



WONDER WOODS

Family Handbook '23-'24



Wonder Woods NFP

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Welcome to Wonder Woods

We're so glad to have your child join us in the woods! Please review this guide before their first day to learn more about our policies, our philosophy, and our tips for keeping your kid resilient and confident outside.

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Showcasing facepaint and dance moves in summer.

Who We Are



What is a Forest School?

A Forest School is an alternative education program that takes place in an outdoor environment, usually a forest or woodland. According to the Forest School Foundation:

“A child enrolled in forest school experiences all kinds of weather, witnesses the gradual changes of a natural landscape through the seasons, becomes familiar with local plant and animal species, practices social skills and emotional intelligence, and develops gross and fine motor skills through handcrafts and meaningful work.

All of this happens within child-directed and interest-based play in mixed-age groups, with trained adults available for facilitation and support. A forest school education results in students who are secure in themselves and their abilities, who can navigate social relationships with others of all ages, and who have fallen in love with the natural world.”

Like many forest schools, Wonder Woods focuses on learner-led outdoor play that encourages curiosity and exploration. We believe in creating an experiential learning environment that respects the autonomy and personhood of children and fosters their creativity, resiliency, and healing. Our staff are not “teachers” who lead curriculum, but rather, they are playworkers who create opportunities for rich, interesting, dynamic, child-led play. In fact, play IS the curriculum at Wonder Woods.

About Us

Established in 2021, Wonder Woods is a 501c3 non-profit program akin to many of the forest schools currently flourishing across western Europe and the U.S that follow in the tradition of indigenous land-based models of learning. We meet in all seasons and (almost) all weather and operate in various locations within the Cook County Forest Preserves, which is the stolen land of the Council of Three Fires—the Ojibwa, Ottawa and Potawatomi—as well as the Miami, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sauk and Meskwaki peoples. Wonder Woods’ programming takes place 100% outside, where Chicago-area children ages 0-12 gather to play and learn, surrounded by trees and plants, warmed by fire and friends, cooled by water and mud, brightened by sun and flowers, accompanied by insects and wildlife, and empowered with love and community.

Location

Wonder Woods is grateful to partner with the Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC) who grant the permit for our program to meet in three different sites that provide ecological interest and enrichment for the children in all four seasons. Our routine of

rotating locations throughout the week helps minimize our impact on the land and protect the restoration work often underway in the preserves.

Enrollment, Staffing, and Family Demographics

Regardless of enrollment numbers which fluctuate year to year (and tend to increase in the summer), we run our program with a small adult to child ratio, typically between 1:3 and 1:4. As we expand our program capacity, we may expand to a 1:4 or 1:5 ratio. During the summer, our “camp” has a ratio of 1:4 adult to child. To learn more about our organization including staff metrics and family demographics, [read our Annual Report here](#).

Governance

All employees report to the Executive Director, who is the key decision maker of the organization. Like many non-profit organizations, Wonder Woods has a board of directors, made up of volunteers (many of whom are current or former forest school parents) who give their time, insight, and support to the executive director toward advancing the vision and operations of the program. The executive director is hired by the board and reports to the board for the duration of their tenure. The board works with the executive director to set goals for the organization, and also provides oversight of the executive director including regular one-on-one meetings and annual performance evaluations of the executive director throughout their tenure. Although the board holds hiring and firing power over the executive director and can vote on the executive director’s salary, all other decision-making power for the organization (including policy-making, budget-setting, and staff hiring/firing/salaries) is held by the executive director. As part of their decision-making process on organizational policies and goals, the executive director seeks input from the playworkers, the board, and the community of families enrolled at Wonder Woods. On a project-by-project basis, the executive director can and often does invite playworkers, board members, or community members to collaborate on decision making. Additionally, the board sponsors committees that playworkers and families are invited to join in order to help shape the organization and assist it in achieving its stated annual goals.

To learn more about our current executive director, playworkers or board members, please visit our website at www.wonderwoodschicago.org.

2023-2024 Schedule

Parent/Caregiver Orientation: August 22

We ask that a parent or caregiver attend this orientation session to learn more about our practices, safety guidelines, practical tips, philosophy, and community.

First Day of 2023-2024 Program Year: September 5

Back to the Woods Night: September 14

A welcome for new families and a reunion with returning families. Kids can show their families where they play and parents/caregivers can meet the playworkers.

Harvest Party: Oct 21st

A gathering to think about family and grow community.

Fall Break: November 18-26

Winter Solstice Party: December 16

A gathering to honor the darkest night of year and celebrate the coming light. Food provided.

Winter Break: December 17-January 7

Spring Break: March 16-March 24

Spring Party: April 30

A welcome to the warmer days as we join together for a potluck and outdoor play.

Memorial Day Off: May 27

Last Day of 2023-2024 Program Year: June 14

Summer Solstice Party: June 15

A celebration of the past year. The children may put on small performances and showcase their work if they're interested in doing so! In 2023, we did a talent show! Our Summer Solstice Party can signify a goodbye or a see you later, but for all of us, it is a transition into the next season.

First Day of Summer Session: TBA



Flower petal fights at the Spring Party!

Mission, Values, Beliefs, and Philosophy



Mission

The mission of Wonder Woods is to pave the way for children to play and learn in a living ecosystem, every day, in nearly all weather, throughout all four seasons. The forest is endlessly challenging, soothing, changeable, and various. Children who know that they are part of an inspiring larger world become lifelong learners. We encourage resilience, curiosity, confidence, and joy in children.

Values and Beliefs

- We trust children.
 - We believe all children deserve time and space to play freely outdoors and that free play is among the most important work they can do.
 - We believe children learn best when they are exploring topics they want to learn about while doing so in natural spaces.
 - An ideal learning environment for children is a protected part of the real world.
 - Tools, loose parts, natural materials, art supplies, and non-human living things should be available to children in learning environments.
 - We acknowledge the innate dignity, autonomy, and personhood of children.
 - We help children form a kinship with nature and each other.
 - We call the grown-ups who work at Wonder Woods 'playworkers' and believe their role is to empower children by supporting their play, first and foremost.
 - We support self-directed learning and help children discover their own interests by inviting them to explore different topics through various games, activities, materials, skills and child-led free play.
 - We think outdoor education should be broader than just ecology. The natural world is also the inspiration for so much art, literature, music and poetry. Its study offers a deep look into chemistry, math, physics, and engineering.
 - We support risk-taking as it is crucial to helping children learn, grow, and adapt.
 - We observe rather than lead, question rather than assume, practice patience rather than interruption, and create opportunities rather than curriculum.
 - We are building a community and practice care for all members in that community.
 - Children and playworkers can create a small, vibrant culture amongst themselves, with shared experiences, agreed-on rules, co-constructed legends and stories, and important roles for every individual.
 - We are queer-affirming and future-oriented. We embrace change and commit to learning, unlearning, and adapting in order to live our values and prepare young
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people to remain in relationship with the natural world on a rapidly changing planet.

Some Questions and Answers About Our Playworking Philosophy

What is a Playworker?

We call the grown-ups who work at Wonder Woods “playworkers,” a term derived from the concept of playwork, which is based on the premise that all children need time and space to play freely, making their own choices and following their own intrinsic motivations.

What is Play? What is the Role of the Playworker Who Facilitates Play?

Play is defined as “a set of behaviors that are freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated.” Play “is a biological, psychological and social necessity” that allows children to “integrate their internal and external worlds.” And yet, free play is becoming scarcer in the lives of today’s overscheduled children. Many kids have become more accustomed to engaging in “activities designed to train them for adulthood” and don’t know how to play even when given the opportunity. “Playworkers fill this need. They create playful environments, support children’s own play, assess risk, and help out when needed, without directing or controlling.” (The quotes in this section come from Penny Wilson’s [The Playwork Primer, 2010](#))

Do Playworkers Create or Deliver Curriculum at Wonder Woods?

The primary role of a playworker is not to create curriculum, but to create *opportunities for play*. The play IS the curriculum. Playworkers create opportunities for play by setting up playscapes for children, introducing them to the sensory phenomenon of our natural setting, and remaining observant enough to childrens’ interests that they can provide them the resources to explore these interests further. Some practitioners might call this “emergent curriculum,” and we are not opposed to providing children with resources that help them explore the interests they chose to pursue. We do not, however, bring adult-made curriculum projects to the woods and invite children to participate. Rather, we wait for children to reveal to us what they are interested in exploring and support those interests with supplies, resources, or knowledge. We can notice their interests through observation of their play or from being in conversation with them.

We do not push scientific, mathematical, or literacy learning on young children, although lessons about these things are abundant in nature and often come up in conversation and play. We also do not try to “sneak in” academic learning by way of games or craft projects. Learning happens at the behest of children and their intrinsic motivation for it. We trust (and plenty of research shows) that while children are playing, they are working out a number of cognitive, emotional, social, intellectual and physical challenges they are primed to work on. We do provide process-based art supplies (think: supplies and textures; not pinterest projects). We sometimes draw on materials from nature (think: making ropes out of nettle or animals out of sticks) to create fun projects for kids who like

to work with their hands. We also sometimes delve into more skilled handiwork projects for older or patient kids like weaving, whittling, knot tying, sewing or cooking.

Playworkers are not required to have any special academic skills, but practical life skills (e.g., cooking, gardening, or tree climbing), handiwork skills, game playing, singing, poetry, or plant/wildlife knowledge are often most useful for the kids. Playworkers are invited to bring their applicable skills to the school day and discuss with the rest of the staff how to integrate their skills into the school day in a way that adds interest and enrichment for the kids.

What is the Philosophy Behind Making Play the Curriculum?

One of our foundational beliefs is that children are born learning and will naturally learn on their own without adult interference or adult expectations. We give children space to learn at their own pace and in their own time. We believe it is important for young people to build resilience by trying and failing, then trying again. This helps children build their capacity for and internalize endeavor as opposed to deciding, without much effort, that a certain goal is not for them and they can't do it.

We also know that all people are more likely to persist when they are allowed to learn what they want to learn on their own terms and in their own time for their own reasons. We honor children's intrinsic motivation to learn and encourage, above all, the exploration of learning *how to learn* rather than learning any specific content on any specific timeline. Our goal is to give kids the space and time to develop their own internal model for how they learn rather than depending on external instruction or direction from others. We value risk-taking, process over product, and flow. We want children to be totally absorbed in what they are doing in the here and now.

Here are Some of the Things You Will See Effective Playworkers Doing:

- facilitating a safe and healthy space for young people to discover their own strengths and aptitudes
 - setting up a stimulating environment in which kids play
 - walking the play area to evaluate any possible hazards and adjusting the environment or moving to a different space as needed
 - co-assessing risks with children throughout the day
 - closely observing play and looking for opportunities to enrich the environment with resources that are based on the interests of the kids and might encourage deeper or more varied play if kids choose to use them
 - responding to direct requests for materials/support from students if they ask
 - patiently waiting for a child to respond to a question
 - inviting children into a new space or activity when they are ready
 - verbally coaching a child to climb down from a tree after the child has expressed uncertainty
 - intentionally taking a step back from their interactions with a child when that child has begun to play independently or with other children
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- stepping in to help resolve conflict only after patiently giving children the space to do it on their own or if the situation has become unsafe
 - engaging in their own learning and play by pursuing their own interests within the play environment, welcoming kids to participate if the kids express an interest

How are Playworkers Trained?

Although there is no academic degree or training certificate for becoming a playworker, Wonder Woods does train playworkers in the skill of playworking on scheduled staff training days. We also provide them with resources for learning more about playworking and for expanding their skills. A lot of playworking must be learned on the job with the coaching of our more seasoned playworkers on staff. If you are interested in learning more about the practice of playworking, feel free to ask us questions, and we encourage you to read the [The Playwork Primer](#) (2010) by Penny Wilson. This text is foundational to our approach and all of our playworkers are required to read it.

Note also that all of our staff is CPR and First Aid certified. They are also background checked and complete mandated reporter training, as required by law.

Accessibility

Accessibility can mean a lot of things. When we consider accessibility at Wonder Woods, we consider whether our program is physically, emotionally, cognitively and financially accessible. If you would like your child to attend but there is a barrier you would like to discuss with us, we would love to problem-solve with you. We do our best to accommodate everyone who wants to be a part of our community.



“We aim to provide a play environment in which children will laugh and cry; where they can explore and experiment; where they can create and destroy, where they can achieve, where they can feel excited and elated, where they can sometimes be bored and frustrated, and may sometimes hurt themselves; where they can get help, support, and encouragement from others when they require it; where they can grow to be independent and self-reliant; where they can learn – in the widest possible sense – about themselves, about others, and about the world.”

–Stuart Lester, Master Playworker



A Day at Wonder Woods



A typical day in the woods is ever-changing. The weather and the children are the biggest teachers. Children are encouraged to play and take risks and to learn through experiences. Community is cherished and autonomy is respected. Our biggest goal is to pave the way for kids to play in a space where they may also connect with nature and each other.

Daily Schedule

9:00-9:25 am: Arrival

Drop-off time is flexible, but it is preferred that children arrive in time for Circle at 9:25. Upon arrival, please see the Executive Director to check in your child(ren). We do free play until Circle. We welcome parents to stay and interact with other parents, kids, and playworkers until Circle Time if they wish. Caregivers may stay through circle time and it can be helpful to do so in the first few weeks your child attends. This is a good time to ask questions or meet other members of the community.



9:25-9:45 am: Circle Time

Circle time is our most formally structured part of the day, but we cherish it as a community building activity. It encourages children to interact with those outside their close friend groups and models a collective gathering for them. It also establishes a gentle way for children to learn about group agreements, community guidelines, and important safety instructions. One of the playworkers will lead poems, songs, or a story. The song or poem will be introduced in the weekly newsletter so you may read it with your child if you wish. We do introductions, pronouns, and check-ins. We go over rules and share announcements.

We understand that sometimes children will have a difficult time focusing during Circle. Kids are encouraged to participate and listen out of respect for the community, but (especially for caregiver/child pairs) don't worry if your kid can't make it through! A set of

poems, songs, and games usually lasts around three weeks before the children are ready for something new. The new poems, songs, games will be sent out every few weeks to the families in the weekly newsletter. Circle is our time to say good morning, to set the tone for social interactions, and to transition children into the day. Children who are grumpy or anxious can be eased into the morning at this time via singing, poems and movement.

9:45-11:00 am: Free Play

Free play includes lots of activities at Wonder Woods. During this time, kids choose their activities. Some of the common activities are engaging with playscapes the playworkers have put together, drawing and painting, tree climbing, sculpting or harvesting clay, building houses, reading and telling stories, making pretend food, and engaging in pretend play such as playing house, family, or cats. Playworkers also sometimes bring in materials based on the childrens' requests and interests. During this time playworkers supervise any risky activities (such as tree climbing), help with hand tools if needed, or go on a walk with kids. We check in with kids to see if they need to use the bathroom and may take them to the bathroom.

Cooking

One of our playworkers will prepare our meal during this time. Participants are welcomed to join meal prep to learn and assist. Wonder Woods has kid-friendly knives/choppers and will ensure safety for the people cooking and eating the food!

11:00-11:45 am: Meal Time

Wonder Woods will provide a daily meal for all participants that is peanut, sesame seed, and nut-free. We will also try to accommodate other allergies/dietary restrictions listed on your registration form. The meal will almost always include a protein source, carbohydrate, and fruit or vegetable. Please pack a heat-safe bowl, fork, and spoon for your child to eat with. The bowl should be large enough to hold a full meal. If you are concerned about allergens or have a selective eater, you are welcome to pack extra food from home for your child to eat during meal time! Kids do not need to eat the meal provided, but they should be with us or nearby during mealtime.

We say a secular blessing before we eat created by Teresa Weed with inspiration from The Thanksgiving Address from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer:

Thank you earth.

Thank you sky.

Thank you sun.

*Thank you rain.
Thank you worms.
Thank you bees.
Thank you farmer
For the good food
we're about to eat.*

A playworker will sign the blessing using American Sign Language (ASL) in addition to saying it. We learned our signs from an ASL interpreter in our community.

Meal time is a great time for stories, jokes, and talking games. Playworkers sometimes tell stories or encourage children to do so. Playworkers eat along with the children to model the communal fun of eating and fueling our bodies. During the winter, mealtime is an important time where we check each child for wet socks/gloves/base layers if there is precipitation present or it is a wet or snowy day.

ALL DAY: Rolling Snack**

In addition to the scheduled snack we provide at our 11am meal time, kids can also eat food that they bring from home (which is often in the form of a sack lunch) at any point during the day. Some kids choose to eat this during the 11am snack time, and others eat it whenever they are hungry. Playworkers will periodically check in with children about if they would like to take a snack break. Playworkers supervise those eating' to ensure hand washing and other safety measures. See below for more on our philosophy behind doing a rolling snack instead of a formal sit-down scheduled lunch time.

11:45am: Caregiver/child pairs depart

Caregiver/child pairs head out after meal time is over. C/C participants do not need to check out before leaving, but we do enjoy saying bye and this can be a special time for your child to receive a goodbye.

11:45am-1:45pm: Free Play

Kids can resume free play. Since this is a longer period of time for play, kids can walk with playworkers to a new location to play and explore (i.e., climbing trees or different forest area). Kids may also do some process-based art work at our art station, which remains available all day for kids who choose to use it.

2:00pm: Pick Up

Please see the Executive Director to check out your child. This helps us to ensure that your child is under your supervision. If a caregiver who we haven't met before will be

picking up your child, please contact the Executive Director through e-mail or phone or let us know at the beginning of the day.

****Why We Do Rolling Snack**

A rolling snack—allowing children to eat whenever they are hungry—is good for play and the kid's emotions during the day. Playworkers find children to be less frustrated and it allows them to fully dive into play and projects they care about. At Wonder Woods, we recognize that the tummy is in charge. We support bodily autonomy for children and we recognize that children get to decide how much they eat or whether they do eat. Only they can know their internal cues of hunger and fullness. Just as we believe that children have the natural ability to learn, we believe children have a natural ability to know when to eat. As Ellyn Satter states in *Division of Responsibility in Feeding*: "children have natural ability with eating. They eat as much as they need, they grow in the way that is right for them, and they learn to eat the food their parents eat. Step-by-step, throughout their growing-up years, they build on their natural ability and become eating competent."-Ellyn Satter from *Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Feeding*

What this looks like

We individually ask the kids in the afternoon to check in with their tummies and see if they're hungry. Some kids just do this on their own and choose to eat. The playworkers sit down when they're feeling hungry and let the kids know they will be



eating and are invited to join us if they are hungry as well. This may be new to children and we understand it may take a few weeks for them to learn to check in with their tummies and choose to eat. Playworkers check on the children to see if their energy levels or emotions are changing and if they are we remind them how food can help when we feel low energy. The Full Bloom Project, a project about body-positive nurturing and a health-at-every-size model, is a project we look toward to inform our conversations about food and the body. Playworkers look for cues from any children who seem to be hungry or have trouble figuring out how to respond to their hunger cues.

Equipment to Bring

Our recommended packing list varies depending on the season and weather! For all seasons, children should bring a backpack that they are physically able to carry themselves. Buckles across the waist or chest make backpacks more manageable for the kids. Please do your very best to dissuade your kids from bringing toys or stuffed animals from home to the site. The only toys allowed are those found onsite. We ask because your child is likely to spend the day standing around holding the toy as opposed to building, collaborating, and exploring. When kids do not bring toys, they are free to use the resources at hand creatively. Toys from home are often lost, broken, or end up being an object of conflict. If your child needs to bring an object with them, please prepare them for it to become dirty and (unless in a special circumstance) shared with other kids. In this case, please communicate about the object your child is bringing/what support they will need with it at dropoff time.

***NOTE* Please pack a hearty snack or lunch, a full water bottle (a 12+oz size bottle), heat-safe bowl, fork, and spoon for meal time, and change of underwear, socks, and base layer regardless of weather. Sunblock and bug spray are also recommended for most of the year.**

Clothing

What to wear

GEAR TIPS:

1. It is easier to stay warm than to get warm. A child cannot take off clothes they do not have with them, so please err on the side of over-dressing and over-packing.
 2. Every child will need a rain suit and waterproof boots.
 3. Cotton is not advisable for cold/wet/rainy/snowy days. Cotton absorbs and will stay wet and lose its insulating properties.
 4. Functional pockets are always a plus.
 5. Short shorts and dresses are discouraged unless tights, leggings, or shorts are underneath, as children need protection from burrs, thorns, biting insects, and abrasive surfaces-- even in hot weather. If your child will not leave the house
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unless in shorts, skirt or dress, try to encourage them to wear leggings underneath. Pack leggings or pants in the backpack so they can change into it if they discover on their own that it is uncomfortable to be outside with their legs exposed.

6. Floaty polyester fabric, for instance ballerina skirts or similar, is hazardous around the fire and should not be worn on cold days.
7. Rain and snow pants work best when pulled down around the outside of boots - tucking them in lets water and bugs get inside of the boots!
8. If your kid is wearing shoes or sandals with holes, they must wear socks underneath to protect from bugs, poison ivy, yellow jackets, and sharp objects like sticks.
9. Tucking pants into socks prevents ticks and other insects from getting inside of pants in warm weather.
10. Wide brim sun hats that cover your kid's neck are great for staying cooler through the summer.

Below 20 degrees

- 2 layers of silk or wool tights, long underwear, and 2 pairs of wool socks
- Long-sleeved shirt, sweatshirt or heavy flannel, wool sweater
- Snowsuit, or down coat (or similar) and snow pants
- Wool/non-cotton hat
- Balaclava
- Scarf
- Waterproof [mittens or gloves](#)
- Substantial boots
- 3 Pairs spare [waterproof gloves/mittens](#) during cold and snowy weather
- 2 Pairs [Eating Gloves/Mittens](#) (thin gloves to keep your hands warm during eating times)

20-30 degrees

- Silk or wool tights and/or long underwear, wool socks
 - Long-sleeved shirt, undershirt, wool sweater
 - Snowsuit, or down coat (or similar) and snow pants
 - Wool or fleece hat
 - Scarf
 - Waterproof mittens
 - Substantial boots
 - 3 Pairs spare [waterproof gloves](#) during cold and snowy weather
 - 2 Pairs Eating Gloves (thin gloves to keep your hands warm during eating times)
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30-40 degrees

- Silk or wool tights and/or long underwear, wool socks
- Several layers of long-sleeved shirt
- Snowsuit, or down coat or similar and snow pants
- Stocking cap
- Mittens
- Boots
- 3 Pairs spare [waterproof gloves/mittens](#) during cold and snowy weather
- 2 Pairs [Eating Gloves/Mittens](#) (thin gloves to keep your hands warm during eating times)

40-50 degrees

- Cotton* tights, 2 layers cotton* socks or light wool socks
*Do not wear cotton if Raining or snowing & under 70F
- Undershirt and long-sleeved shirt
- Snow pants, rain pants, or jeans
- Down or fleece vest
- Mid-weight coat
- Stocking cap
- Mittens
- Boots or sneakers

50-60 degrees

- Cotton* knee socks
*Do not wear cotton if Raining or snowing & under 70F
- Undershirt and long-sleeved button shirt
- Rain pants or jeans
- Soft coat
- Light hat
- Light boots or sneakers

60-70+ degrees

- T-shirt, linen shirt or breathable hiking shirt
- Jeans, lightweight hiking pants or knee length shorts
- Cotton knee socks
- Sneakers or sports sandals with socks
- Sun hat

Since this clothing is a requirement, we are aiming to establish a Clothing Lending Program for families who are in need of financial assistance in purchasing proper

gear. However, until that program is established, please contact us for access to various social media groups to find high quality used clothing. These are spaces to find used forest gear or ask questions about what brands families find to work well:

- [Chicago Forest Wear Buy/Sell/Trade facebook group](#)
- [Wonder Woods Families Facebook group](#)
- [City Kids Outdoors](#)
- [Forest Schools for Illinois](#)

Additionally, many outdoors clothing outfitters for children offer 15-25% discounts for those who attend forest schools. Contact us for more information.



Seasonal Delights at Wonder Woods

Each season at Wonder Woods offers new sensory experiences, opportunities for play, and kinship with nature. Many of our playworkers are well attuned to the plants, animals, and shifts in the elements, and they enjoy helping attune the children to them as well. We encourage you to help your children embrace the wonders of all four seasons—even the extra cold or exceedingly muddy times. The following are a few of the seasonal delights we look forward to throughout the year:

Autumn

Autumn is an exciting time. The weather is energizing and often beautiful. We work on establishing routines and relationships with the children. Highlights include:

- Hawks
- Courtship behavior among the deer
- Woolly Bear Caterpillars
- Stories of the woods
- Prairie Plants
- Puffball & Turkey Tail mushrooms
- Preparing for winter
- The first frost
- Black Walnuts & Acorns
- Preparing for Winter
- Dehydration
- Fall Equinox
- Samhain

Winter

In Winter we are bundled up in snowsuits and mittens, so the play can become very large motor- and adventure-oriented. We run, sled, and saw wood to keep warm. In order to balance this out, we go very deeply into storytelling by the fire after snack. Highlights include:

- Ice and snow
 - Hot chocolate days (above 15F and below 20F)
 - Gathering Kindling
 - Hot Tea & Maple Syrup
 - Pinecone Bird Feeders
 - Preparing the Fire
 - Stick Bread & Dutch Oven Cooking over the Fire
 - Candle Making
 - Winter Solstice
 - Darkness
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Spring

Spring is a very social time. Everything is thawing and there can be lots of mud! We observe and experience the emergence of new life that this season brings. Highlights include:

- Bird Songs
- Bird migration
- Rain, Thunder & Lightning
- Planting flowers & food for snack
- Oyster Mushrooms & Jelly Fungi
- Harvesting wild foods for snack
- Rain Shelters
- Baby Deer
- Windiest Months
- Spring Equinox
- Clay

Summer

Summer is a dreamy time. The plants are all in bloom and the colors feed our eyes. The weather is often hot and sticky. Kids who attend “indoor school” throughout the other seasons often join us for this season so there is often a larger group of kids who are very excited to be outside. Highlights include:

- Garlic mustard & Stinging nettles
- More mushrooms!
- Insects & Cicadas
- Clay Harvesting
- Natural Dyeing
- Mulberries from the mulberry trees
- Juneberries
- Water Play
- The role of the sun
- Summer Solstice

How We Engage With Children



This section of our handbook explains our approach to rules, agreements and guidelines. It also covers our understanding of play, learning, development, and the landscape of emotions children experience—and how we engage with children in these categories.

We seek to engage with children in a gentle and respectful way, making space for their feelings, their various learning styles, their age-based modes of play, and their inherent dignity and personhood. We do not punish children or idealize a specific model of “behavior.” We do value community and the imperative that children not hurt one another. We seek to show children the benefits, joy, and worthwhile challenge of keeping community with one another.

When it comes to setting rules, we prefer to have transparent discussions with children and form agreements with them, as opposed to requiring them to memorize instructions. We honor the time and space it takes for children to process the world of grown-ups’ customs and safety measures. We acknowledge that many rules in the world that children must abide by are created for the convenience or ease of adults or institutions. We aspire to check ourselves in this regard when we give children directives, and we hope to be transparent and collaborative when we devise or announce any directives to children. We often invite the kids to discuss or vote on guidelines for the group to follow, and we seek their input in as collaborative a way as possible. Sometimes children become dysregulated or need guidance from calm, experienced adults, and we are quick to provide this as well.

The One Rule

We have one rule at Wonder Woods:

- **Have the best time that you can while you are here and try not to hurt yourself or anyone else.**

While that is our one rule, we have many helpful guidelines in support of that rule. These guidelines help kids and staff make sure nobody is hurt and that everyone can have the best time they can. These guidelines are not a list to be memorized by children, rather, they are to be used by playworkers for coaching in the appropriate moment when kids are engaging in the activities and as an aid to co-assessing risk. It is important that everyone at Wonder Woods understands the WHY behind the guidelines.

Here is a list of our rules and guidelines our playworkers follow:

- Kids can play with most things that we have.
 - Adults and 7+ year olds may touch the water coolers to get water for play, handwashing, or refilling water bottles.
 - If you didn’t make it, you can’t break it or take it.
 - We must always **ask** before taking things from others.
 - We must always **ask** before doing something to someone else’s body (i.e., wrestling with them, throwing a snowball at them, splashing water on them).
 - We can say ‘stop’ or ‘please stop’ if we don’t like something that someone else is doing. If we hear someone say ‘stop,’ we must stop what we’re doing and communicate with that person. You may also make a “blocking sign” if that is easier for you.
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- We don't approach wildlife. We also don't pick (or eat) things without a playworker's guidance. (Consult a playworker who is knowledgeable about edible plants).
 - When climbing, we must be touching the thing that we are climbing in at least 3 places. When it is slippery (i.e. after rain or snow), we hold on in 4 places. Children under 7 can only climb as high as the tallest play worker can reach. Children over 7 can climb 2x the tallest playworker.
 - We must wear shoes at all times except while on the hammocks in the summer. Occasionally, an activity will call for being barefoot. In these cases shoes can be removed with a playworker's permission.
 - Play fighting, including with imaginary weapons, is okay as long as everyone playing agrees, and everyone not playing is respected. (See Safety section of this handbook for more guidelines on play fighting).
 - We don't play police or jail games. A good redirection is often ambulance games.
 - The only toys allowed are those found onsite; toys found onsite must stay onsite.
 - Leave any dogs we encounter in peace. We cannot approach them even if "friendly."
 - No talking about poop/vomit at snack or meal time. Before and after meal time is fine.
 - If a child touches mushrooms, bones, the river, or feathers make sure they wash hands with soap and water (instead of using sanitizer) before eating food.
 - If playing stick fighting, the stick must be no longer than elbow to middle finger in length. This ensures the stick isn't too unwieldy and lowers chance of getting hurt.
 - With consensual play fighting, the children still may not push each other down to the ground while standing. (See Safety section of this handbook for more guidelines on play fighting).
 - Children may not run on concrete (under the pavilions) as the gear and materials there create trip hazards.
 - If warm enough, children may put their rainboots in water.
 - We do not make kids say please, thank you, or sorry but we can model those behaviors. This goes for turn taking as well.
 - On the smaller hammocks, there can be no more than 3 children in the hammock at one time.
 - On the larger hammocks, there can be no more than 5 children in the hammock at one time.
 - Don't hurt trees or plants that are alive. It's okay to pick leaves or pull out invasive plants like buckthorn or garlic mustard.
 - We treat any fires we have with great care, and do not play with or near them. You may not be silly/push/run in the fire circle. (See the Safety section of this handbook for more guidelines on the fire).
 - Children must play where the playworkers can see them and where they can see the playworkers. They must also play where they can hear the playworkers if the playworkers are calling out to them.
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- Older children cannot use cell phones/tablets unless they are using it for a project related to their time at Wonder Woods. Younger children cannot use cell phones/tablets during the Wonder Woods day.



How We Talk to Children

First and foremost, we respect the innate dignity and personhood of all children. We do not talk down to them by using baby talk or condescending tones. We treat them with the same respect and regard as we treat grown-ups. We do not laugh at them or tease them. We do not try to elicit responses from them if they are not interested in speaking with us. We do not hover over them and ask them too many questions as they are playing. We do not get overly involved in their conversations or their play. We stand back to allow them to move through the space and communicate with us as often or as little as they wish. Our goal is to provide an environment where children can pursue the kind of play that works best for them with the safety of grown-ups nearby. Chatting and laughing with children is a wonderful part of this job, but listening and observing is our first role.

How We Handle Conflict Among Children

Conflict is an important part of play. It can help children to develop communication skills, understand others' feelings, and confront their own emotions. Here are some ways we help children in conflict:

- When possible, we give the kids in conflict a chance to figure it out for themselves. We step in when the children lose the ability to communicate with each other.
 - If it is necessary to step in: We try to get to the root of the issue by asking both children questions. Helpful questions might include "Why is this important to you?" or "What did it make you feel when this happened?" or "Can you think of anything that would help you feel better about this?" or "What would you like the other person to hear?"
 - We help the children find a solution by using what you learned while asking questions. If one is upset about a stick being broken, perhaps the other could find a new stick for them. The solution might also look like the children taking a break from playing with each other. We try to involve them in problem solving (if possible).
 - Instead of forcing a child to apologize, we help them understand how and why they caused harm. We talk about alternative behaviors for when they feel this way in the future.
 - We remind the children to breathe. When the conflict starts to spiral out of control, getting oxygen into the brain and simply taking a couple seconds to pause can be very helpful. Some tips we use to help kids breathe is to prompt them to roar like a lion, pretend to blow up a balloon, or make their chests as big as possible.
 - If a child is reacting physically to another child, we will try to physically block the reaction and remove them from the situation and give them an alternative physical activity. Breaking sticks, ripping out grass, or tearing paper might give them some relief. We talk to them about why it's ok to do these activities but not to hurt another kid.
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What We Do When a Child is Refusing a Necessary Safety Measure

Here are some approaches we take when a child won't do something required for their safety (based around the example of washing hands):

- Question reasoning - "Why don't you want to wash your hands?"
- Affirm - "It makes sense that you don't want to wash your hands because you're having fun here."
- Use 'and' instead of 'but' - "I know you don't like washing your hands AND it's important to keep you and your friends safe and healthy."
- Make the undesired task fun - "I'll tell you a story about dinosaurs while you wash your hands"
- Make statements instead of questions - "It's time to wash hands" instead of "can you come wash your hands?"
- If a child outright refuses, the playworkers think about alternatives. Maybe they're hating the idea of being wet, so the playworker could use hand sanitizer or hand wipes. Maybe the child is so engrossed in their project that they need 5 more minutes (with a 1 minute warning).

How We Co-Assess Risk With Children

Taking risks can help kids gain confidence, learn skills, and make their own judgements. Playworkers are constantly gauging the potential risk of kids' behavior and inviting them to co-assess those risks as a team. Playworkers must also keep an eye out for hazards. Here are some things that playworkers do to ensure children's safety while they are engaging in riskier activities:

- Establish guidelines for the activity ahead of time. When climbing a tree, for instance, playworkers establish that the kids under the age of 7 can only climb as high as the tallest instructor and must touch the tree in at least 3 places.
- Think about the consequences of the risk. If the risk involves playing in a puddle, does the child have dry clothes to change into (or is it warm enough that they'll be ok in wet clothes)? If they fall, will they land on a rock or soft ground? If the playworker decides that the activity's possible consequences are too big, they explain the reasoning to the child.
- Be specific when checking in with a kid. If a kid is climbing and looks like they're losing their balance, we say "do you feel balanced?" instead of "be careful." This gives children something specific to check in with themselves about and shows trust.
- If the 'natural consequence' of the child's activity does happen, we trust that they will learn from it. If they fall while climbing a tree and get a scrape, for example, we don't discourage them from climbing in the future. After they've recovered from the fall, we ask them questions like "why do you think that happened?" or "what could you have done differently?" to get them thinking about those things.

How We Help Children Handle Fear

Kids may encounter new things while playing at Wonder Woods that might feel scary or

uncomfortable. Insects, dirtiness, and hard weather are among things that children new to the woods are commonly uncomfortable with. Playworkers seek to empower kids by helping them to overcome these fears. Here are some things that playworkers think about when confronting ‘scary’ things with kids:

- Model confidence. Showing curiosity and comfort with the object of fear can be incredibly reassuring. For example, if a child is afraid or hesitant about mud, we show the kid that it’s ok to be muddy by getting muddy with them. We talk about what it feels like to be muddy with them.
- We evaluate our own feelings about the object of fear. Are we afraid of spiders? Are we comfortable with spiders but assume that the child will be afraid of them?
- Affirm that it’s okay to be afraid. There are reasons that we are scared or uncomfortable with certain things. It’s also okay to be afraid of something for no reason.
- Asking questions like “what about the spider is scary to you?” can help a child to process their fears.
- Go slow. If a kid is feeling scared of a spider, we try to talk about the spider from a distance, or maybe temporarily capture it in a container so that the child can view it without worry.
- Accommodate. If we’ve tried a few different techniques to address fear and the child is still terrified, we find a way to change the environment or remove them from the situation so that they feel safer.

Children with Sensory Processing Disorders or Neurodivergence

In today’s child population, many children are diagnosed with sensory processing disorders or neurodivergence (e.g., ADHD, Autism). We find that the woods are a hospitable environment for most children—often helpful, soothing, or stimulating in good ways—but we remain observant about sights, sounds, and textures that might activate children in unhelpful ways and we work with their parents to best meet their needs. We are observers and problem-solvers. No one on our staff is qualified to diagnose or identify sensory processing disorders or neurodivergence, but we are committed to being observant and sensitive to the needs of all our children. When a child has a repeated challenge, we brainstorm how to help the child, try out methods for helping the child, and first and foremost, consult with their caregivers. When a child has a diagnosis and some identified special needs, we invite parents to share those with us so we can accommodate them (e.g. if a child is sensitive to loud noises and brings earphones in their backpack for loud moments). We celebrate the process of discovering what is unique about each child as they grow and develop and learn more about themselves. At Wonder Woods, we welcome and honor the individuality of all children.

Children’s Bodily Autonomy

We encourage kids to walk on their own, carry their backpacks on their own, put away their things, and pack up their stuff. We never do for children something they can do for themselves or with the help of another child—whether that means building a castle for

them during their play or putting on their mittens for them. Respects kids' ability to navigate conflict or physical hardship, allowing children to work out disputes and supporting them in walking on their own vs carrying them. If a child can't do something on their own, playworkers encourage them to collaborate and help each other to find the power in sharing skills and learning from one another. We discourage playworkers giving children piggyback rides, carrying them on hikes, pulling them onto their laps, or otherwise lifting them, unless it is a safety situation. We never lift a child into a tree or other tall structure as opposed to allowing them to scale it themselves. This is for safety and autonomy reasons. Playworkers model physical boundaries with children at all times, asking for their permission to touch their bodies or clothing if the need arises. We do not assume a crying child wants to be patted or hugged. We always ask before engaging in physical touch.

How We Engage with Child/Caregiver Pairs

Wonder Woods welcomes children ages zero to three who are not yet toilet trained to attend with a caregiver. With these pairs, the caregiver is responsible for the child, and playworkers do not monitor the child. The accompanying caregiver is responsible for the child at all times. However, we engage with these younger children in the same way we engage with all children. We talk respectfully to them, assume their autonomy, and allow them to lead in their own play. The program is perhaps a different experience for these younger children as their play often looks different than that of older children (see below for information on stages of play by age), but like the older children, they benefit greatly from the sensory exposure to sights, sounds, and textures in the woods. We take extra care to not “baby” the younger children, modeling for them and their caregivers that they are in a space where they are free to explore their interests and exercise their autonomy. We do not force the younger children and older children to interact if they do not choose to.

Stages of Play

(These bullet points taken from @kristen.rb.peterson on Instagram)

All kids develop in different ways and speeds. That being said, it can be helpful to understand the different stages of play that many kids go through.

Unoccupied play (birth-3 months)

- Random movements
- Non-objective
- No social interaction

Solitary play (3 months-2.5 years)

- Plays alone
 - No interest in others
 - Focused on task
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Onlooker play (2.5-3.5 years)

- Watches others play
- Starts showing interest in what others are playing

Parallel play (3.5-4 years)

- Play near each other with the same items
- May copy each other
- Minimal communication with each other

Associative play (4 years-4.5 years)

- Interacts socially with others
- Task is not coordinated or organized with others

Cooperative play (4.5 years+)

- Socially interacts with others
- Activity is organized
- Shared common goal with others

Common Types of Play

(explanations taken from @kristen.rb.peterson on Instagram)

Orientation

Hanging upside down, climbing things, hanging from bars, looking through holes and transparent objects

Wonder Woods (WW) Items that support this play: Trees, logs, blanket and tarp shelters, swings, magnifying glasses, log seesaws, rope

Positioning

Lining up items, playing with new orders and patterns for grouping items

WW items that support this play: rocks and other found items, branches, art supplies, play dishes

Transforming

Observing and discovering how things change

WW items that support this play: art supplies, mud and clay, water, strainers, shovels, snow

Transporting

Moving things from one place to another. Collecting items and moving them around.

WW Items that support this play: Wagons, sleds, natural boat making supplies, baskets, cloths, rope

Enclosing

Building borders around items and themselves. Discovering how objects and children fit into spaces.

WW Items that support this play: natural shelter making supplies, cloths, rope, tarps, buckets, snow

Trajectory

Running, throwing, swinging, crashing, and dropping things. Observing movements of objects and bodies.

WW Items that support this play: rope, swings, leaves, balls, water, tubes, funnels, dead grass, snow

Connecting

Exploring how items connect together. Constructing and deconstructing things.

WW Items that support this play: art supplies, tubes, mud and clay, shovels, play dishes, natural items

Rotation

Turning, rolling, spinning, and making circles with items or their bodies.

WW Items that support this play: play dishes, balls, art supplies, mud and clay, swings



How We Talk To Kids About Gender and Sexuality

We recognize and honor transgender and gender-expansive people beyond the gender binary. Many of us are happy to be LGBTQIA+ individuals ourselves and are positive about LGBTQIA+ children and families being in our community. We often refer to adult family members as “grown ups” or “caregivers” instead of “moms and dads” in order to be inclusive of other family structures. We respect an adult and a child’s choice in pronouns and name.

We believe in proactively deconstructing social stereotypes associated with gender. Some people feel like their sex assigned at birth matches their gender identity (cisgender) and some people feel like their sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity (transgender, nonbinary, demigender, agender +) . These individuals may change their appearance, in addition to taking hormones and/or undergoing gender confirmation surgery and they may not.

Families come in a variety of forms. Some have one caregiver. Some have two or more. Some have two dads or two moms. Some have (a) nonbinary caregivers(s). Some families have polyamorous caregivers. Some include grandparents or step-parents. Some children are fostered or adopted. Some families have no children. A child’s guardian may be a sibling, grandparent, or aunt/uncle. Some have one mom and one dad. The list of different types of family configurations is very long. We honor and celebrate every family and make an effort to represent the vast and beautiful array of families in the materials, stories, and conversations offered at Wonder Woods. We expect all children and families to honor and respect this as well.

How We Talk to Kids About Sexual Development

In the way we approach topics around sexual development, we hope to present clear understanding, move away from shame, and keep children safe from abuse.

At ages 3-5, children should be given the correct terminology to describe body parts. If needed, playworkers will use the correct terms - penis, vagina, vulva, breasts, etc. - to describe private parts. These terms will be needed if dealing with toileting, clothing, or identifying pain/injury. We model speaking about these parts only when necessary (not as a joke to distract others) and without shame.

Additionally, we want to equip all children with an understanding of privacy and consent. We protect the boundaries of children to have privacy when changing clothes or using the toilet. We ask the children before touching them in any way. Children have a right to say “no” to their body being touched (by an object or a person) at any time. We teach the children that if someone says “stop,” they must stop immediately.

We converse with children openly about reproductive organs. These conversations happen naturally as children read about how animals reproduce. Children naturally then begin to wonder how human beings reproduce. We answer questions specifically as they

are asked, without providing more details than the child asks for. We believe that children often demonstrate their natural boundaries by asking only about what they need to know at that time.

We encourage caregivers of children ages 8 and up to begin discussions at home about puberty and sex. Children are best supported in their sexual development if they have a community of adults around them who they can come to for information.

We are mindful and observant around any signs that a child might be experiencing sexual abuse. Our staff are trained as mandated reporters to recognize signs and follow-up carefully and safely if we suspect sexual abuse.

How We Talk to Kids about Nature, Land Theft, Climate Change, and Justice

Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral homelands of the Council of Three Fires—the Ojibwa, Ottawa and Potawatomi tribes—and a place of trade with many other tribes, including the Ho-Chunk, Miami, Menominee, Sauk and Meskwak. We acknowledge the people of these tribes have been stewards of this land for thousands of years, and we believe descendants of white settlers (which many of our instructors are) need to go beyond a Land Acknowledgement: we must teach children about what white settlers have done to the land, about the Indigenous peoples who have been removed from the land, and advocate for land to be given back to indigenous people. We must also stress that Native people are still here. Chicago has the third-largest urban Indigenous population in the United States, with more than 65,000 Native Peoples in the greater metropolitan area and some 175 different tribes represented. We encourage the Forest Preserve to work with Indigenous people and ideally give back to them rights to the lands.

Land Theft

Because we are actively engaging with land that has been stolen, we feel it is important to acknowledge the legacy of land theft with children. Heavy topics of genocide and land theft can be difficult to discuss with young children, but we do not believe these conversations are insurmountable; furthermore avoiding them would only contribute to more erasure of Indigenous genocide.

When we talk to children about this legacy, we do so by discussing a concept they already understand: stealing. Because we already teach children not to take things out of other people's hands when they are using them, it is a great entry point for these discussions. By helping a child focus on how it feels when someone takes something from them, we can teach them about the importance of returning stolen items.

Understanding Nature Through a Decolonial and Indigenous Lens

We encourage experiencing and understanding nature through an indigenous lens as well as a “western” lens. As teachers we believe in listening to Indigenous people in Chicago, and we have also found inspiration from Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a plant ecologist and member of the Anishinaabe tribe. Her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* is a great place to start if you are interested in learning about nature from both an indigenous and “western” lens.

We believe it is important to decolonize learning. We like to ask ourselves how the prevailing view of nature has been influenced by colonization and then we work to actively disrupt that. For example, we do not classify nature and animals in a separate category from humans, nor do we view the forest as an untouched “pure” environment to be roped off and preserved--but rather, we see it as a place for engagement and discovery. We encourage an understanding that people are a vital part of nature and the worst thing to do to a natural area is to leave it alone. One way we put this belief into practice is to identify non-native species with the children, including plants that were originally brought here by settler-colonizers such as Buckthorn and Garlic Mustard. We remove these plants with the kids and then often make good use of them. For example, in the Winter, when we build a fire, we can use Buckthorn for our kindling and firewood, and in the spring, we can use Garlic Mustard leaves to make a tasty fresh pesto. This process also allows us to have conversations with kids about natives and invasives, and to actively engage with the plants.

Policing, Abolition & Transformative Justice

At Wonder Woods we firmly believe in defunding police, abolishing prisons, and striving towards transformative justice practices. We apply the logic of these beliefs in the way the playworkers guide the daily play. For example, we are not punishment-focused, and we do not allow a cops and robbers style of play. We take an abolitionist approach to dialogue with kids and are mindful of power dynamics and avoid coercive language. When there is conflict, instructors work to restore peace using restorative and transformative justice methods.

Climate Change

We believe in climate change. We know that many children have heard about climate change but may not fully understand it yet--particularly because childrens’ sense of time is different than adults’. In order for children to understand climate change in a developmentally appropriate way, it is important to scaffold their understanding of climate, weather, and atmosphere. Climate is the pattern of weather conditions over many years. It is important for children to learn what the weather conditions are like during certain months or times of the year. We teach the children about this through observation. We discuss how animals make choices like migrating, eating food, or mating based on the usual conditions.

Additionally, we teach the children that we are not separate from “nature” and that we need to be stewards of the land, to care for the land we are on. We offer trash grabbers and buckets to go around and pick up the trash we find in our urban woodlands. We teach how cleaning this up makes an impact on the plants and animals that live in the woods.

As children get closer to the 6+ age range, it becomes possible to explain some of the science behind climate change. Robin Gurwitch, a professor and clinical psychologist at Duke University Medical Center and the Center for Child and Family Health, suggests describing it this way: “Our world is protected by a layer surrounding the earth, like a blanket that keeps it at just the right temperature. With global warming, there are more and more blankets being put around the earth. We can’t just toss them off. So we’re figuring out how to change back to the right kind and number of blankets.”

Safety Philosophy and Policies



This set of safety policies is subject to change if safety procedures need to be revised or reevaluated. Parents and caregivers will be notified if safety policies change or when new ones are proposed. We invite any and all feedback, concerns, and questions on any of our policies, old and new. Please reach out to the Executive Director to schedule a time to meet or email hello@wonderwoodschicago.org. Many safety measures we take on a daily basis don't necessarily have policies attached to them, as they are applied based on context in the moment or when co-assessing risks with kids (e.g. when making decisions on guidelines for kids in regards to ephemeral puddles.) Understanding safety measures, risk-assessment, and hazard reduction are the responsibility of all Wonder Woods staff.

The safety of the child is our top priority! No one can learn anything if they are in danger or feel unsafe. That said, the development and popularity of programs like ours is due in large part to the fact that children today are more sheltered than ever. Think of your childhood or your caregivers' childhood: more likely than not, you had less freedom than your caregivers. Existing research suggests that children today have been misserved by the well-meaning but misguided effort to remove specific kinds of challenges from childhood. The absence of risk leaves children deeply anxious and lacking the confidence that comes from being competent in a variety of skills. When children face age-appropriate risks and challenges, they are better able to understand their limitations and how to safely stretch them. This, in turn, actually makes them safer in the face of real hazard and danger.

Since research suggests risky outdoor play is optimal for child development, how do we balance risky play (a good thing) with keeping kids out of danger? We approach every

situation with the “risk versus hazard” framework. Risks are activities where a child has the potential to cause injury or has the potential to be injured. An example of a risk may be climbing on top of a log four feet off the ground, which we require to be done with three body-parts touching at all times, and in the sight of a program instructor who can provide coaching and spotting as needed. Hazards are activities that are categorically too dangerous to pursue, and must be stopped immediately. An example of a hazard is walking closer to a cliff or ledge with a drop off that is higher than you are tall. We regularly use the risk versus hazard framework with our students to make sure they understand what we mean, what’s allowed, what requires assistance, and what is forbidden. Also, we strenuously avoid uttering the phrase “Be careful,” which expresses alarm but is almost categorically unhelpful, particularly to children. Instead, we strive to use specific instructions to assist children in navigating risk, such as, “Remember, use three body parts when climbing; what other body part can you put on that log to stay safe?”

“The most dangerous risk is not allowing children to develop risk assessment skills and self-regulation by exploring risky situations. [The playworker’s] role is to watch for hazards that kids do not have enough life experience to assess, and respect risks that children have made an informed choice to take, within the parameters that parents and other faculty find tolerable.”

-Teresa Weed, Founder of The Forest Playschool

How We Set Up Our Space and Move Safely Throughout our Environment

At Wonder Woods, we encourage children to move freely within the play environment, using their five senses to explore the natural world. Students decide how they will play and where they will play, stimulating their imagination, and sparking their sense of wonder. We do not “containerize” kids—something they experience in most other environments. Through our precautions in setting up and monitoring the environment in which we are playing, children are free to play where they want without losing freedom of movement. Playworkers are skilled in remaining unobtrusive yet alert, and are keen observers of play and movement. Playworkers are constantly looking for opportunities to step back, while also actively monitoring for when they need to step in.

Choosing the Play Environment and Checking for Hazards

We are grateful for the opportunity to use the Cook County Forest Preserves. These public urban forests and nature spaces provide both gifts and challenges. Playworkers explore the forest preserve sites for areas rich with opportunities for play, child-development, and experiential learning. For example, running and walking over uneven ground builds gross motor skills; vernal ponds may contain creatures to observe; and climbing trees provides opportunities for problem-solving, concentration, and physical development. Upon arrival in our space for the day, playworkers scan the area

for hazards. For example, playworkers will remove larger pieces of broken glass or other sharp objects which children could pick up during their play. Playworkers might also evaluate the depth of the water in an ephemeral pond that has appeared after a long rain the previous day. Playworkers look up into trees to check for potential weakened or broken limbs that are at risk for falling into the play area. Playworkers pick up larger pieces of trash as needed. If we move to another location during the day, those sites will also be scanned. Hazards are announced to playworkers and children as appropriate (e.g. notifying everyone that we will not go near a tree that is becoming unrooted.)

Keeping Track of Kids

Wonder Woods uses a specific protocol for keeping track of kids so they may engage in free play, direct their own movements, and still remain safe without being “containerized.” At the beginning of the day, all playworkers are issued a walkie talkie that they carry throughout the duration of the day. The Executive Director announces each morning on the walkie talkie which kids are absent and the number of drop-off children in attendance that day. If there are any substitute playworkers on duty that day, the Executive Director sends the substitute playworkers a picture of the attendance sheet with children’s names and pronouns and then goes over important details about the children with them. After circle time, the Executive Director provides a second updated announcement about the number of drop-off kids if more children have arrived after circle time. (The adults in the Caregiver-Child pairs are responsible for keeping track of their children for the duration of their stay.)

Throughout the day, playworkers divide up to oversee different play zones, depending on child interests. Playworkers are always aware of how many children are playing in the zone they are overseeing. Playworkers do headcounts and communicate headcounts through the walkie talkies to make sure we always have everyone accounted for. If a child chooses to move from one play zone to another, the playworker alerts fellow playworkers via walkie talkie that a child is moving from one zone to another, and keeps eyes on the child until the other playworker replies on the walkie talkie that the child has entered their play zone. (e.g. Playworker #1 says: “CHILD is moving from the woods to the grassy area. I have eyes on CHILD” Playworker #2 replies: “CHILD has now moved into the grassy area. I have eyes on CHILD”). Children are encouraged to tell playworkers when they want to move from one zone to another, but for the children who forget, playworkers are always responsible for keeping track of their movements. In the event that a walkie talkie loses range with the other walkie talkies (for example, a playworker takes the older kids on a longer hike), the playworker communicates this via text and maintains these safety protocols via text instead of walkie talkie.

Keeping Track of Kids While Hiking

Venturing away from base camp by going on hikes deeper into the woods is an important part of exploring the forest preserves and taking full advantage of what they have to offer.

When we venture on hikes as a group, we do not split up the children and playworkers into more than two groups unless the playworkers in those groups are always within sight and sound of each other. It is important that the children stay within sight and hearing distance of the playworkers—a guideline the children are familiar with because we go over it with them regularly, particularly for the first few months of the fall or when new children join. The playworkers remind children that they must wait before bends in the hiking trail because bends in the hiking trail often block sight. The walkie talkies stay on the playworkers at all times during the day, and can be used on hikes if and when necessary. Playworkers communicate which playworkers will be at the front, middle, and who will serve as the caboose.



Potential Hazards in Our Play Areas That We Can't Remove

When hazards—such as train tracks or a road with car traffic—are a part of our play environment and can not be removed, we explicitly teach kids how to avoid them. And, as always, we carefully observe children in their play to determine if we need to step in.

For example, while at Forest Glen Woods, our play area is adjacent to the Amtrak/Metra train track. The children are told not to go near the tracks. We feel comfortable playing in this site despite its proximity to the train tracks because the tracks are elevated above the site and the hill up to the tracks has a sharp incline, which makes it much easier to ensure children do not wander up onto it unseen. We have eyes on kids at all times and tell them that if they feel their body start to go up the hill that they should turn back around.

We believe in teaching children transferable skills (such as looking for car traffic with an adult before crossing a parking lot) rather than creating dependencies on artificial visual cues, such as adding flags to mark a boundary they can't cross. Relying on artificial cues can create a false sense of security in children and cause them to depend on adults altering their environment to remain safe. Instead, we want to empower kids with the skills and awareness to keep themselves safe while under our close supervision.

The Chicago River

The Chicago River runs through all three of our Forest Preserve locations. We sometimes play near the slough areas (which are run-off standing water, completely unmoving) or very shallow parts of the river that are without a strong current. These areas are less hazardous to play around. Kids are allowed to put their boots in the very shallow still water of these areas. We remain very alert to river conditions and use our discretion about going near it.

Bathroom Options and Setup in the Forest Preserves

We want children to be as comfortable and independent as possible when using the bathroom options in the Forest Preserves.

Indoor Bathrooms with running water are accessible at all Forest Preserve sites from about April 1st-October 30th). In the cold months (about October 31-April 1st) when the indoor bathrooms are closed, the Forest Preserves provide porta potties and Wonder Woods sets up a portable luggable loo inside a pop-up privacy shelter. Warm water and soap for handwashing are available at all times at our handwashing station at base camp. Children and playworkers must wash hands after using or touching any of the bathroom options. Wonder Woods has individual rags for drying hands which are placed in a laundry bag after use.

Before children arrive on site, we inspect all Forest Preserve restrooms and/or porta potties for their general state of cleanliness and to ensure foreign or dangerous objects are not present. Playworkers remove trash from bathrooms as needed and/or sanitize toilet seats or door handles using provided rubber or nitrile gloves and cleaning supplies.

Bathroom Assistance

Children participating in the drop-off program are expected to be toilet trained and able to use the bathroom on their own. Playworkers ask children (especially those newer to

independent toilet use) periodically throughout the day if they need to use the bathroom. A toilet trained child can do the following:

- Communicate to the playworkers that they need to go to the restroom before they need to go
- Pull down and pull up their underwear without assistance (playworkers are able to help with outer layers if needed)
- Wipe themselves after using the toilet.
- Wash and dry hands
- Wait to go (within reason) if bathroom is occupied or if we are away from the bathroom

In keeping with standardized best practices in child care environments, our playworkers do not wipe or help wipe children. They can verbally guide children through the process so they can attend to it on their own. Sometimes children will tell playworkers that their caregivers/parents always wipe for them. If that happens, we encourage the child and talk them through wiping themselves.

Playworkers can help zip, buckle, and readjust clothing afterwards. Playworkers can also help lift a child onto a toilet seat and hold their hand if needed. If it seems a child may be in need of help with these things, playworkers will ask kids first if they need assistance before providing it. We do not assume that children do or do not need help. After using the toilet, all children will wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 or more seconds before rinsing.

We do understand that even toilet trained children will occasionally have accidents. By definition, “accidents” are unusual incidents and should happen infrequently. In these instances, the playworkers will help children to change their clothes, encouraging independence as much as possible. If there is an accident or mess that requires the playworker to touch the child's body under their clothes in order to clean up a mess, the playworker must get another playworker to observe. This policy and our no-wiping policy are standard and are meant to protect all concerned.

It is not uncommon for a child who is fully toilet trained to have a setback when they are in a new environment or experiencing a big life change at home. We do not shame or punish a child for toileting accidents. In the event of a toileting accident, caregivers will be notified. We are happy to work collaboratively with caregivers to create a “potty plan” for kids who are struggling and having repeated accidents. If after reasonable efforts are made a child is still not successfully able to use the toilet on their own, we may work together with parents to assess whether or not the child is ready to be dropped off. Again, these measures are meant to be supportive for the children and caregivers in our program, not a tool for shame, punishment, or inconvenience for the primary caregivers.

Note: Some portions of this Bathroom Assistance policy have been borrowed from the Chicago Science Academy policy.

Using Fire in Our Fire Pit

During cold and sometimes chilly weather, Wonder Woods may have a fire in a portable fire pit. Fire provides warmth and can help us cook our food (for example, stick bread). Gathering around a fire creates an atmosphere of coziness, comfort, and fellowship. Learning fire safety and how to build a small controlled fire in a safe way is an



opportunity for skill-building and process-oriented learning (gathering kindling, setting up the firepit in a safe location, respecting the boundary of the fire circle, etc.).

While fire is a wonderful tool, it is important to learn how to use fire responsibly and for the Wonder Woods playworkers to ensure that fire does not become a hazard. There is a protocol in place for playworkers who are responsible for building and maintaining the fire. Each day, one playworker is designated for fire duty. The playworker on fire duty follows these guidelines for building and maintaining the fire:

- First, fill the small red bucket with water from the drinking water cooler. This water is in case of uncontrolled fire. Kids are not allowed to touch this.
 - The fire pit should be set up under the pavilion on concrete or in the grassy area where there are no tree branches overhead. Tree branches can be a fire hazard and a safety hazard if branches or sticks were to fall off into the fire.
 - Consider the direction of the wind when setting up the fire pit. Any flammable items should not be downwind of the firepit.
 - If there are higher winds, it is important to communicate to children and caregiver-child pairs to not be too close to the fire and to not stand downwind of the fire.
 - Make a circle using the black hose surrounding the fire pit. The hose should be at least 6 feet away from the fire pit in all directions. The circle indicates the space in
-

which children must not run or act out physical silliness due to the proximity of the fire.

- When it's a little warmer out (i.e. 35+), the fire can be started at 10am for potatoes and 10:15-30 for stick bread. Otherwise, we'll need to start building the fire right after circle time. This might also be the time to collect firewood, if it isn't already done. The playworker on fire duty can radio and ask if anyone's free to collect it while they build the fire.
 - The green bag has dryer lint (fire starter), newspaper, the hatchet, mallet, and lighters. It lives in our Teachers Only Gray Bin that has a lid that is difficult for children to open.
 - Remember to remove all leaf litter around and below the fire pit (remove snow and ice too). If there is any debris including wet leaves, they must be removed before starting the fire. Wet leaves can dry out and catch fire.
 - The green bag, kindling, and logs should all be moved away from the fire once you begin to light it. The green bag especially, should be moved far enough away that the wind cannot blow sparks into it.
 - For potatoes, you'll need A LOT of kindling. We make a base with (generally) two big logs for the dutch oven to rest on. We'll continuously feed the fire kindling while the potatoes are cooking.
 - With stickbread, you can build it however you want! As long as there's lovely flames and coals for the bread to cook.
 - The fire is the playworker's responsibility until meal time. After this time, the playworker on fire duty will communicate with the Executive Director and other playworkers to determine if they should keep the fire going, let it die down, or put it out with water. Reasons we may keep the fire going: if it is 32F and below after mealtime or if it is precipitating.
 - Children under the age of seven are not allowed to put anything in the fire except their stick bread or other food they are cooking in the fire. Playworkers supervise children while they cook. Children seven years and older, after working 1:1 with a trained playworker to learn how to safely put sticks/paper in the fire, may do so if the fire keeper agrees to it.
 - Whenever possible, more than one playworker should be supervising children in the fire circle. Regularly, while cooking, we have multiple playworkers in the fire circle at once supervising.
 - People should not walk in front of one another (and therefore between that person and the fire pit) to get around someone while near the fire. People should walk behind and around to move to another spot.
 - We encourage children to move to non-smokey spots, step away from the fire, or turn their head and close their eyes if smoke comes near them, and to be patient to re-open their eyes. They should not try to walk away to a new spot at the fire with their eyes closed.
 - Playworkers should remind the children of the fire circle guidelines as needed.
-

The fire is never left unattended. It must be supervised by a playworker 100% of the time. A playworker can always ask another playworker to take over for them. The playworker taking over must clearly verbally confirm that they are taking over supervision of the fire.

Any playworkers new to the fire will be trained by a seasoned employee of Wonder Woods at the direction of the Executive Director. Playworkers should never hesitate to ask for advice or support (using their walkie-talkies so that they don't leave the fire ring if the fire has already been lit).

How We Learn to Coexist with Risks in the Natural World

Wonder Woods believes in promoting biophilia (the innate drive in humans to connect with nature) as opposed to biophobia (the fear of nature). While some plants and creatures pose a risk or hazard to humans, we help children understand the role they play in our ecosystem and the precautions that we can take in order to peacefully coexist with them.

Poison Ivy and Other Plants with Natural Defenses

Poison Ivy, a native species in Illinois, grows fruits that feed birds, especially as the weather cools and food becomes more scarce. Its leaves feed deer and other wildlife. Poison Ivy tries to defend itself from predators by using a chemical, urushiol, that can irritate human skin.

Playworkers inspect the area for poison ivy each morning during set up and have a good awareness of the areas it generally grows and avoid those areas accordingly. (It is particularly pervasive in late spring and summer.) Wonder Woods asks families to have children wear pants or shorts with tall socks. We teach kids to identify poison ivy throughout each season even in the Winter months and encourage them to point it out to the other kids.

If a child touches poison ivy, playworkers immediately tell the child not to touch their face. Playworkers bring the child to wash their hands and affected area with Tecnu or Zanfel (special soap that removes the poison ivy oils from the skin). Then the playworker wipes down the affected area with sanitizing wipes.

A poison ivy rash often presents as small, liquid filled blisters. Cold compresses work best to relieve the itchiness. Topical creams including Cortizone, Benadryl, and Calamine can also help. Jewelweed salve is a good herbal treatment.

Playworkers also support children in recognizing and avoiding plants with other natural defenses that can irritate humans, such as thorns or nettles.

Wild Animals

While some animals we encounter, such as frogs and worms, are safe to touch and engage with, there are other wild animals we do not approach. We sometimes encounter

wild animals such as deer, raccoons, possums, birds of prey, small snakes, squirrels, chipmunks, fish, turtles, minks, coyotes or foxes. We only observe these animals from a distance if deemed safe by the playworker. If deemed unsafe, the playworker moves children into another area. We try not to disturb these animals.

We also do not approach dogs, even if they are friendly. An exception to this may be made if a Wonder Woods family brings a leashed dog to drop-off or pick up. Families are asked to check with the Executive Director if they plan on bringing a leashed dog to drop-off or pick-up. Families are asked not to bring unleashed dogs to drop-off or pick-up. All dogs must be leashed.

Ticks

Wonder Woods recommends that staff check their own bodies and families check their children for ticks after every day at Wonder Woods in the spring, summer, and fall. Although ticks tend to live in tall grasses or dense vegetation, they can live in short grass or mulch. Playworkers will keep children away from tick-prone areas when ticks are most active. We recommend children wear pants or tall socks with shorts during the tick-season. Bug repellent can also be an effective tool in preventing tick bites. If we see ticks on children, we brush them off or remove them with tweezers.

Stinging and Biting Insects

Playworkers teach children the importance of pollinators like bees and wasps. We promote a love for these critical and sometimes endangered insects, and simultaneously help the children understand the best way to avoid getting stung by them. We share and practice at circle time how to avoid an insect by remaining still in their presence or slowly walking away from them. Typically, these insects won't sting unless threatened.

Wonder Woods keeps on site at all times (in our blue binder) an accounting of all children's history with stings (e.g., whether they have been stung before and if so what their reaction to it was). All playworkers commit to memory the names of any children who have life-threatening reactions to insect stings. Anytime any other child is stung, playworkers consult the blue binder to check on the child's sting history and learn what previous reactions they have had to stings. If the child has not been stung before, a playworker will closely monitor the child for allergic responses for the remainder of the day at Wonder Woods.

If a child has had a reaction to a sting before, caregivers should make sure to include a treatment plan (i.e., Benadryl, EpiPen) in their registration to indicate what actions playworkers should take if the child is stung again.

Wonder Woods also recommends that you should wear whatever form of bug repellent you are comfortable with in order to protect against mosquitos and other biting insects.

How We Support Risky Play

Rough Play/Wrestling/Play Fighting

Rough play is not unusual and it is often fun for children. They climb over each other, wrestle, and engage in play fighting. This type of play helps children understand the limits of their strength, explore their changing positions in space, practice setting boundaries and discover the boundaries of what other children will and won't let them do, work out social relationships as they play roles, practice listening, burn off energy and release tension. This form of play is biologically appropriate and we do not discourage it when it is practiced in a way that is consensual and does not harm anyone emotionally or physically.

Playfighting/play wrestling and stick fighting should be done in the "Pig Pen." The Pig Pen is an area playworkers set up with pink cord each day in a grassy area free of rocks or other sharp objects. Playfighting/play wrestling and stick fighting cannot happen simultaneously in the Pig Pen.

Playworkers are vigilant and observe closely when children engage in rough play. If the play fighting is consensual and truly playful, children smile and laugh. Playworkers see excitement, determination, and pleasure on their faces. No child is forced to do anything, and when the rough play is over, the children continue to play together.

Playworkers are ready to step in if they see frowning, crying, fear, anger, or a lack of listening to another child who has set a boundary through their words or actions. Children who are actually fighting (and not play fighting) often move away from each other and don't continue to play when the fight is over.

At Wonder Woods, we teach and model using, listening for, and respecting words like "stop" and watching for body language that other people use to communicate with us.

Because we allow consensual, supervised play-wrestling, we require all children involved to follow these guidelines:

- Children may not hit each other around the head or neck.
- They cannot grab or take clothes including masks.
- They are not to push so hard that the other person is pushed to the ground.
- They cannot wrestle on concrete or near areas that have sharp ground or are near water.



Children may need help getting out of the play fight if it has been going on a long time and they are getting tired. When children are playfighting a lot, it is often indicative of the fact that the site where they're playing has become less interesting to them. So it can be helpful to move them to another location with a more physically challenging terrain where they can use their bodies more. Doing so often makes the children less likely to seek out a physical challenge from one another. If a child is not wanting to play fight but another child is trying to engage them in play fighting, it can be important for the playworker to physically block this behavior and model saying no to this. If children are engaging in mean-spirited or non-consensual play fighting that becomes too rough or does not follow our guidelines, the Executive Director will put a pause on play fighting for a set amount of time to allow children to reflect on the guidelines and reset.

A Note on Stick Fighting:

Children engage in stick play, imagining hundreds of creative uses for sticks, often making them into pretend swords or lightsabers. We do allow children to stick-fight as long as they are being supervised, the children involved agree to it, and the sticks they are using are no longer than the length between their elbow to the tip of their middle finger. Children may not hit each other with the sticks, but may engage in using sticks like swords. Children may need help getting out of the stick fight if it has been going on a long time and they are getting tired or if they are having difficulty regulating themselves. Playworkers check in with the children periodically throughout a stick fight.



Using Tools

When children are trusted with tools, it increases their self-confidence, hand-eye coordination, and manual dexterity. Tool use in a calm setting also helps children stretch their ability to concentrate and develops an understanding of the many resources in the material world. As kids get older, they can exercise their creativity and problem-solving by tinkering and building. Understanding how to use tools to accomplish a task is a valuable life-long skill that builds efficacy and independence.

Wonder Woods may use a variety of tools with children including but not limited to hand drills, bow saws, screwdrivers, and chisels. Tools are introduced to children 1:1 by a playworker and are only used under close observation and supervision. It is important for children to be calm when using tools, so playworkers will assist kids in noticing when they are unable to maintain concentration and need to move onto a different activity. Tools are to be used as tools and not as play things. Children are encouraged by playworkers to return tools back to their storage container when they are done with the supervised task for which they are using the tool.

Climbing Trees

Climbing trees is a fun way to play in the woods. Children feel a sense of accomplishment and pride as they learn how to safely climb higher and co-assess with playworkers the risks involved in climbing up and down safely. Children engage in problem-solving and creative thinking as they have to figure out the best path to take to climb up and then the safest way for them to climb down. They develop spatial awareness as they figure out how their body will fit on and between branches or around a tree trunk. They use their muscles and build physical strength and coordination when pulling themselves up and managing their arms and legs to climb. Scaling a tree is also not an activity that can be rushed. Kids tend to be cautious when climbing and must concentrate over an extended period of time. They are usually fully focused on the task at hand.

We supervise and vigilantly observe children when they are climbing. If a playworker had previously been observing at a distance, they will move closer in order to provide coaching or spotting as needed. Playworkers do not pick children up and put them onto a higher up log or tree. If children are unable to climb up on their own, they are not ready to be that high up. We only help children down from a tree if they are unable to get down after we have encouraged them and supported them to get down on their own first.

Children under age seven are only allowed to climb as tall as the tallest teacher and must always hold on in three places or more. When the branches are wet or slippery they must always hold on in four places.

Children that are seven and older are allowed to climb up to 2x the height of the tallest playworker.



Other Safety Considerations

On Site Safety Binders

We care about the health and well-being of everyone in our community. Playworkers are required to review the red and blue binders that are kept on site at all times. The red binder contains the state mandated labor law notifications and workplace safety postings. The blue binder contains a list of all the children (their names, ages, and pronouns) and the days they attend– along with their emergency contact information, notifications of their food and insect allergies as well as any critical medical information that playworkers are responsible for knowing about each child. Playworkers are required to commit to memory the children who have life-threatening allergies or other medical

needs. Substitute playworkers are asked to review the binders at the beginning of the days on which they are subbing. All playworkers also receive a daily morning text with the roster of students signed up for that day. The roster contains notations to remind playworkers about any children who have life-threatening allergies or medical needs.

Allergies, Medical Notes, and EpiPens

All playworkers have knowledge of each child's allergies and medical notes. This information is listed in our blue binder and life-threatening allergies or medical needs are noted on the roster each playworker receives through text each day. Children who bring medication or EpiPens must check in with the Executive Director every morning to show that their medication or EpiPen are in fact in their pack that morning. Playworkers know which children carry EpiPens and those EpiPens need to be carried by the child in a designated backpack or carrier if we move to play away from basecamp. Wonder Woods has an EpiPen for an adult and an EpiPen for a child on hand in our large First Aid Bag.

A Note on Cooking and Allergies

We do not cook with ingredients that children in the program are allergic to. Our menu is always safe for all children in the program. We also are able to accommodate gluten free sensitivities and dietary preferences such as vegetarian and vegan diets.

In Winter, when working with stick bread dough, playworkers must use disposable nitrile gloves when handling the gluten free dough in order to not mix gluten into the dough. There are separate dedicated gluten free bamboo sticks for cooking gluten free stick bread. We wash and store the bamboo sticks separately. The gluten free sticks have yellow tape on the bottom of them to distinguish them from the others.

Incident Reporting

Wonder Woods values transparency, open communication and clear record-keeping that can help us better track unexpected incidents and promote future safety. When a child or adult who is part of our program is injured, falls ill, or is endangered, an [Incident Report Form](#) is filled out by the playworker who was supervising the child at the time of the incident. If any care is administered including a band-aid applied (unless there was no blood present and the band aid was more of an "emotional support band-aid"), an incident report form is filled out by the end of the school day. The incident will be communicated to the child's caregivers either by phone or in person at pick-up time by the Executive Director or by the Executive Director and playworker supervising at the time of the incident. The families of the child(ren) involved in the incident may request a copy of the incident report.

If there is a larger incident, the Executive Director will notify the child's caregivers immediately and will email a communication about this event to the Wonder Woods community (caregivers, staff and board), pending permission from the families whose child(ren) were involved in the incident. "Larger incidents" include:

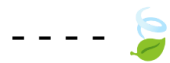
-
- a fire that endangered children
 - a significant medical emergency where we have to call 911
 - If children witness or experience a natural hazard (such as an earthquake) or other disturbing event
 - a child gets lost
 - any incident that causes us to create a new safety policy

Emergencies

In the event of an emergency in the vicinity the children will be led to a safe predetermined location. Families will be group texted in the case of an emergency.

Every playworker is trained in CPR/First Aid with up-to-date certificates. In case of a minor accident, first aid will be immediately administered to the child. For major accidents, the staff reserves the right to call 911 or bring the child to the nearest hospital for proper care.

Program Cost and Policies



Visiting/Trial Days

If interested in a Trial Day to see if this program is the right fit for your family, you may email us at hello@wonderwoodschicago.org to request a trial date. Trial Days are \$30 for caregiver-child pairs (9:00-11:30am) or \$60 for drop off children (9:00-2:00pm). [A Liability waiver](#) will need to be signed and we will invoice you prior to the Trial Date. If this is not financially feasible for your family, please contact us directly and we may be able to accommodate this.

Drop-In Days

On the occasion that you would like your child to attend an extra day in the woods, we do offer Drop-In Days if we have available spots. However, availability is limited since enrollment usually fills up. Drop-In Days are limited to children who are already enrolled in the program or have been enrolled in the past with us. Drop-In Days are \$30 for caregiver-child pairs (9:00-11:30am) or \$60 for drop off children (9:00-2:00pm). We have high demand and we are holding your spot if you opt in for a Drop-In Day, so if you call out/cancel within 24 hours of the date, you will still be charged for this day.

Make Up Day Policy

We understand families need to miss days once in awhile or take a trip out of town. Unfortunately, we cannot offer make-up days for those days missed.

Drop-off Policy

If you and your child(ren) arrive before 9am, please do not bring them over to the set up area. We know they are excited (we are too!) It creates a difficult dynamic as the

playworkers are trying to set up and we cannot be as present with greeting your child as we would wish. The playworkers also use that set-up time to check in with each other about important information about the day and we often cannot have those conversations in front of the children. You are welcome to bring them to another area of the woods during set-up.



Teamwork, in a few ways

Pick-up Policy

Pick up is at 2:00pm. If you are late (arriving after 2:05pm), you must contact another caregiver to ask if they can stay with your kid and call or text us letting us know who will be staying with your child until you arrive. This needs to be done before 2pm, so all parties know. If you haven't coordinated with another caregiver and you're late more than 2x within a 12 week period, you will be charged an additional \$35/child for the day you are late. Playworkers meet and tidy up at the end of the day, so late pick-ups interrupt their ability to wrap up the day. You will receive a contact list of families and can join our private Facebook group in order to make connections with other parents and caregivers who might help you out if the unforeseen circumstance arises and you're unable to make it to pick-up on time. If you have not picked up your child within an hour and have not responded to any of our attempts to contact you, we will call the child's emergency contact.

Extended Hours: Morning and Aftercare

We recognize that families have all kinds of child care needs, so we are making our best

effort to accommodate these. We hope to eventually offer morning care and full day length programming. If enough families are interested, we may offer extended hours until 3pm each day. Each additional hour will be \$11/hr/kid.

Pricing and Financial Assistance

A non-refundable deposit* will be required in addition to a \$300 non-refundable registration & supply fee. Deposit will be applied towards tuition in the final payment(s). If the registration & supply fee presents a hardship for your family, we may be able to waive it. Please let us know of your financial assistance needs in the financial assistance section of the enrollment form.

NOTE: Once you have submitted your registration form and deposit/registration fees, your registration fee is non-refundable. If you drop the program, you will not receive a refund on your registration fee. If you drop MORE than 60 days before the start of the session, you will receive your deposit back. If you drop LESS than 60 days before the start of the session, you will not receive your deposit back. The way we typically return your deposit is by subtracting your deposit amount from your last tuition payment. This policy exists because we hire based on enrollment, and your deposit/tuition fees ensure we can pay our playworkers even if our enrollment changes.

*The Deposit Scales:

\$1250 for 4 or 5 day drop off program

\$750 for 2-3 day drop off program

\$475 for 1 day drop off program

\$225 for caregiver-child program

Program Cost:

CAREGIVER-CHILD PAIRS

1x/week Caregiver-Child Pairs per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$972

2x/Week Caregiver-Child Pairs per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$1,944

3x/Week Caregiver-Child Pairs per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$2916

4x/Week Caregiver-Child Pairs per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$3,888

5x/Week Caregiver-Child Pairs per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$4860

DROP OFF

Once/week Drop Off per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$1980

Twice/week Drop Off per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$3,960

3x/ Week Drop off per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$5,940

4x/ Week Drop off per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$7,920

5x/ Week Drop off per child: Registration & Supply fees (\$300) + \$9,990

Payment Calendar

Deposit Due at time of Registration

August 15: First Payment due

November 15: 2nd Payment Due

January 15: 3rd Payment Due

March 15th: Final payment due



Inclement Weather and Air Quality Index Cancellation Days Policy

Being outdoors should not be hazardous or a test of a child's endurance. That said, challenging weather days, with a lot of rain or deep cold, are often the most enjoyable for children who were formerly kept indoors in these conditions. As we currently do not have an indoor space, we will cancel in the event that:

- [The temperature is not predicted to reach 15 °F by 10:00 a.m](#)
- Thunderstorms or more than 1" of rain are predicted.
- There is a wind advisory (over 25mph winds with gusts up to 40mph)
- The Air Quality Index is 150 or above at 7 a.m.*

We are working to secure some kind of alternate indoor space to avoid canceling programs during these conditions. In the event of a weather emergency, we will have an identified alternate location to take cover and safely wait out a storm. Children will practice regular storm drills to ensure they are ready to move to that location quickly and safely

Although we can not guarantee weather patterns, we typically have to cancel no more than 5-10 days per year. We do not offer refunds for canceled days. These funds go towards paying employees and the costs of the program. We may offer refunds for canceled aftercare. If you would like to request a refund for canceled aftercare, please email the Executive Director. If not, that amount will go towards covering costs of the program.

*We follow the advice in this [Air Quality and Outdoor Activity Guide for Schools](#) maintained by AirNow.gov, which recommends limiting outdoor activity for all populations when the air quality index is above 150. The chart also recommends that on "orange" days (when air quality index is between 101-150) that more sensitive populations—including children—limit intense outdoor activity (athletics or activities that involve heavy breathing for longer periods). Thus on "orange" days Wonder Woods does not cancel school, but will monitor intense activity of the children (anything inducing heavy breathing), particularly for children with asthma or other health sensitivities. We will also work with families on other mitigation factors—such as masking in N95s—to keep children who are sensitive to air quality safe. Please feel free to discuss any concerns or requested accommodations with us. We continue to monitor the science and recommendations related to air quality index and outdoor activity—a newer phenomenon forest schools must reckon with. Airnow.gov is a good source for families to check the air quality index number on a daily basis and learn more about these advisories and recommendations.

Privacy Policy

Your privacy is critically important to us. At Wonder Woods we have a few fundamental principles:

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- We don't ask you for personal information unless we truly need it.
 - We don't share your personal information with anyone except to comply with the law, develop our services, or protect our rights.
 - We don't store personal information on our servers unless required for the on-going operation of one of our services.
 - From time to time, we take photos of students during their activities. In this regard, we seek your consent for the publishing or use of photos of your children. The photos will be used for newsletters, marketing or advertising, and/or updates posted via the facebook or instagram pages, or website. Should you decide to take back your authorization later on, you may do so by writing to us.
 - For protection of privacy of the child, we guarantee that names will not be included with the publication of any photos. We will use the first letter initial for quotes.

Illness Policy and Covid-19 Policy

Individuals who exhibit or self-report a temperature greater than 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit/38 degrees Celsius or currently have known symptoms of COVID-19, such as fever, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, fatigue, muscle and body aches, headache, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell, vomiting, or diarrhea, may not enter Wonder Woods.

Covid-19 Protocol

Please view [Wonder Woods' current protocol for Covid-19](#). In the case that a Wonder Woods teacher, student, or housemate has symptoms of or exposure to the COVID-19 virus, use the flowchart in the link to determine whether or not they should come to Wonder Woods.

We follow the provider directions, recommended treatment & return to school guidance as per school policies and [IDPH Communicable Diseases in Schools](#).

- All playworkers and substitutes are fully vaccinated and stay home if we have any symptoms of illness.
- We do have families and playworkers that continue to mask outdoors. We ask that you respect their decisions and practice care in respecting their physical space. Some playworkers choose to mask around specific children who choose to mask, or keep a mask on hand for wearing when the need arises to interact closely with one of these children or their caregivers.
- We will ask you to keep your children home if they have any symptoms (just like always). See "Illness Policy."
- Children will wash hands before and after mealtime.

Illnesses During the Day

If your child falls ill during the day, they will be brought to a pavilion separate from the other children for symptoms to be assessed. In most cases, we will then call home to have the child be picked up for the day. The child may return to Wonder Woods the next

day if they are symptom-free and test negative for COVID.

Birthdays

We also welcome you to bring a special edible treat to share for your child's birthday. Please make sure the treats are gluten- and allergen- free. Snacks like rice Krispies treats, tamales, or fruit salads are often a good option. We also welcome more creative options like finger-knitted items, cork boats, bananas with faces drawn on them, or flower petal confetti. If your family would like to send a treat, you must notify the Executive Director at least 48 hours in advance with a list of the ingredients. This allows for time for the Executive Director to announce the treat via email to the community so families can decide if they want to pack an alternative treat for their kid. Birthday treats should not include peanuts, nuts, or sesame seeds. If your child cannot eat the birthday treat provided, feel free to pack an alternate treat for them. We will sing happy birthday at Circle Time so there are other fun ways to celebrate with us other than eating!

Lost and Found

Lost items will be in our Lost and Found container for two months. Periodically we will upload what is in the Lost and Found container to the Wonder Woods Families facebook group. If the items are not claimed by the end of the month, they will be donated to our program or to a donation center.

Withdrawing from Wonder Woods

Should a family decide to withdraw their child from Wonder Woods for any reason, we may refund some tuition if applicable, less the non-refundable deposit and non-refundable supply and registration fee. If you drop MORE than 60 days before the start of the session, you will receive your deposit back. If you drop LESS than 60 days before the start of the session, you will not receive your deposit back. The way we typically return your deposit is by subtracting your deposit amount from your last tuition payment. This policy exists because we hire based on enrollment, and your deposit/tuition fees ensure we can pay our playworkers even if our enrollment changes. If your family drops and would like to donate any tuition already paid, it can be given to our scholarship fund as well.

Parent/Caregiver Agreements and Responsibilities



Agreement Checklist for Caregivers

Every family will be asked to review and sign off on the following agreements:

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- I acknowledge that my child might play with sticks, climb trees, logs and jump into puddles.
 - I acknowledge that my child will learn age-appropriate fire and knife safety.
 - I acknowledge that my child will encounter wild animals and insects and sometimes touch insects.
 - I acknowledge that my child may get bitten by mosquitos or ticks.
 - I agree that my child should learn about their own impact on the environment.
 - I agree that my child will learn the ecological and political history of the land as well as the connection between the two.
 - I agree to use the pronouns and names that are chosen by the individual (children and adults).
 - I acknowledge that Wonder Woods does not avoid discussing racism and anti-racism with children when the topic arises.
 - I acknowledge that Wonder Woods values align with prison abolition and if the topic of prison or policing arises with children, the concept of abolition may be discussed. We ask that you do not put your children in pro-law enforcement clothing while at Wonder Woods.
- I acknowledge that Wonder Woods values align with prison abolition and if the topic of prison or policing arises with children, the concept of abolition may be discussed. We ask that you do not put your children in pro-law enforcement clothing while at Wonder Woods.
- I acknowledge that Wonder Woods is a queer-affirming program. Children often play marriage or family games, and when the topic arises, we do not avoid discussing relationship configurations that fall outside of heteronormative categories.
 - I agree to not ask playworkers to break or violate Wonder Woods policies or provide my child with special treatment outside of the policies. If I need accommodations for my child I will speak with the executive director about it
 - I agree to provide my child with the necessary clothing and tools for an enjoyable day, and if I cannot provide them, I will inform Wonder Woods staff beforehand so Wonder Woods staff can try to source them and provide such tools for my child.
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- I acknowledge that Wonder Woods' program embraces risk, but playworkers will make sure there are no hazards.
 - I trust Wonder Woods to let my child learn at their own pace, and understand that through play they are learning all the time.
 - I agree to stay in close communication with Wonder Woods staff if my child has any medical or emotional needs.
 - I acknowledge that playworkers will use transformative & restorative justice principles to deal with conflicts between children. We do not force kids to apologize or punish them with "time outs."
 - I agree to let playworkers take photos of my child playing in the woods. The photos will be shared via email with our family and the other families whose children are in the weekly program. If you would like to opt out of Wonder Woods using additional photos for their website or social media, we must be notified by caregivers. Example of a photo below:



Parent/Caregiver Responsibilities

1. Ensuring all forms and fees are submitted prior to your child(ren)'s attendance at our program. Communicating with administration if you are needing accommodations.
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2. Ensuring your child is equipped with the proper clothing, outerwear and other supplies for the season and length of the program (see Equipment & Clothing). We are outside for 5+ hours a day in all weather. Learning only happens when we are feeling safe and comfortable and therefore if children arrive with less than adequate clothing, they will be asked to return home to get proper clothing before joining our program.
 3. Open communication with playworkers and providing staff with any information that would assist us in meeting the needs of your child.
 4. Following all policies and procedures outlined in this handbook.

Responsibilities of the Caregiver in Our Caregiver/Child Pair Program

If you will be accompanying your child as part of our caregiver-child program, we are very happy you are here! Bringing very young ones into the woods is the first step in connecting them with their playful selves and it does worlds of good for you, the caregiver, to be outdoors too! We find that the adult caregivers often benefit just as much as the child they bring, enjoying the time outdoors in the fresh air with other caregivers and grown-ups. We know caregivers of very young children are often weary with the labor of parenting and carework so we hope to provide you some respite in the woods and a place to breathe while your little one has fun.

Our playworkers will not oversee your child in the same way they do the older kids. We consider you the caretaker of your child, responsible for their whereabouts and safety at all times. But we look forward to engaging your child in whatever way is comfortable for them. We ask that you join us in the group, but do not interfere with the children's play. Please allow them to discover the best path for them when problem-solving, climbing, etc. We encourage the children to try doing things on their own and with each other. We encourage you to read the "How We Engage with Children" section of this handbook for more ideas for how to encourage safe, fun, relaxing and enriching play while you and your child are at Wonder Woods

Ways for Parents and Caregivers to Volunteer

If you are interested in any of our Volunteer groups, please reach out to hello@wonderwoodschicago.org letting us know which projects or group(s) you'd like to be a part of. The following groups will be available for caregivers to join during the school year:

Organizational Work

We are a non-profit which means we can apply for Grants and we should! Do you want to help us apply for these and make a schedule of when to apply to certain grants yearly?

Substitute Playworkers

We need substitute playworkers from time to time. We always need a lengthy list of substitutes to reach out to. If you'd like to apply, [fill out this application](#).



LOVES events. Do you want to help us plan some this year?

- Clothing /Gear Swap
- Annual Summer Camp Out
- HarvestParty (October)
- Winter Solstice (December)
- Spring Party (April/May)
- Summer Solstice (June)

Guest Playworkers

Have a skill you want to share? Music you want to delight us with? Come show us!

Fundraising Committee

This committee creates fundraising events and opportunities to help us raise \$10,000 annually to cover scholarships for families and supplies to grow our program. One of our top priorities is expanding access to programs like ours to kids who can not afford to attend and thus do not receive the same kind of outdoor time as kids whose families can afford tuition. Raising scholarship money is very important to us.

Family Ambassadors

We would love to have a group of Family Ambassadors who could host caregiver get-togethers, help field questions by new and prospective families via email or phone.

Event Planners

Our Executive Director is a Libra sun and therefore

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- Beach Party (August)
 - Annual Summer Camp Out (July or August)



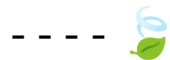
Digital Work

We are looking for someone who might have the skill to add a payment portal on our website. From time to time we need additional digital work.

Land Stewardship

At least every quarter WW tries to get in a work day at the Forest Preserves to show them our appreciation for giving us the permits to be here, to help restore the preserves, and also to get to know the space where our kids are playing and forming a kinship with nature every day. It's also a good time! We are looking for someone new to bottomline these stewardship days!

Communicating With Us



General Communication

If you need to get a hold of us please email us at hello@wonderwoodschicago.org. If your email is time sensitive, please indicate a response time needed. Please give us between

36-72 hours of time to respond. We are a small operation and will answer emails in order of urgency and date sent.

Emergency Communication

If you need to get a hold of us immediately, please text or call. You can reach the Executive Director at 312-883-5467.

Attendance, Absence, and Tardiness

If your child(ren) will be absent for the day, please email hello@wonderwoodschicago.org indicating which day(s) your child(ren) will be out.

Caregiver Absence

Please notify the Executive Director if there will be a change in your child's care. Examples include one or more caregiver traveling for an extended time, caregiver going through a separation or divorce, or a caregiver experiencing long-term illness or health treatment. Understanding your family circumstances will help us support your child in their time at Wonder Woods.

If your child will have other individuals picking them up from or dropping them off at Wonder Woods, please notify hello@wonderwoodschicago.org with the names and phone numbers of those caring for your child.

Communicating Concerns

Your concerns, questions, and feedback are very important to us. Should you have any concerns, questions or feedback, please contact the Executive Director by phone, email or in person during drop-off and pick-up times. If necessary we can set up an appointment to meet in person. We are looking forward to being in community with you and your child(ren).

Non-Discrimination Policy *(from Humboldt Park Montessori's Protocol)*

Wonder Woods does not discriminate in violation of the law on the basis of race, religion, creed, color, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, nation of origin, gender, immigration status, or any other characteristic. Furthermore, we take an active stand against any systems that support such discrimination. We commit to take any allegations of discrimination seriously and examine our processes and policies on a regular basis to weed out bias and discrimination.

Non-Discrimination Grievances

Non-discrimination grievances can be reported to the Executive Director by email in order to set up a meeting. The meeting will be with the Executive Director regarding the grievance, but all information will be shared with, depending on the degree of harm, the Board of Directors.

When meeting to discuss a grievance, the Executive Director will need to ask questions in order to gather information and determine next steps. These questions will follow a specific script:

1. *When did the incident occur?*
2. *How many times has this grievance taken place?*
3. *What was happening when the incident occurred?*
4. *Who was also around during the incident?*
5. *If the harm was to a child, were the caregivers notified?*
6. *Did you speak to the other person about the harm of this incident?*
7. *Has the individual recognized the harm in their action?*
8. *What kind of response from the other individual would feel restorative for you?*

These responses will be documented so that we can address any patterns of harmful behavior taking place.

In the case of the grievance involving the Executive Director, a member of the Board of Directors can be emailed or called directly.

Mailing list

We will send out a weekly e-mail on Sunday evenings that includes curriculum notes, quotes from the children, and photos from the past week. It will list the upcoming mealtime menu, circle poems and songs as well.

- [Opt In to the Newsletter!](#)

