



darien  
nature  
center

# PARENT HANDBOOK

## 2025-2026



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# WELCOME

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Dear Parents,

Welcome to the Darien Nature Center! We are excited that your child is joining us to explore the wonders of nature. We appreciate the time you will spend familiarizing yourself with our policies and procedures, and encourage you to reach out with any questions. Your involvement is crucial to us, and we are committed to maintaining open communication with you throughout your child's time with us.

One of our goals is to help our students develop a sense of comfort and confidence when out in nature. We achieve this by spending most of our time outdoors, discovering our surroundings in a stress-free way. We foster curiosity, support risk-taking, and follow our students' lead. At the Darien Nature Center, we provide children with the time, space, and careful guidance to develop a lifelong passion for learning about and exploring the natural world.

Sincerely,



**Ursula Lewis**

Preschool Director



**Angela Whitford**

Executive Director

## ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

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Angela Whitford, Executive Director

Ursula Lewis, Preschool Director

Molly Robertson, Program Director

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## PARENT LIAISONS

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# MISSION

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We inspire passion and respect for the natural world through nature education, hands-on experiences with nature, and environmental action and stewardship.

# VISION

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The Darien Nature Center envisions a community that is deeply connected to nature and inspired to take action to preserve and protect it.

# VALUES

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## *We Value Nature*

We appreciate nature's beauty and complexity, and we foster strong and lasting connections to nature.

## *We Value Nature Education*

We are committed to experiential nature education that is accurate, empowering, and confidence-building.

## *We Value Integrity and Authenticity*

We are a trusted source of information for our community. We treat all living things with respect.

## *We Value Excellence and Quality*

in all that we do.

## *We Value Collaboration*

Working with other public and private organizations expands our reach into the community and provides us with valuable perspectives.

## *We Value Our Leadership*

as stewards of the environment and sustainable practices.



# 2025-26 ACADEMIC CALENDAR

August 25-27	<b>Chipmunks Vacation Camp</b>
September 1	CLOSED – Labor Day
September 4	<b>Preschool Parent Orientation</b>
September 8	<b>First Day of Fall Drop-Off Preschool</b>
September 22	<b>First Day of Fall Caregiver &amp; Child Preschool and After-School Classes</b>
September 23	CLOSED – Rosh Hashanah
October 2	CLOSED - Yom Kippur
October 13	OPEN – Columbus Day
November 4	CLOSED – Election Day
November 12	CLOSED – Professional Development Day (No regular programs)
November 26-28	CLOSED – Thanksgiving
December 12	<b>Last day of ALL Preschool and After-School Classes</b>
December 15-18	<b>Snowbirds Vacation Camp</b>
Dec. 19 - Jan. 5	CLOSED – Holiday Break (open to visitors on select days - TBD)
January 5	<b>First Day of Winter/Spring Drop-Off Preschool</b>
January 12	<b>First Day of Winter Caregiver &amp; Child Preschool and After-School Classes</b>
January 19	CLOSED – Martin Luther King Jr. Day
February 16	CLOSED – President's Day
February 17-20	<i>Groundhogs Vacation Camp (No regular programs)</i>
March 12	CLOSED – Professional Development Day ( <i>No regular programs</i> )
March 20	<b>Last Day of Winter After-School Classes</b>
March 23	<b>First Day of Spring After-School Classes</b>
April 3	CLOSED – Good Friday
April 13	CLOSED – Holiday Break (open to visitors on select days - TBD)
April 14-17	<i>Cricket's Vacation Camp (No regular programs)</i>
May 25	CLOSED – Memorial Day
June 5	<b>Last Day of Drop-Off Preschool</b>
June 12	<b>Last Day of Caregiver &amp; Child Preschool and After-School Classes</b>

# PLAYGROUND

We are pleased to introduce Playground, our new preschool management software. This platform will serve as a central hub for communication, required forms, and important updates. By consolidating these functions, Playground provides families with a more efficient and reliable way to stay informed and engaged in their child's school experience.

<b>Billing</b>	Use this section to view and edit payment information, view your account balance, and make payments. If you are registered in multiple days, you can also use this section to see your specific registered classes.
<b>Guardians</b>	Use this section to manage all guardians for your child. You can add, edit, or delete guardians at any time within the app.  When adding guardians, please make sure to select the correct 'role' for each guardian. Roles determine a guardian's access within the app.
<b>Paperwork</b>	Use this section to upload, view, and fill out required medical forms.
<b>Calendar</b>	Use this section to see your child's schedule and other important dates, including school closure dates.
<b>Switch Accounts</b>	If you have multiple Playground accounts at other schools, use this section to switch between your accounts.
<b>Settings</b>	Use this section to manage your account settings.
<b>Support</b>	Use this section to contact the Playground support team. The support team is there to help with any technical issues within the app.  Please direct questions about registration, billing, and paperwork to the Darien Nature Center administration team.
<b>Help Center</b>	Use this section to access the Playground help center and learn all things Playground.



# ARRIVAL AND DISMISSAL

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Our drop-off programs start at 9:15 am and 9:45 am. Your punctuality is not just a matter of timing, but also crucial to ensuring a smooth start for your child and their classmates. Your role in this is vital, and we appreciate your understanding.

Once you arrive, please park in the Nature Center parking lot. No more than 5 minutes before the beginning of class, escort your child down the ramp to the back of the building to their outdoor classroom. Please do not leave your car idling while dropping off your child.

At the start of class, your child's teachers will greet you at the entrance to the outdoor classroom. They will ask about the general wellness of your child before signing them in. Please be mindful to exit the parking lot quickly to make room for the next family.

Pick-up happens from the outdoor classroom. The teacher will sign out the children and dismiss them to their waiting parent/caregiver. Please wait for your child's teacher to dismiss your child to you. We will only release children to their parents or those adults authorized by parents in the Playground app. When someone other than the parent will pick up for the first time, please have them bring a photo ID. If there is a change to your daily pickup, please email authorization to: [information@dariennaturecenter.org](mailto:information@dariennaturecenter.org).

**Authorized Pick-up:** To ensure a smooth sign-out of your child, please log in to your Playground app and add any caregivers or family members who may pick up your child throughout the year. You can update your authorized pick-ups in the Guardian section of the Playground app.

**Late Policy:** We understand that occasionally a caregiver may be delayed picking up a child due to traffic or personal reasons. However, repetitive lateness will result in a financial penalty. Children remaining on the premises 15 minutes past the end of class will be brought to the Director's office to wait for a pick-up. A staff member will call your emergency contacts if a parent or caregiver has not arrived or called within 15 minutes. If an hour has elapsed with no pickup or communication, we will notify the local police department. We want to ensure the safety and well-being of all children in our care, and your cooperation in this matter is greatly appreciated.

If you anticipate a late pick-up, please inform the Nature Center as early as possible by email at [information@dariennaturecenter.org](mailto:information@dariennaturecenter.org) or by phone at 203-655-7459. We are here to support your child, and your proactive communication is welcome.



# COMMUNICATION

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All communication between parents and staff should go through the office. To contact the school or a specific teacher, please email our Preschool Director at [ursula@dariennaturecenter.org](mailto:ursula@dariennaturecenter.org). Please feel free to contact our Preschool Director or Executive Director about any concerns, big or small. While you may reach out to the director at any time, it is best to arrange to speak with your child's teacher after pick-up. Drop-off is only for conveying information pertinent to that day (difficult night's sleep, change in pick-up, medication given, etc.) Open and comfortable communication between home and school is essential for good childcare. Please refrain from discussing concerns in front of your child.



# CURRICULUM

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Our curriculum is developed collaboratively by all teachers under the leadership of the Preschool Director. Children will spend the majority of their day immersed in nature. Through exploring the woods, pond, streams, and fields of Cherry Lawn Park, they will use all their senses to observe and explore the many changes that occur due to weather seasons, and the passage of time. These experiences deepen their understanding, spark joy, and nurture a lasting love for the environment.

At the DNC, we believe that every child is an active and capable learner. Each child learns in their own way and at their own pace, guided by curiosity and exploration. Our nature educators' role is to create a supportive environment where children feel safe to take risks, solve problems, and make discoveries. We respect their ideas, honor their questions, and celebrate the unique paths they take in building understanding.



## CURRICULUM CONTINUED

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Children will engage in many sensory-rich, hands-on activities. They are allowed to explore and experiment with materials without the pressure of creating something perfect or specific. Our open-ended activities allow children to make their own choices. This encourages self-expression, personal creativity, imagination, problem-solving, and individuality.

Because our curriculum is student-led, we constantly adjust our lessons and activities to better suit the interests, abilities, and needs of the children in any given class.

The teacher's role is to guide the child on their journey to awareness and understanding of the natural world. Teachers are constantly observing and engaged in play-based learning with their students. They gently encourage participation, model expected behaviors, and *share their curiosity, excitement, and sense of wonder on a daily basis.*



## SAMPLE DAILY SCHEDULE

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9:15 AM - 10:00 AM	Outdoor Classroom Activities
10:00 AM - 10:20 AM	Handwashing/Bathroom and Snack
10:20 AM - 10:40 AM	Circle time or Story time
10:40 AM - 11:00 AM	Animal Encounter
11:00 AM - 11:30 AM	Hike in the park

# CLOTHING

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*Outdoor discovery requires freedom of movement in non-restrictive clothing.*

Tight clothing, fancy dresses, and costumes can get in the way during active play. For independence in toileting, children need clothing that is easy to take on and off.

Please dress your child in clothing that is ok to get dirty so they will feel free to participate fully in messy projects and outdoor exploration.

*You should expect your child's clothing  
(and your child) to get dirty.*

Children need comfortable, protective shoes with gripping soles for running, jumping, and climbing. Sneakers or well-fitting hiking boots are best. Rain boots are encouraged every day for puddle jumping opportunities. No open-toe shoes or "dress up" footwear allowed.



Please provide an extra set of labeled clothing in your child's bag each day, including a shirt, pants, underwear, and socks.

*We are outdoors every day!*

*It is important that your child wears weather-appropriate clothing.*

All students need rain gear (a one-piece rain suit or separate jacket and pants) and rain boots. Please provide mittens, hats, snowsuits/pants, and snow boots during the winter months.



# PACKING LIST

Each day, your child needs the following items, **LABELED** with their name:

- Diapers and wipes, if needed
- Change of clothes, full set including underwear and socks
- Reusable water bottle
- Clothes appropriate for movement and messy play - we will get dirty!
- Closed-toe shoes and rain boots/snow boots
- Outerwear appropriate for the day's weather
- Nut-free snack
- Nut-free lunch, if enrolled in extended-day Nature's Playroom or Lunch Bunch



# SNACK AND LUNCH POLICY

All students should come with a reusable, labeled water bottle EVERY DAY

This year, we are asking students to bring in their own snack. Here are the guidelines for making this a safe and healthy experience for all:

- Please send snacks in labeled reusable containers when possible.
- Provide small, ready-to-eat portions.
- We are a **nut-free environment (no peanuts, tree nuts, or nut butters)** - please check ingredient labels carefully.
- We encourage a low/zero-waste approach to food. We encourage you to pack food in reusable or recyclable containers
- Composting is available in our classroom.

**Some healthy choices include:** fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain crackers, bread or tortillas, cheese, yogurt, hummus, boiled eggs, and sunflower seed butter.

**Foods to avoid:** highly processed treats, foods with high sugar or salt content, and foods that are choking hazards, such as whole grapes and popcorn

**For those bringing lunch:**

- Please follow the above snack guidelines
- Pack lunch in reusable containers that your child can open independently
- Include utensils if needed
- Ice packs are recommended for perishable foods as refrigeration is not available



# SCHOOL CANCELLATIONS, EARLY DISMISSAL, AND DELAY NOTIFICATIONS

In the event of a school closing or delay, we will email all parents of that day's classes, post a notice on our website home page, and share the information via social media (Instagram and Facebook). If the Darien Public Schools are closed, have a delayed start, or an early dismissal due to inclement weather, please use the following schedule for Darien Nature Center classes:

- If Darien Public Schools are closed, the Darien Nature Center is closed.
- If Darien Public Schools have a delayed opening, the Darien Nature Center's 9:15 am classes will begin at 10:15 am, and 9:45 am classes will begin at 10:45 am. (We will cancel the 9:30 am Babes in the Woods programs.) Dismissal times remain the same.
- If Darien Public Schools have an early dismissal due to inclement weather, morning classes follow their regular dismissal time, and we will cancel Lunch Bunch. All Nature's Playroom classes will end at 11:45 AM. There will be no afternoon classes.
- There are no make-up classes or refunds for any delay or cancellation.

## SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

All staff members are certified in First Aid and CPR. In the case of an accident or event that requires medical attention, we will do one of the following:

- Contact parents/guardians and emergency contacts. We will request that they collect the child immediately and seek medical attention.
- If immediate help is deemed necessary, we will call 911, and a staff member will accompany the child to the emergency room.

When outside, all teachers carry walkie-talkies and personal cell phones. If an emergency develops, teachers will use these to contact the office or emergency services immediately.

On extreme weather days, very hot or cold, we will take the necessary precautions to ensure everyone's safety.

**COLD:** If the temperature is below freezing, we monitor children for signs of discomfort and move them inside when needed. If the temperature (real or feels like) is below 10 degrees, we do not stay outside for longer than 10/15 minutes.

**WIND:** On days in which the sustained wind is 20 mph or above, and/or there are wind gusts above 30 mph, classes will start inside. We will stay out of the woods.

**RAIN:** We try to start outside using tents or structures. If there is a downpour and/or high winds, classes will start inside.

**AIR QUALITY:** If the air quality index is between 101-150, we will shorten outside time. If it is higher than 151, all activities will move indoors.

# DISCIPLINE POLICY

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Discipline is not about punishment or control. Discipline is about guiding and teaching children, helping them to make wise decisions about their behavior, and gradually allowing them to accept responsibility for their choices and actions. Our goal is to help each child feel encouraged.

We are a child-centered environment, and this commitment is at the core of our values. We will establish clear classroom rules with the children at the beginning of the school year. Our teachers strive to anticipate and prevent inappropriate behavior. For our 2-year-olds, distraction and redirection are effective methods to help them maintain control. When working with older students, our teachers emphasize understanding the 'why' behind behaviors, fostering empathy and patience. When we know the motivation behind a behavior, we can help the child develop the skills needed to replace it with more appropriate behavior. The goal of behavior management is always to teach, never punish. Praising appropriate behavior helps to reinforce positive actions.

Removing a child from a situation may be necessary if they exhibit unacceptable behavior and do not respond to the teacher. This action allows the child time to calm down and discuss their feelings. In cases of persistent behavioral problems, we will initiate a conference with the parents to address the issue collaboratively. This conference will involve a discussion about the child's behavior, potential triggers, and strategies that can be implemented both at home and at school.

It is important to note that we do not condone the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline for children. It is not only against the law but also results in a staff member's immediate dismissal.





# CODE OF CONDUCT

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At the Darien Nature Center, we aim to foster healthy, positive relationships between adults and children and respect every child's unique qualities, abilities, and potential. However, we appreciate children's vulnerability and dependence on adults. Therefore, we have developed a Code of Conduct for all adults who visit or work at our Nature Center, including parents, teachers, caregivers, volunteers, and visitors. We ask that all adults at our facility act as role models for the children who visit or attend our programs.

## The Darien Nature Center Code of Conduct:

- Treat others with respect regardless of race, creed, disability, or sexual orientation.
- Demonstrate courtesy even when others do not.
- Value diversity and inclusiveness.
- Respect the animals and their enclosures with gentle voices and walking feet, and only interact with the animals under staff supervision.
- Respect nature by following the Leave No Trace principle.
- No Idling: Idling wastes 3 billion gallons of gas and adds 30 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually.
- Supervise children at all times.
- Refrain from corporal punishment.
- Respectfully enter the parking lot at a maximum speed of 5 mph.
- Never use inappropriate language toward students, staff, or visitors.
- Discuss sensitive issues out of children's earshot.
- Do not allow children to engage in unsafe behavior while in your care.

We hope all adults at our facility use this Code of Conduct to guide their actions and decisions and ensure we treat each other respectfully, reasonably, and honestly. This Code extends the Darien Nature Center's values and provides clear examples of how we can live those values every day.





# HEALTH POLICIES

The Darien Nature Center takes precautions to prevent the spread of illness by maintaining a clean environment, providing substitutes for staff, and setting clear limits on the health of children in attendance. Frequent hand washing is also an important habit that helps prevent the spread of illness.

To keep all children and staff healthy, we need your cooperation! Your active participation is appreciated and integral to the success of our childcare program. Please give us a courtesy call at 203-655-7459 if your child is out sick. Children recovering from an illness are more likely to contract a new one. Keep in mind that we spend our days outdoors engaged in active play. If your child is not well enough to go outside, please keep them at home. If students have been exposed to a contagious illness such as chickenpox or strep, notices will be posted throughout the Nature Center and sent home within 24 hours of our notification.

## **Drop-Off Preschool Required forms include:**

1. **Child Enrollment and Emergency Contact Form**
2. **Health Assessment Record** – completed and signed by both a parent or guardian and your pediatrician

If your child has allergies that require medication or special health considerations:

1. **Authorization for the Administration of Medicine**
2. **Emergency Action Plan**

**We must receive all required forms before your child's program starts.**

**Your child will be permitted to attend once our registered nurse had processed all forms.**

Please log in to the Playground app and navigate to Paperwork to see the required forms for your child's program, upload new forms, and manage previously uploaded or expired forms. Please note: the Playground app requires a single-file upload.

If you are having issues uploading your forms, please email them to [registration@dariennaturecenter.org](mailto:registration@dariennaturecenter.org).



# HEALTH POLICIES CONTINUED

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## ILLNESS:

Please keep your child home if they have/are:

1. Overtired
2. Unable to participate in usual daily activities
3. Nasal discharge (yellow or green)
4. An elevated temperature (100 +) within 24 hours of school
5. An infectious disease
6. A rash that may be infectious
7. Infectious conjunctivitis
8. Head lice, including nits
9. A sore throat
10. Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
11. Recently received stitches, staples, or broken bones

## RETURN DATES:

Your child may return to school when

1. Fever is absent for 24 hours (without medication)
2. Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea is absent for 24 hours
3. 24 hours have passed after the start of treatment for strep or conjunctivitis
4. The stage of contagion for the infectious disease has passed
5. The child, under the doctor's care, has received permission to return (including in the case of stitches, staples, or a broken bone)
6. The child feels well enough to participate in activities

## WHEN A CHILD BECOMES ILL AT SCHOOL:

1. We will notify the parent (or an alternate person specified by the parent) by phone to pick up the child.
2. The sick child is cared for in a dedicated sick room, thus protecting healthy children.

## ALLERGIES:

Darien Nature Center is a NUT AND PEANUT-FREE SCHOOL. We do not allow ANY nuts, peanuts, peanut butter, or projects/food containing nuts/nut oil in the school or playground. We strictly enforce this policy. (Some of our animal food and birdseed may contain nut products and are kept separate from students with allergies.)

## MEDICATION:

Teachers must be informed if your child has received any medications before class (e.g., inhaler, Benadryl, stool softener).

## DAILY TICK CHECKS:

Whether your child has been to a class at the Darien Nature Center or is just playing in your backyard, we recommend that you check your child daily for ticks.

## SPECIAL OCCASIONS

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Holidays are an exciting time for everyone. In our programming, we downplay the commercial aspects of holidays and focus on seasonal elements instead, providing a well-rounded and enriching educational experience for your children.

Due to our restrictive snack policy, we do not celebrate birthdays with sugary treats. If you want to acknowledge your child's birthday in the classroom, we suggest you bring their favorite fruit to share.

We also have a festive birthday crown that a child can wear to celebrate this special occasion.



## TOILET TRAINING

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Every child's toilet training process is different. We work with families to help children become independent in the bathroom. Learning the vocabulary you use, your child's routine and habits, and any incentives you give are essential to us.

During the transition to underwear, children must wear pull-ups at the Nature Center. Open communication and frequent check-ins with the teachers are strongly encouraged.

Children must be in diapers, pull-ups, or underwear at all times. Going "commando" is not permitted.

## CLASS COMPOSITION AND DESCRIPTION

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We place all children in classes based on age. For requests to change a child's class assignment, please contact the office. Student to teacher ratio is 9 to 2 for the three-through five-year-olds and 6 to 2 for the two-year-olds. We want to assure you that no child will ever be left unattended, reinforcing our commitment to child safety.



# CHILD ABUSE

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As childcare providers, the law requires us to report any suspicion that a child is being abused, neglected, or at risk.

Mandated reporters must report orally to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) or a law enforcement agency within 12 hours of suspecting that a child has been abused or neglected. Within 48 hours of making the report, the mandated reporter must submit a written report (DCF – 136) to DCF.

Staff are not only obligated to report, but they are also protected by law. The CT General Statutes, Section 17a-101e, ensures that no staff member will face discrimination or retaliation for reporting suspected abuse or neglect. All phone calls to DCF shall be documented and kept on file at the Center. A copy of all statements from staff and the DCF-136 shall also be kept on file.

All staff are trained at orientation before the start of the school year on the role of a mandated reporter and the steps to take if abuse or neglect is suspected. For any new staff joining us during the school year, it is mandatory that they are trained in these procedures before starting in the classroom.

To report a suspected case of abuse or neglect:

- call the Department of Children and Families (open 24 hours a day) at 1-800-842-2288.
- call the Department of Public Health at:
  - 1-800-282-6063
  - 1-800-439-0437 or
  - 1-860-509-8045

The Darien Nature Center supports zero tolerance for abuse and neglect and will implement immediate action should there be an allegation that a staff member abused or neglected a child. The administration will protect the child, including immediate notification of a parent or guardian, once there is an allegation of abuse or neglect of a child in our program. We will immediately remove from their position any staff member accused of abuse or neglect until DCF completes its investigation. Based on whether the allegations were substantiated, the employee would either be dismissed from their position or allowed to return to work.



## LICENSING

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The Darien Nature Center is fully licensed by the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) ([www.ctoec.org](http://www.ctoec.org)).

## REFUNDS

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**2025-2026 Preschool Refund Policy:** If you choose to withdraw your child for any reason, the Darien Nature Center must be notified of a cancellation by July 24, 2025, to receive a 50% refund. If and when your child's space can be filled, then an additional 25% of the program fee will be refunded. There are no refunds for withdrawals made after July 24, 2025. The Darien Nature Center does not offer credits for program withdrawals.