



Saplings

2023-2024 Family Handbook

Fernbrook Farms Environmental Education Center Mission and Purpose

The Environmental Education Center is a non-profit 501-c-3 organization with a mission to provide hands-on educational experiences for all young people by exploring the complex interconnectedness of our natural world. Our purpose is to educate children about food, agriculture, and the environment. We believe people should make meaningful connections with our natural world in order to become responsible stewards of local and global sustainability.

Saplings Philosophy

The Saplings program at Fernbrook Farms is a play-based nature program for young learners aged 3-5. The Saplings program is designed to provide the roots for lifelong connection with nature and love of learning. Students spend much of their days outdoors, immersed in Fernbrook's many diverse ecosystems. The program operates 5 days a week and has half-day and full-day options.

Learning at Saplings is child-led, nature-inspired, and focused on fun. Students are encouraged to follow their natural curiosities, to explore and experiment, to wonder and discover. Saplings teachers guide students in their nature investigations, deepen their learning with hands-on activities, and join them in open-ended nature play. Students are encouraged to try new things, suggest new ideas, and challenge themselves.



Contact Information

Fernbrook Farms Environmental Education Center

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2023-2024 Saplings Calendar

- September 5: First day of Saplings
- October 9: Closed, staff in-service day
- November 22 – 24: Thanksgiving break
- December 22: Half day (12:30 dismissal), last day of first semester
- December 25 – January 1: Closed for winter break
- January 2: First day of second semester
- January 15: Closed, MLK Day
- February 16: Closed, staff in-service day
- February 19: Closed, President's Day
- May 27: Closed, Memorial Day
- June 7: End-of-Year Family Party
- June 12: Last day of second semester



The Rhythm of Our Day

At Saplings, the day's events follow a consistent order without adhering to strict timetables. This provides students with the predictable routine they need to thrive, while also accommodating the flexibility that child-led education requires. The times noted below are meant as general guide.

8:00 – 9:00:	Before care**
8:30 – 9:00:	Drop-off window
9:00 – 10:00:	Mixed-age free play, typically in our “Saplings Spot” outdoor classroom and play area
10:00 – 10:45:	Circle time and snack
10:45 – 12:00:	Morning adventure: Our adventures at Saplings are typically either a child-driven visit to one of Fernbrook’s forests, fields, or wetlands or a project-based activity inspired by nature
12:00 – 12:30:	Lunch
12:30:	Pick-up for half-day students
12:30 – 2:00:	Quiet time: This is a chance for students to nap or relax independently as they re-energize their minds and bodies
2:00 – 3:30:	Snack and second adventure
3:30 – 3:45:	Pick-up window for full-day students
3:45 – 5:00:	After care**

** Before and after care is available upon request for an additional hourly fee.
Contact the Saplings Director if interested.

Drop-off Procedure

Drop-off time for Saplings students is between 8:30 and 9:00am. Before care beginning at 8:00am can be added for an additional fee and must be scheduled ahead of time.

Enter the farm at the farm's main entrance located at the intersection of Route 545 and White Pine Road. This entrance has a set of **red brick pillars** at the end of the driveway with a hanging white and green "Fernbrook Farms" sign. Once on the farm, follow the driveway all the way past the farm shop parking lot on the right. When you come to a split where you can turn left towards the Willow Parking or continue straight towards the barn, continue STRAIGHT to the pick up/drop off area behind the barn.

The Saplings "homebase" consists of their cubby area inside the main barn and an outdoor playspace on the side of the barn. At drop-off, a teacher will meet you outside in the parking lot and you and your child can continue inside to their cubby to drop their things off and pack their Fernbrook-issued adventure pack for the day. After dropping off their belongings we ask that parents please **bring their child to use the bathroom and wash their hands before they join the group in the outdoor playspace.** This will especially help children in the beginning of the school year get comfortable with using a new bathroom and will allow staff to fully focus on the students in the outdoor play space.

****Please always make sure you sign your child in and out with a teacher****

Pick-up Procedure

Pick-up also occurs at our outdoor classroom space next to the barn. When you help your child retrieve their things from their cubby, please be sure to check inside their adventure pack for belongings and empty any food from their cubby.

Morning-only pick-up time is 12:30pm.

Full-day students have a pick-up window between 3:30 – 3:45pm.

Please communicate any changes in your child's schedule (early/late drop-off or pick-up) with a staff member ahead of time. Oftentimes we are out on the farm on our adventures and we need to account for walking time to have your child ready for an early departure or to have a teacher meet you for a late drop-off.

After care can be added on at an hourly rate with a pick-up time as late as 5:00pm. **All students still in our care at 4:00pm will transition to aftercare for an additional fee. Please contact us to schedule extended care ahead of time so that we can plan staffing accordingly.**

Required Gear



The Saplings Gear Guide document provides a comprehensive list of the items your child will need to keep them safe and comfortable all year long. While this list may seem extensive, Saplings students engage in outdoor play in all seasons and all weather conditions. It is important to be prepared with the proper gear to stay warm, dry, and comfortable. Please review the Saplings Gear Guide to ensure your child is fully prepared for their adventures. If you have any questions or are concerned about your ability to provide these items for your child, please don't hesitate to reach out to the Saplings or Education Center Director for support.

In addition to the clothes they are wearing, every Saplings student should have at least one (two for full-day students) full change of clothes in their cubby every day. A full change of clothes includes all layers for the season, underwear, socks, and shoes!

Be sure to label **every piece of clothing and gear** with your child's full name, such as with label stickers or sharpie, so lost items can be returned to their proper owner.

Fernbrook-Provided Gear

Every student in the Saplings program will be provided with a Fernbrook-issued backpack and pair of Oaki brand rainbib pants for the school year. These items should stay in your child's cubby so that they have access to them every day.

The Saplings take their "adventure packs" on daily explorations around the farm. At morning drop-off, please help your child pack their morning snack, water bottle, and any extra accessories such as extra gloves or a sunhat, into their adventure pack and leave it in their cubby. At pick-up, empty the contents of the backpack and leave it in your child's cubby. Leftover snacks/crumbs result in unwanted visitors, so please make sure to empty the pack every day!



Items from Home

A single, small security item (stuffed animal, small toy, etc.) from home is permitted to help students with adjusting to a new environment. We ask that you please help your child understand the risks of loss or damage to belongings brought to Fernbrook. Students will be asked to keep items from home in their cubbies during adventures and learning activity times.

Photo Policies

The Education Center uses photos from our adventures for promotional materials such as our website and brochures in order to give families an accurate and exciting representation of what their child's day at Fernbrook could look like. All families selected on their enrollment form whether or not they give permission for photos of their child to be used in this format.

In addition to promotional content, photos and video are often used by Saplings teachers for the purpose of assessment. Taking undistruptive photos and video during our day allows teachers to clearly document each child's learning, experiences, and growth throughout the program. If you have concerns over your child being photographed or videoed for the purpose of assessment, only to be used internally between you and their teachers, please talk to us.

We also often include photos of our adventures in our outreach communication with Saplings families. These photos illustrate our daily adventures and learning highlights. If you selected "disagree" on the photo release agreement on the enrollment form but are comfortable with your child's photo being used in this context only between Saplings families, please talk to their teacher.

Communication with Families

Communication between staff and families is an essential part of your child's educational experience. We value conversations with our families and we welcome the opportunity to touch base about your child's day or their development, or to answer any questions you may have. Please keep the communication lines open with us and share with us any important changes or significant events going on in your child's life so that we can provide the best possible care for them. While we are happy to answer quick questions at drop-off or pick-up time, when children are present they are the teachers' top priority. If you would like to have a more in-depth discussion regarding your child, we are more than happy to schedule a meeting time outside of class, and you are always welcome to email the Saplings Director with any questions or concerns.

We know that oftentimes children leave Fernbrook so excited over all of the things they did that it can be hard to get the full picture of their day. To help fill in the details, we use the classroom outreach app Homeroom to post near-daily summaries of our adventures and learning. You will receive information at the beginning of the year about joining our private class album.

Additionally, we send out monthly newsletters that highlight the activities we've done and the learning we've accomplished. These newsletters also often include important notes about upcoming events or plans, so be sure to check your email for them!



Student Assessment

Our outdoor, play-driven model of education provides your child with opportunities to engage in developmentally-appropriate activities that help them grow cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally. Informal student evaluation that measures work and effort in the real world environment is conducted by your child's teachers every day. This assessment is accomplished in a way that does not disrupt the natural behaviors and learning of the child.

To document growth over time, teachers use written notes, photos and video, and collections of student work. At least once per school year, Saplings teachers hold parent conferences. An email will go out around February to schedule these meetings. The conferences provide an opportunity for teachers to share about the growth and development of each child. We also work together with you to create shared goals for your child for the remainder of the school year. If you have questions about your child's progress at any point during the semester, please feel free to reach out to schedule a meeting with their teacher.



Rest Time

Restful downtime every day is important for children, especially when they are as active as they are here at Fernbrook. All full-day students participate in quiet time after lunch. They may take a nap, lie down to relax, or engage in quiet independent activities. By doing so, the children re-energize and prepare for the afternoon adventures. During rest time, all students will be provided with a cot and/or personal tent.

Please send your child with either a fitted sheet/blanket combo or a nap mat, even if you don't expect them to fall asleep. Extra blankets in the wintertime are also helpful!



Discipline Policy

All humans occasionally make choices that negatively affect themselves or those around them. This is especially true of young children who are still learning to manage their emotions, navigate conflict, remember directions, and control their impulses. Our approach to discipline guides children to better choices by teaching them to consider the impacts of their actions, practice mindfulness, use their words to problem-solve, and accept when they can't get their way.

The majority of discipline at Fernbrook is preventive. **We prevent misbehavior by:**

- Taking steps to get student attention before giving direction or correction
- Establishing realistic expectations with the students upfront
- Explaining in child-friendly terms why these expectations are important to follow
- Modeling appropriate ways to interact with each other and with the environment
- Pointing out and encouraging positive behavior when we see it
- Closely monitoring students and stepping in before any misbehavior occurs, through verbal reminders, teacher assistance, and/or redirection
- Helping students to name their feelings and take steps to emotionally regulate (deep breaths, a break from the group, a hug)
- Minimizing idle time that lacks constructive options for play and engagement
- Cultivating warmth, collaboration, and mutual respect between students and teachers, so that students feel safe, listened to, and motivated to help their community

However, mistakes and bad choices still happen even with the best prevention. **When misbehavior occurs, we may respond by:**

- Reminding students of the established expectations and why we have them
- Explaining which specific action of theirs was unacceptable and what impact it had
- Redirecting students to a more acceptable activity or location
- Asking the student for their reasoning in choosing misbehavior, validating their emotions, and working with them to find other ways to accomplish their goals
- Pointing out natural consequences when they occur
(e.g. "You threw dirt in the air and it got in your eyes.")
- Enforcing logical consequences as needed
(e.g. "If you choose to throw dirt again, I have to take away the shovel.")
- Working with students to make the situation right again (apologize, clean up, rebuild)
- Removing a student from the group for some one-on-one teacher time until they have shown they are ready to rejoin
- Communicating frequently with families about any behavioral problems we've noticed and how we can work together to solve them

Discipline Policy, Continued

At Saplings, we do not:

- spank, shake, pinch, push, or otherwise physically punish students in any way
- mock, humiliate, shame, or belittle students
- abandon, ignore, or neglect students
- withhold food, water, rest, or bathroom visits as punishment
- physically restrain children beyond what is necessary to protect their safety or the safety of another
- allow students to discipline each other
- shame students for having and expressing their emotions
- punish students for bathroom accidents
- punish the group for individual misbehavior

There may be times when a student's misbehavior is so persistent or disruptive that it requires special intervention. In these cases, we will meet with the student's family to discuss possible solutions and set up an action plan. We recognize the negative effect that suspension and expulsion can have on young children, and we seek to exhaust all other options to help children with challenging behaviors before taking these steps.



Illness Policy

To help us prevent the spread of illness, please keep your child home if any of the following symptoms are present:

- Green or yellow runny nose
- Fever of 100.4°F or higher in the last 24 hours
- Chronic or continuous coughing or wheezing
- Diarrhea, vomiting, or stomach complaints
- Symptoms of unknown origin, such as a rash
- An illness during its contagious stage, such as “pink eye”

Please keep in mind that recovering children are more likely to pick up a new illness, and we are outdoors daily and very active throughout the day. Even if they are symptom-free, your child may need more time at home to fully rest and recover.

If your child will be absent due to illness (or any other reason) please let us know.

Getting Sick at Fernbrook

If your child becomes ill while in our care, experiences a fever of 100.4°F or higher, or is suspected to be contagious, they will be isolated from the group to rest comfortably with a staff member. You will be contacted immediately to pick them up. If we cannot reach you, we will call your emergency contacts.

COVID-19 Protocols

Fernbrook Farms follows the guidelines laid out by the New Jersey Department of Health. As such, these policies may be updated mid-year.

Students are not required to wear masks. If you would like your child to mask at any point, let their teacher know and we will help them to do so.

If your student tests positive for COVID-19, they are expected to stay home. Please reach out directly to the Saplings Director to determine when they can return to the program.

If your student is identified as a close contact of someone who tested positive, please monitor them for symptoms and test them for COVID-19 if possible. Asymptomatic close contacts do not have to stay home and may attend Saplings as normal.

If we suspect COVID-19 exposure to have occurred at Saplings, we will notify families of the relevant timelines and likelihood of risk.

Injury Policy

Staff members at Fernbrook Farms are trained in First Aid and CPR. It is our goal to provide a safe environment for all students, but playing outside always comes with risks and sometimes accidents happen. Minor scrapes and bumps are typically easily remedied with a band aid or ice pack, and the caring words and comfort of a teacher. For injuries that may require additional attention at home (such as further cleaning of a cut) you will be notified by a teacher at pick up. For more serious injuries or if a child appears to be in continued discomfort following our medical care, you will be notified via phone by the Education Director.

In the event of an accident that requires medical attention beyond basic first aid, we will do one of the following:

- Call parents/guardians or emergency contacts to collect the child immediately to seek medical attention; or
- If severe and immediate help is deemed necessary, we will call 911 and a staff member will accompany the child to the emergency room until parents/guardians arrive.

Severe Weather

Our goal at Fernbrook is to spend as much of the day outside as possible. We encourage our students to play and delight in all types of weather – heat, cold, rain, snow, and wind. When weather conditions are extreme enough to affect the safety and comfort of the students, such as thunderstorms or extreme temperatures, we move our learning and play to our indoor spaces until it is safe to return to our outdoor adventures.

Weather Closures

As part of living in New Jersey, we may occasionally experience weather events that create unsafe conditions both on the farm and on the roads for staff and families. Should we need to cancel class due to snow or another weather event, you will be notified via email and/or phone. We may sometimes operate on a delayed opening, which you will also be notified of as soon as our decision is made. If weather worsens during the day, we may need to close early to ensure families and staff can get home safely. We will call and/or email should any of these changes arise during the day. On days that the Education Center needs to operate on a delayed opening, there will be no morning care. Likewise, if we need to close early there will be no after care.



Tuition and Payments

A 10% deposit is due at the time of enrollment to secure your spot in the Saplings program. The remaining tuition balance can be paid in full at the time of enrollment or paid in monthly installments: 4 monthly installments for fall-only enrollment, 6 installments for spring-only enrollment, or 10 installments for full-year enrollment. If your family requires an alternative payment plan, you can call the Education Center at (609) 298-4028.

