! Opening up the world of exploration for participants is part of the magic we strive for every day. This vast amount of experience has also allowed us to develop careful operational strategies and safety protocols that help us provide safe and fun adventures for each child. Although we haven't had a Nature Preschool before, we have been offering summer camps and preschool programs since the 1960s!