



darien
nature
center

PARENT HANDBOOK

2026-2027



120 Brookside Road, Darien, CT 06820

Phone: 203-655-7459

Fax: 203-655-3185

www.dariennaturecenter.org

Instagram: @dariennaturecenter

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WELCOME

Dear Families,

Welcome to the Darien Nature Center Preschool! We are so happy to have you join our community of young explorers. Each day, children discover, play, and learn in the natural world. From splashing in puddles, investigating animal tracks in the snow, and sharing stories under the trees, children find wonder in every season and develop a deep connection to 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.

Thank you for sharing your child's early learning journey with us. We look forward to a wonderful year ahead!

Sincerely,



Ursula Lewis
Preschool Director



Angela Whitford
Executive Director

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Angela Whitford, Executive Director
Ursula Lewis, Preschool Director
Molly Robertson, Program Director
Lindsey DeVito, Off-Site Program Coordinator
Hannah Brady, Database and Office Manager
EJ Yu, Finance Manager
Victoria Heyne, Grounds Manager
Catherine Bailey, Communications Manager

angela@dariennaturecenter.org
ursula@dariennaturecenter.org
molly@dariennaturecenter.org
lindsey@dariennaturecenter.org
hannah@dariennaturecenter.org
finance@dariennaturecenter.org
victoria@dariennaturecenter.org
catherine@dariennaturecenter.org

PARENT LIAISONS

Brittany Baclawski
Blake Riley

brittanybaclawski@gmail.com
blake.e.orban@gmail.com

OUR PHILOSOPHY

We believe children learn best through hands-on exploration and discovery in a safe, supportive environment. Our unique, nature-based educational approach encourages children to observe, question, and discover, while building confidence, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning.

Every day, our students spend meaningful time outdoors, exploring trails, caring for animals and noticing seasonal changes. These experiences not only foster a sense of wonder but also instill a deep respect for all living things, and support physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth.

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. We respect their ideas, honor their questions, and celebrate the unique paths they take in building understanding.

By combining play, experiential learning, and intentional teaching in nature, we create an environment where children feel safe, capable, and deeply connected to nature and the community.

BENEFITS OF NATURE EDUCATION

Mental Well-being: Spending time in nature is associated with reduced stress, anxiety, and depression. It increases exposure to fresh air and vitamin D, providing a healthy break from screens.

Physical Health: Outdoor play boosts movement and coordination.

Enhanced Academic Learning: Supports experiential learning in science, math, literacy, and the creative arts, by making educational experiences more relevant and impactful.

Social and Emotional Skills: Activities in natural settings often require teamwork and collaboration.

Environmental Awareness: Instills a sense of responsibility and stewardship towards the environment.

OUR PRESCHOOL

At our school, children learn and grow in a variety of inviting spaces that nurture curiosity and connection.

- We're fortunate that our school is in Cherry Lawn Park, a beautiful natural space owned by the town of Darien. When exploring the park's pond, forest, garden, and fields, we observe a variety of wildlife, including a diverse range of trees and plants, insects, and seasonal changes, creating a rich experience for our students. The children have many questions about what they see, and our teachers are always ready to guide them towards answers.
- Our classes involve a variety of activities including science experiments, games, artifacts, and art projects using natural materials. Children can freely choose which activities they would like to try or select free play, as each classroom is equipped with Tuff Trays, mud kitchens, and sandboxes, encouraging cooperative and imaginative play.
- All of our classes have their own outdoor classroom, which offers room to run, dig, climb, build, and discover the wonders of nature first-hand.
- Our indoor classrooms offer a warm and welcoming space for learning and play, providing a safe haven when inclement weather makes outdoor learning and exploration challenging.
- Unique to our preschool are our fascinating and friendly animal ambassadors. Most children feel a natural connection to animals; therefore, we incorporate them in all we do. Learning what makes each animal unique and understanding their role in nature promotes empathy and care for all living things.





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2026-27 ACADEMIC CALENDAR

August 25-27	Chipmunks Vacation Camp
September 4	Preschool Parent Orientation
September 7	CLOSED – Labor Day
September 8	First Day of Fall Drop-Off Preschool
September 22	First Day of Fall Caregiver & Child and After-School Classes
September 21	CLOSED - Yom Kippur
October 12	OPEN – Columbus Day
October 15	CLOSED – Professional Development Day (No regular programs)
November 4	CLOSED – Election Day
November 25-27	CLOSED – Thanksgiving
December 12	Last day of ALL Preschool and After-School Classes
December 15-18	Snowbirds Vacation Camp
Dec. 24 - Jan. 1	CLOSED – Holiday Break (open to visitors on select days - TBD)
January 5	First Day of ALL Preschool and After-School Classes
January 18	CLOSED – Martin Luther King Jr. Day
February 15	CLOSED – President's Day
February 17-20	Groundhogs Vacation Camp (<i>No regular programs</i>)
March 10	CLOSED – Professional Development Day (<i>No regular programs</i>)
March 20	Last Day of Winter After-School Classes
March 23	First Day of Spring After-School Classes
March 26	CLOSED – Good Friday
April 13	CLOSED – Holiday Break (No regular programs)
April 12-16	Crickets Vacation Camp (<i>No regular programs</i>)
May 31	CLOSED – Memorial Day
June 4	Last Day of ALL Preschool and After-School Classes

SAMPLE DAILY SCHEDULE

9:15-9:45- Activities in the outdoor classroom

9:45-10:00- Bathroom, wash hands, snack

10:00-10:15- Circle time-discussion, song, story or experiment

10:15-10:30- Animal encounter

10:30-11:45- Nature walk

STUDENT-TEACHER RATIO

Nature Time for Twos – 2 teachers per class, 6 or 7 students in a class

Nature's Playroom (3-5 yo) – 2 teachers per class, 9 students in a class

SAFETY

We are unwavering in our commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of every child in our care, providing parents with peace of mind and confidence in our school.

- We maintain low class sizes, so every child receives personal attention and care.
- Our teachers are trained to handle any emergency and all are certified in CPR and First Aid.
- Our teachers carry a backpack at all times with first aid essentials and a walkie-talkie for immediate communication with the office from anywhere in the park.
- We conduct regular safety drills to ensure staff know exactly what to do in any situation.
- We employ electronic attendance, so we know exactly which children are in our care at any moment and students are only released to authorized individuals.

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.

COMMUNICATION

We believe that strong partnerships between home and school create the best experiences for children. Our school uses the Playground app to share updates, photos and important announcements. Each classroom posts regular updates highlighting what the children have been exploring and learning. In addition the director sends biweekly newsletters to keep families informed.

We also value in person communication. Parent chats are available to discuss your child's growth and experiences. Families are invited to join us for seasonal hikes and community gatherings, which are wonderful opportunities to connect with teachers, other families and our outdoor environment.

All communication between parents and staff should go through the office. To contact the school or a specific teacher, please email our Preschool Director 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.

SCHOOL CANCELLATION, EARLY DISMISSAL AND AND WEATHER DELAYS

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.

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.

Billing	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.
Guardians	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.
Paperwork	Use this section to upload, view, and fill out required medical forms.
Calendar	Use this section to see your child's schedule and other important dates, including school closure dates.
Switch Accounts	If you have multiple Playground accounts at other schools, use this section to switch between your accounts.
Settings	Use this section to manage your account settings.
Support	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.
Help Center	Use this section to access the Playground help center and learn all things Playground.

CURRICULUM

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.

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.*



ARRIVAL AND DISMISSAL

Our drop-off programs start at 9:15 am and 9:30 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.

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. Per OEC regulations, at least one other guardian than the parent(s) and their contact information must be on file for your child's participation.

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 or by phone at 203-655-7459. We are here to support your child, and your proactive communication is welcome.

CLOTHING

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





EXTREME WEATHER POLICY

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

The Darien Nature Center recognizes that discipline is not about punishment or control. It is a process of guiding and teaching children to make thoughtful decisions about their behavior and gradually accept responsibility for their actions. The goal of discipline is to encourage self-control, promote positive social behavior, and foster mutual respect within the classroom.

Staff use developmentally appropriate conflict resolution methods such as positive guidance, modeling, redirection, and clear, consistent limits. When conflicts arise among children or between a child and a teacher, staff employ positive guidance and encourage a “talking out” process to acknowledge feelings, promote problem-solving, and support constructive solutions.

Staff model and reinforce positive behavior through encouragement, recognition, and peer support. Redirection may be used when a child displays aggressive, disruptive, or destructive behavior. They may be asked to make an activity choice in another area. In cases of ongoing behavioral concerns, a parent conference will be requested to ensure consistent support between home and school.

All disciplinary actions are supervised by staff at all times. Abusive, neglectful, physical, humiliating, or frightening treatment of children is strictly prohibited. Corporal punishment of any kind, including spanking, slapping, pinching, shaking, or striking, is unlawful and will result in the immediate dismissal of the staff member involved. Physical restraint will be used only when necessary to protect the safety or health of the child or others.



CODE OF CONDUCT

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 CO₂ 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.



HEALTH POLICIES CONTINUED

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

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

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.



CHILD ABUSE

The DNC has a legal responsibility to prevent child and abuse and neglect of children enrolled in our facility. We are mandated by law to report any suspicion that a child is being abused, neglected or at risk.

Child Abuse is defined as: A child who has had

- Non-accidental physical injuries inflicted upon him
- Injuries which are at variance with the history given of them
- Is in a condition, which is the result of maltreatment, such as, but not limited to, malnutrition, sexual exploitation, and deprivation of necessities, emotional maltreatment or cruel punishment.

Child neglect is defined as: A child who has been:

- Abandoned
- Denied proper care and attention physically, educationally, emotionally or morally
- Allowed to live under circumstances, conditions or associations injurious to his wellbeing (CT statutes 46b-120)

Mandated reporters must report orally to The Department of Children and Families 1-800-842-2288 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 protected by law from discrimination or retaliation for reporting suspected abuse or neglect (CT General Statutes, Section 17a-101e).

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.

The management of this program supports a 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. Any staff member accused of abuse or neglect may be immediately removed from his or her position until DCF's investigation is completed. Based on whether the allegations were substantiated or not, the employee would either be dismissed from his/her position or allowed to return to work.

Staff Training: Staff will be required to attend bi-annual staff meetings, held in September and February, focusing on the steps for reporting suspected abuse and neglect and the role of a mandated reporter. All new staff will be trained in these procedures prior to their start in the classroom.

When an accusation of abuse or neglect by a staff member is made, the Director will immediately inform the parents or guardians that a report has been made to DCF. Health care officials may need to talk to a child's parents to access the cause of the child's injuries and offer support and guidance

LICENSING

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

REFUNDS

2026-2027 Preschool Refund Policy: If you choose to withdraw your child for any reason, the Darien Nature Center must be notified of a cancellation by **Friday, July 24, 2026**, to receive a **50% partial refund**. There are **no refunds for withdrawals made after Friday, Jul 24, 2026**.