



Saplings

Family Handbook

FFEEC Mission and Contact Information

Fernbrook Farms Environmental Education Center provides year-round educational experiences to children ages 3-17. Our 230-acre working farm has a variety of ecosystems to explore, including meadowlands, forests, creeks, ponds, swamps, and farm fields. Our programs are designed to get children outside and into nature, using hands-on learning to develop a deeper understanding of the food system and the natural world. We believe children must first make meaningful connections with their environment to later become responsible stewards of the land. Fernbrook Farms Environmental Education Center is a non-profit 501-c-3 organization.

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Saplings Overview

The Saplings program at Fernbrook Farms is a play-based nature program for young learners aged 3-5. Saplings 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.



Enrollment Options

Saplings has a capacity of 20 students a day with a staff of 5 teachers, including our Saplings Director.

Our academic year consists of a Fall Semester (Sep-Dec, 16 weeks) and a Spring Semester (Jan-Jun, 24 weeks). Students may enroll for the full 40 weeks or for just one semester. All students must be 3 years old by the September start date, and all students must be sufficiently potty-trained.

Saplings runs Monday-Friday from 9-3:30. (Extended care is available from 8-5 for an additional hourly fee.) Each Saplings day offers a half-day (9-12:30) or full day (9-3:30) option. Families are welcome to enroll in whichever weekdays work best for them, and to mix-and-match half- and full-days to create a custom weekly schedule. All students must enroll for at least two mornings a week.

Mid-year schedule changes are easily accommodated, provided we have the spots available. We cannot guarantee Spring Semester spots for students initially enrolled in Fall Semester only.

Academic Calendar

The Saplings academic year begins the Tuesday after Labor Day each September. Fall Semester runs for 16 weeks and includes 1 staff in-service day in October and Thanksgiving Break in November, before ending in late December with Winter Break.

Spring Semester begins in early January and runs for 24 weeks, including 2 holidays in January, 1 holiday and 1 staff in-service day in February, and 1 holiday in May. There is no Spring Break. The Saplings year ends in mid-June.

Fernbrook's summer camp programs are not included in Saplings and must be registered for separately.

Tuition and Payments

A non-refundable \$250 deposit is due at enrollment to secure your child's spot in the Saplings program. The remaining tuition balance can be paid in full at the time of enrollment or paid in monthly installments over your child's time in Saplings. Alternate payment plans are also available upon request.

Payments are processed using the credit card on file in your registration form. You will be emailed a receipt. Cards on file can be updated at any time and checks are also accepted. For tax documents, reach out to the Saplings Director.

Daily Rhythm

The Saplings daily schedule is designed to provide our students with a consistent, predictable routine while also honoring the flexible nature of child-led learning in a mostly-outdoors setting. Expect each day to follow the same set order of events without sticking to a strict timetable. The locations of our daily activities may change based on weather, student interests, or the needs of other Fernbrook programs. We may spend all day together in one large mixed-age group, or we separate out into an older “Bees” class and a younger “Apples” class (each with its own designated Lead and Co-Teacher). As a result, no two days at Saplings ever look the same. The schedule below is intended as a sample guide.

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| 8:30 – 9:00: | Drop-off window |
| 9:00 – 10:00: | Mixed-age free play in our “Saplings Spot” outdoor play area |
| 10:00 – 10:45: | Circle time and snack |
| 10:45 – 12:00: | Morning adventure: A child-driven visit to one of Fernbrook’s forests, fields, or wetlands for nature exploration and play OR a project-based activity inspired by nature and student interests |
| 12:00 – 12:30: | Lunch |
| 12:30: | Pick-up for half-day students |
| 12:30 – 2:00: | Quiet time: 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 |

Extended Care

Saplings offers early care and after care for an additional hourly fee. Early care runs from 8-8:30 each morning with rolling drop-off. After care runs from 3:45-5 each afternoon with rolling pick-up. Families can use extended care services regularly or on an as-needed basis. We ask for ample advance notice of any extended care needs.

Extended care fees are totaled at the end of each month and added to the total tuition charge.

Drop-off and Pick-up Procedures

Drop-off and pick-up take place in our Saplings-only parking lot, located next to our Saplings classrooms, cubbies, and “Saplings Spot” outdoor play area.

Drop-off takes place between 8:30-9:00. Upon arrival, find your child’s cubby inside the barn and load their Fernbrook-issued “adventure pack” with that day’s snack and water bottle. Deposit their lunch and nap items in the designated areas, then get suited up into any needed gear. We ask all families to visit the bathrooms with their child before joining the group. When ready, have your child bring their loaded adventure pack with them to our play area to join the group in morning free play.

Half-day pick-up is 12:30. Full-day pick-up takes place between 3:30-3:45. At pick-up, help your child return their adventure pack to their cubby and retrieve their things for home. Please be sure to empty the pack of any food or wrappers. Always sign your child out with a teacher. Any students still in our care after pick-up has ended will automatically transition into after care and incur an additional hourly fee.

Please inform staff of any late drop-off or early pick-up needs in advance. We are often afield on our adventures and need to account for walking time to receive a late student or have them ready for an early departure.

Rest Time

Restful downtime after lunch is an important part of our daily rhythm, allowing our full-day students time to relax and re-energize after their active mornings. We may rest outside in personal pop-up tents, or we may rest inside on cots. Please send your child with a nap mat or a fitted sheet/blanket combo to help them feel cozy, even if you don’t expect them to fall asleep. Many students who don’t nap at home end up napping at Saplings due to our high-activity days.

Any children awake after 30 minutes may end their rest and enjoy quiet play or crafting until rest time is fully over. Saplings does not keep tired children from sleeping and cannot accommodate families who request their child be kept awake.



Eating Policies

Families must send their student with snacks, lunch, and a filled reusable water bottle each day. Saplings provides water for refills.

There are currently no food restrictions at Saplings, though we encourage families to pack nutrient-dense foods with minimal plastic waste. Families should disclose any food allergies or sensitivities at registration.

Eating at Saplings is kept to designated mealtimes, and all students are taken to wash hands before meals.

During mealtimes, students are expected to sit while chewing and to dispose of their trash in designated trash containers.

Students at Saplings are free to eat as much or as little of their food as they like, in whatever order they like. Teachers avoid labelling foods as "good/bad" or "healthy/unhealthy." If a teacher has a specific concern about the contents of your child's lunch, we will contact you directly.

Students are permitted to bring in treats for the class to celebrate birthdays and other special events. Check with your child's teacher about allergy restrictions.



Toileting Policies

All Saplings students must be potty-trained to attend. This includes:

- Recognizing and expressing their need to go before having an accident
- Being able to briefly postpone going if needed
- Pulling down and up their pants and underwear (we can assist with tricky winter layers)
- Getting on and off the toilet on their own (stepstools and child-sized seats available)
- Wiping their own bottom
- Washing their own hands
- For full day students, resting without naptime accidents

Saplings cannot accommodate students in diapers or pull-ups.

We recognize that for students of this age, occasional accidents will happen. Bathroom accidents at Saplings are never shamed. Students are cleaned and changed promptly, and the families are alerted and soiled items sent home at pick-up.

If your child shows a chronic pattern of accidents, either due to inability to recognize their need in time or unwillingness to take care of their need at school, they may be asked to leave the program.

Saplings students visit Fernbrook's rustic plumbed bathrooms several times a day: with their families at drop-off and then with their class before morning snack, morning adventure, lunch, rest time, and second adventure. A student in need is always allowed to use the bathroom, no matter the timing. If afield on adventure, students can "talk to a tree" or walk with a teacher to one of Fernbrook's port-a-johns or back to the plumbed bathrooms in the barnyard.

Toileting Supervision Policies

Saplings understands that children of this age are still learning self-help, safety, and hygiene skills, and thus often require assistance in the bathroom. Saplings staff are on-hand to supervise students in the bathrooms and provide support as needed. If a child needs assistance in the stall, staff provide that assistance with the stall door open.

If a child needs to change clothes after an accident or for other reason, Saplings staff encourage the child to do as much of the process as they can themselves, and be on-hand to provide direct assistance as needed.

Approach to Learning

Saplings believes that open-ended time in nature during childhood is essential for proper development, and that children learn best when allowed to follow their own interests. Each day at Saplings is centered around child-led play and exploration, shaped by the unfolding natural events of Fernbrook's ever-changing forests, fields, and wetlands.

Saplings students learn by doing. They are given space to notice, wonder, investigate, and tinker. Curiosity and experimentation are encouraged, allowing students to develop strong critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Mistakes are seen as part of the learning process. Group discussion and collaboration is emphasized, teaching students to compromise and advocate for themselves and each other. Over time, Saplings students learn to trust in their abilities and navigate the world with confidence and resilience.

Saplings teachers expand upon this child-led learning with an emergent curriculum that responds to student interests. Well-placed questions and strategic suggestions guide students to deeper learning in the moment. Structured learning activities are designed around the current interests and abilities of the class, providing hands-on experiences that are engaging and meaningful to the students themselves. Mathematical, literacy, and pre-writing concepts are folded in so subtly that it often still feels like play.

Student Assessment

Saplings staff use daily close observation to evaluate students in their learning work. This informal assessment method allows us to measure real-world ability across the different developmental domains without disrupting the learning cycle of the child. Teachers use written notes and photos to document current interests, recent learning accomplishments, and areas for future growth. We use these observations to tailor future lessons to the needs of each student.



Teachers often share day-to-day observations with student families at pick-up. More in-depth family-teacher conferences are held each spring, offering a chance to discuss overall student growth and develop shared goals for the remainder of the school year. Families are welcome to reach out at any point to schedule a meeting about their student's growth and progress.

Saplings Parent-Teacher Conferences



Learning Across Developmental Domains

In early-childhood nature education, we group children’s skills into three primary developmental domains: physical, cognitive and social-emotional. Being immersed in nature allows students to participate in activities every day that help them build skills from all three domains. Spending more time outside also leads to lessened feelings of anxiety and overall benefits to both physical and mental health. Below are some examples of skills our students are developing from each domain.

Social-Emotional Development

This is often the foundation of learning. Outdoor education teaches respect and empathy for non-human life and provides countless challenges that help students develop social and emotional skills:

- Patience, flexibility, self-regulation, and resilience (especially with challenging weather)
- How to collaborate, share, take turns, negotiate, compromise, and resolve conflict
- How to communicate ideas and advocate for their wants and needs
- How to assess risk and engage with risk safely
- Perseverance, confidence, and the feeling of accomplishment
- Leadership and social organization
- Emotional intelligence: how to name their feelings and understand the perspectives of others

Physical Development

The natural environment is always changing, giving our students daily chances to develop physical skills such as:

- Perceptual development
- Sensory processing
- Gross motor strength and coordination through climbing, lifting, jumping, running, sliding, rolling, maneuvering through obstacles
- Fine motor strength and coordination through grasping, pinching, stacking, threading, assembling, tracing, pouring, and zipping and buttoning cold weather gear
- Spatial awareness and balance, especially on uneven surfaces of varying materials, and in changing conditions
- Body awareness, including temperature regulation through appropriate clothing choices
- Stamina

Cognitive Development

Learning in nature advances intellectual learning by providing many things to notice and problems to solve. Our program builds skills in:

- Increased curiosity, focus, and interest in learning
- Logical reasoning: Gathering and organizing thoughts, remembering, applying knowledge, forming connections and conclusions
- Scientific method: Asking questions, making predictions, experimenting, learning through trial and error, reflecting on cause and effect
- Engineering and innovation
- Identifying colors, shapes, patterns, sequences, and changes over time
- Math: Counting, adding and subtracting, sorting, estimating, measuring, comparing
- Physics: gravity, states of matter, friction, momentum
- Language and literacy: vocabulary, description, storytelling, mark-making, letter and numeral identification, phonics, interest in books
- Environmental literacy: weather, food systems, plant and animal science, ecology, humans in nature

Communication with Families

Saplings deeply values the close working relationship we have with our families, and we welcome every opportunity to collaborate on student success. In-person conversations during drop-off and pick-up times are the best way to communicate day-to-day updates with us. We enjoy touching base with our families during these times to share stories from the day and briefly discuss any interesting observations. Please keep us abreast of any significant changes or events going on in your child's life so that we can provide them with the best possible care.

For matters that require an in-depth discussion, we're happy to schedule meeting time outside of class. You can also always email our Saplings Director with any questions or concerns.

We know it can be hard to get a full picture of the day from your preschooler. To help fill in the details, Saplings uses the classroom outreach app Homeroom. We post near-daily pictures to our private class album, summarizing and sharing that day's learning adventures with you. Families will receive information on how to join our Homeroom class at the beginning of the school year.

Finally, Saplings sends out a monthly family e-newsletter that highlights recent learning themes and explores the theory behind them. These newsletters also include important programming notes such as upcoming events or changes on campus, so please be sure to check your email for them!



Photo Policies

Saplings teachers take non-disruptive photos and videos of student learning throughout the day. These images are used internally for assessment purposes, and may also be shared with Saplings families in our Homeroom posts or monthly newsletters.

The Education Center may request to use some of these images in external promotional materials such as on our website, in flyers, or in promotional emails. Families can select on their enrollment form whether they give permission for the Education Center to use photos of their child in this way.

If you have concerns over your child being photographed or videoed by Saplings teachers for internal use, please let us know.

Required Gear

Saplings students engage in outdoor play in all seasons and in all weather conditions. Having the right outdoor gear for that day's conditions is critical to ensure students stay safe and comfortable throughout their school day. Our Saplings Gear Guide provides a comprehensive list of the gear items every student needs to thrive in our program. Please review this guide to ensure your child is fully prepared for their outdoor adventures.

In addition to the clothes they are wearing that day, every Saplings student should have a full change of clothes in their cubby (two changes for full-day students). Please note that a full change of clothes includes underwear, socks, shoes, and any seasonal layers.

Be sure to label **every piece of clothing and gear** with your child's full name, so lost items can be returned to their proper owner. Expect anything that comes to the farm to get wet or dirty.

If your family is facing difficulty supplying your student with proper gear, Saplings may be able to help through our gear lending library. Reach out to the Saplings Director for support.

Fernbrook-Provided Gear

Each Saplings student is issued a small "adventure pack" to take on our daily explorations around the farm. Fernbrook also provides each student with one pair of waterproof rain bibs. These items stay in your child's cubby overnight and are returned at the end of the school year.

Items from Home

Adjusting to a new environment can be hard. To help comfort students in need, one small security item (stuffed animal, small toy) is permitted from home. Please help your child understand the risks of potentially losing or damaging their home items at Fernbrook.



Severe Weather Policies

Our goal at Saplings 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. But when weather conditions turn severe and students are no longer having a positive experience, or if student safety is at risk, we will move our activities inside. Saplings has two climate-controlled indoor classrooms as well as access to a larger climate-controlled barn space. These indoor spaces allow us to continue our day despite high winds, extreme temperatures, or thunderstorms. Ultimately, we want our students to see time in nature as a positive and comforting experience, not something to be grudgingly endured.



Weather Closures

Our region occasionally experiences extreme weather events that create unsafe conditions both on the farm and on the roads for our staff and families. The decision to cancel class is always a difficult one but ultimately made to keep everyone safe. If we determine the need to cancel class due to extreme weather, families will be notified as soon as possible via email and/or phone. Depending on conditions, we may choose to cancel class outright, or we may opt for a delayed opening or an early closure. Families are always welcome to make the attendance choices that feel best to them and to stay home even when Saplings chooses to stay open.

Approach to Risk Management

Saplings believes that risk-assessment is a skill that must be learned through direct experience, and that children thrive when they're allowed to engage in activities that come with potential pitfalls. "Risky play" activities give children the opportunity to challenge themselves, explore boundaries, and understand limits. The benefits of risky play (increased confidence, stronger physical ability, heightened awareness) often outweigh any potential liabilities.

Risky play at Saplings may include whole-body physical activities (climbing, balancing, jumping, grappling), tool use (shovels, hammers, drills), stick play, cooking, fire-making, and creek-wading. Students are taught to manage their risk through proper precautions and are supervised particularly closely during any risky play.

In case of injury or emergency, all Saplings staff are CPR/First Aid certified and carry medical kits and walkie-talkies. Regular site scans help us identify and mitigate any environmental hazards before they impact our students.

Injury Policies

We strive to keep Fernbrook a safe environment for all students. We also recognize that schooling outside will always come with unique risks, and that injuries are this age do happen. The majority of Saplings injuries involve minor scrapes and bumps that are easily remedied with a band-aid or an ice pack and the caring comfort of a teacher. Injuries that may require additional attention at home (insect stings, cuts) will be communicated to families at pick-up. For more serious injuries, or if the child appears to be in continued discomfort following our medical care, families will be notified via phone by our Saplings Director or Education Director.

In the event of an accident that requires medical attention beyond basic first aid, we will a) call the family or emergency contacts to collect the child immediately to seek medical attention OR b) 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 the family can arrive.

Illness Policies

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

- Fever of 100.4°F or higher in the last 24 hours
- Chronic or continuous coughing or wheezing
- Persistent runny nose with green or yellow mucus
- Diarrhea, vomiting, or stomach complaints
- Symptoms of unknown origin, such as a rash
- Any 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 that 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 a student becomes ill while in our care or is suspected to be contagious, we will contact the family by phone to pick them up early. The student will be isolated from the group to rest comfortably with a staff member while waiting for their family to arrive.

Illness Policies, continued

COVID-19 Policies

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

Saplings 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 contact 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. Symptomatic children should stay home under our general illness policy.

If we suspect that COVID-19 (or any other highly-contagious condition) exposure occurred at Saplings, we will notify families of the relevant timelines and likelihood of risk.



Discipline Policies

Saplings understands that all humans make choices that sometimes negatively affect themselves or those around them. This is especially true of young children, who are still learning to remember directions, manage their emotions and impulses, and navigate social conflict. At Saplings, we guide students to better choices by emphasizing community, empathy, and emotional intelligence.

We like to say that 90% of our approach to discipline at Fernbrook is preventative.

Saplings staff prevent misbehavior by:

- Establishing clear expectations with our students upfront. We emphasize what our students can do, rather than what they can't do. We make sure we have their attention before giving any direction. We keep our expectations for each student realistic and achievable, based on their individual needs and abilities. We explain the reasoning behind our rules in child-friendly terms, and we talk with our students about what might happen if these expectations aren't followed.
- Staying close to the students during child-led play. Teachers monitor the group's activities from nearby, ready to step in if needed with guidance or redirection. If a student is starting to get upset, we're there to help them name and process their feelings, and to suggest ways to emotionally regulate themselves (deep breaths, a break from the group, a hug). If we notice a disagreement brewing, we will often give students a chance to work out the conflict on their own before we intervene. They may need us to teach them what words they can use to problem-solve, or they may need suggestions on ways to fix the situation.
- Minimizing idle time that lacks constructive options for play and engagement. Teachers will redirect students to spaces and activities that are more appropriate.
- Cultivating warmth, trust, and mutual respect between students and teachers. When students feel safe, welcomed, and listened to, they are more motivated to make positive choices for their community. Staff model appropriate ways to interact with each other and with our environment, and we celebrate positive behavior when we see it.

Discipline Policies, Continued

Even with the best prevention, mistakes and negative choices do happen. **When misbehavior occurs, we may respond by:**

- Reminding students of the established expectations. We explain which specific action of theirs was unacceptable and discuss with them what impact their choice may have had on themselves or others.
- Redirecting students to a more acceptable activity or location. We will often ask the student for their reasoning in choosing misbehavior and work with them to find a different way to safely accomplish their goals. We frequently offer multiple acceptable options and allow students to pick which of these they prefer to follow.
- Implementing consequences. We point out natural consequences when they occur (“You threw dirt in the air and then it got in your eyes.”) and we enforce logical consequences as needed (“If you choose to throw dirt again, I will take away the shovel.”) If needed, we will work with students to make the situation right again (apologize, clean up, rebuild). Consequences are enforced gently but firmly. Students are allowed space to process any negative feelings about their consequences, provided they can do so safely. In some cases, we may remove a student from the group for some one-on-one teacher time until they have shown they are ready to rejoin safely.
- Communicating frequently with families about any behavioral problems we’ve noticed and how we can work together to solve them

At Saplings, we will never:

- spank, shake, pinch, push, or otherwise physically punish students in any way
- purposefully mock, humiliate, shame, or belittle students
- abandon 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
- punish students for having and expressing their emotions
- punish students for bathroom accidents
- punish the group for individual misbehavior

Discipline Policies, Continued

Overall Behavior Expectations

Saplings students are taught to show respect for their community members, belongings, and the natural world. Willful destructiveness towards the classroom or living environment is not permitted.

At Saplings, we see social conflict as learning opportunity, and we teach students to resolve conflicts through age-appropriate conversation (with staff on-hand to help facilitate). Physical conflict towards others, either due to disagreement or unprovoked, is not permitted. This includes striking, biting, kicking, or throwing things at others with intent to harm.

Saplings students are expected to reliably follow teacher instruction, especially regarding safety policies. Saplings students are expected to remain with the group and within the boundaries of the play area unless given explicit and temporary permission otherwise.

If a child shows a pattern of chronic misbehavior, we will work with that child's family to formulate a plan of action to resolve the situation within a reasonable time frame.

Expulsion Policy

Saplings reserves the right to request the removal of any student at any point. Such a request may be made if we feel the student's behavior persistently impacts the safety or experience of themselves or others, and if previous attempts to resolve the situation have been unsuccessful. We recognize the negative effect that suspension and expulsion can have on young children, and we seek to explore all other options to help children with challenging behaviors before taking this step.

Please note that Saplings cannot provide routine, on-going 1:1 support to any child.