

CONNECT TO THE MAGIC.

OFFICIAL ESSENTIALS HANDBOOK



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WELCOME & GRATITUDE

“Our role is not to change or control the world as a human, but to learn from the world how to be human”- Robin Wall Kimmerer

Welcome to Aishling Forest School! We are SO glad you have joined us. Aishling pronounced ASH-ling is Gaelic for dream or vision and is derived from the birthplace of forest fairies. Our unique program was created to be a place where children of all abilities can experience the magic of Mama Earth and within themselves. Here, in our home in the woods, learners will feel a deep sense of belonging, both in the natural world and in a community of people. We hope the information in this handbook will help you and your child(ren) participate fully in our program and our community. We urge you to read it and ask questions.

We are very grateful to many who have helped shepherd this program along. We would like to thank CEED (Center for Environmental Education and Discovery) and the Unkechaug People for sharing their land and cultures with us. And a heartfelt thank you to YOU and your families for making this dream a reality. We could not be more grateful and honored.

We are also incredibly thankful to the land where we mentor learners. The forest and the animals provide us with the greatest classroom of all: ever evolving and dynamic yet calming and grounding. We love to tell the story of the land and cannot wait to create magic and memories that will last a lifetime.

If you have any suggestions for future editions of this handbook, please don't hesitate to let us know!

With love and light- The Forest Fairies of Aishling Forest School

AISHLING FOREST SCHOOL ETHOS

“If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.” - Rachel Carson

Forest School is an inspirational process that offers learners of all abilities regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees. Forest School is a specialized learning approach that sits within and compliments the wider context of outdoor and woodland education.

The ethos of Forest School is based on a fundamental respect for all children and young people and their capacity to investigate, test and maintain curiosity in the world around them. It believes in children’s right to play; the right to access the outdoors (and in particular a woodland environment;) the right to access risk and the vibrant reality of the natural world; the right to experience a healthy range of emotions, through all the challenges of social interaction, to build resilience that will enable continued and creative engagement with their peers and their potential.

Our mission is to create a quality forest school and enrichment program for children of all abilities, where the magic of childhood runs free and nature is the greatest teacher to connect with yourself, each other, and Mama Earth. To nurture the seeds of connection that are in every person from birth (regardless of race, gender identity, class, religion, ethnicity and/or ability): connection to self, others, nature and ancestral skills and knowledge. Forest School is based more on the process of learning than it is on the content- more on the **how than the what**. This means that genuine forest school practice steps boldly out of the shadow and limitation of planned activities and ventures collaboratively into the realms of the unplanned, unexpected and ultimately unlimited.

Significantly, and on many levels, a woodland environment is central in supporting this very dynamic approach to learning; the passage of time from the changing of the seasons, to the contemplation of an ancient tree; the dynamic, stimulating yet grounding and calming nature of an outdoor environment-an infinite source of smells, textures, sounds and tastes; a range of visual stimuli from near to far, high to low, very big to very small; and the many layers of historical, cultural, spiritual and mythological significance that speak of our deep relationship with trees, woodland and nature through the ages.

Research suggests that young children learn best from experience, by using their senses actively rather than passively, and it's via these experiences that the learning remains with us unto adulthood. Providing varied outdoor experiences can help with this development. Free play gives children space and independence and a chance to imagine and learn social skills, while adult-guided activities such as tool use build new skills, vocabulary and the ability to manage risk, creating a positive self-identity and laying foundations to be a successful lifelong learner.

Aishling Forest School's ethos of outdoor educational learning aims to maximize social, emotional and developmental potential by allowing learners to manage risk, have more independence, in guiding their own learning, achieve goals, be active and play and learn through direct experience with nature. Within this context, Forest School leaders assess each learner's interest and learning styles and engage with them to facilitate their full learning ability.

Our Forest School program is also a compassion-scaffolded program, where leaders guide and mentor learners towards the continuation of being respectful, mindful, aware and empathetic towards all of nature's living beings.

Forest School learners are encouraged to see, feel, taste, smell and hear nature. Outside the confines of four walls, without the distractions of electronic devices and excessive supervision, learners can move, explore and discover at their own pace, connecting to the natural world- a place not created by man, that had deep spiritual meaning for our ancestors.

DEVELOPMENT AND BENEFITS OF FOREST SCHOOL

Nature is not a place to visit. Nature is home.” - Gary Synder

Forest Schools are distinguished by their commitment to 100% outdoor time and complete nature immersion, unstructured flow learning, child inspired emergent curriculum, place-based focus, inquiry-based teaching style and authentic play. Nature immersion is defined as “Unstructured free time in nature resulting in an intimate, deep and personal connection to the natural world.”

This approach draws on, in addition to the Scandinavian outdoor model of friluftsliv (“free open-air life,”) the learning theories and playful child-centered pedagogy of thinkers such as Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori and on the nature-based education activities of Kurt Han and the British Scouting and Woodcraft Folk movements, among other influences. Forest Schools have existed since the 1950’s in Scandinavian and other European countries and have proven to provide many, many benefits to all who participate.

The Many Benefits of Forest School: Forest School is suited to all ages and abilities. The aim of Forest School is to develop the learner holistically and at their own pace. The benefits of this holistic, learner-led approach can be transferred to the classroom where learners are found to be more motivated and able to concentrate more effectively.

Researched benefits of Forest School include:

- Are less likely to come down with common infections, since they spend little time inside, where viruses and bacteria thrive (Grahn, 1997).
- Have better motor skills, such as agility, balance and coordination (Fjortoft, 2014).
- Increased ability to perceive and manage risk (Savery et al, 2016).
- Engage in more imaginative and dynamic forms of play (Martensson, 2004).
- Are less likely to be overweight or obese (Boldermann et al, 2005).
- See improvements in confidence, social skills, language and communication, motivation and concentration (O'Brien, 2007).
- Become more resilient (Blackwell, 2015)
- Experience positive emotions, restorative effects and lowered stress levels as compared to a conventional indoor school (Roe, 2014).
- Heightened self-awareness, understanding and respect of themselves and the natural world (O'Brien, 2005).

KEY PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

“Never take the first plant you find, as it might be the last- and you want that first one to speak well of you to the others of her kind.” Robin Wall Kimmerer

Our Key Principles Include:

- **Trusting learners in their wholeness.** We believe all children are born perfect and have everything they need right inside of them. We want them not only to believe this, but to truly KNOW this. We often tell each child that they are whole, complete and enough. We tell ourselves the same and model love towards ourselves, each other and the greater world around us.
- **Total nature immersion.** Nature immersion is defined as unstructured free time in nature resulting in an intimate, deep and personal connection to the natural world.
- **Interest-led Flow Learning.** When learners become interested and excited about something, their sense of wonder leads to hunger for knowledge about that subject. Learners also retain more information when it is dispensed at that moment their curiosity is piqued. Deep learning takes place when learners are engaged in something that interests them and that is relevant to them.
- **Reggio-inspired Emergent Curriculum.** Our mentors have a wide array of knowledge that they draw on to mentor learners based on what nature presents each day. Many teachable moments arise spontaneously, based on the weather, the season and our daily nature finds. When a learner's interests guide their education, the curriculum arises naturally. It is important later to capture the learning and the learners are actively involved in recording their recollections, interests and discoveries.
- **Place-based Education with an emphasis on “Wild Tending”, “Stewardship” and “Honorable Harvest”.** We experience and teach about the natural world in the geographical location where we live. This helps the learners

connect with and care for their own home environment. Permanent location enables learners to witness seasonal changes to their specific landscape. Young learner's sense of place and belonging stem from their direct interactions with their immediate community; the people, the places, flora and fauna around them. They can feel rooted, connected and involved, leading to caring for their own home environment. Intimate knowing of a place develops responsibility and a desire for protection. Later environmental stewardship flows from early personal bonding and experience with a place. Learners also develop a sense of emotional security and learn that there are specific places in nature where they feel comfort and can calm themselves. Honorable Harvest includes: 1. Ask permission before harvesting, 2. Take only what you need and leave some for others, 3. Never take the first and never take the last.

- **Inquiry-based Teaching Style.** Asking open-ended questions for which there are really no wrong answers elicits conversations. Through the learner's own explorations and encouragement to express ideas, they learn to trust their own observations and discover there is more than one answer to any question. Through dialogue with our community, learners discover greater communication skills and this strategy leads to more divergent thinking and greater problem-solving skills.
- **Positive Reinforcement, Conscious and Respectful Behavioral Approach and Community Agreements.** We want to encourage and model positive behavior rather than accentuate misbehavior. Young learners tend to gravitate towards activities that get them attention and reprimanding a child often gets poor behavior to continue. Learners feel self-pride when they are noticed and complimented for qualities such as helpfulness, generosity and kindness. We also want learners to know that each of their voices and opinions matter and thus, our learners co-create their own agreements as a community and learn how to have a dialogue with each other and how to come to a consensus. We are ALL learners at Forest School.
- **Emphasis on Individual Empowerment and Group Bonding.** We want our learners to recognize both their own worth and unique abilities and those of others. Competition is prevalent in our world, pitting up against each other. The Forest School model values cooperation and teamwork and a sense that we can accomplish more when we work together. We also want learners to develop their ability to be comfortable on their own. We respect that some learners need time to develop their own understanding and may wish to work by themselves.

- **Respect and Empathy for Self, Others and Mama Earth.** This is the Forest School Way. Living harmoniously with others makes for a more peaceful and sustainable world. Treating ourselves with gentle kindness and respect flows outward and results in the ability for higher compassion towards others. Seeing ourselves as an integral part of the natural world leads us to want to protect and preserve all aspects of it.
- **Authentic Play.** Research shows young learners learn best through direct hands-on experience and through play, music and art, all the things that stimulate imagination and creativity.
- **Small Class Sizes. Low Mentor: Student Ratio.** This gives leaders the ability to follow the child and their interests and thus truly honor the interest-led aspect of the program. This also leads to relaxed low-stress mentors who can stay in creative mode rather than reactive mode. It gives mentors the ability to notice and praise positive behavior and then reinforce it in the moment. Small class sizes also leads to less impact on our physical site.
- **Exposure to Risk.** Learners exposed to individually appropriate risk receive fewer injuries because they are encouraged to develop their own risk assessment and response skills. Learners develop their instincts and self-confidence through facing challenges successfully and by learning how to fall and pick themselves back up.

Our Core Values Include:

Children/Learners—as inherently competent, intelligent, creative, and loving beings. We believe all children are born perfect, whole and complete. They are our future.

All Feelings are Welcome- All feelings have lessons to teach us and are welcomed to listen, hold space, process and share.

Curiosity—we harness the natural curiosity of young learners and try to keep them in a curious state as long as possible, because curiosity drives learning.

Helpfulness—young learners love to be helpful and we build on this desire, eventually introducing the concept of service.

Kindness, Consent, Boundaries and Respect—our bottom-line expectation is that we all treat ourselves, each other and Mama Earth with kindness and respect. We practice the Platinum Rule: Do unto others as THEY want done unto them.

Physical Experience—we strive to create a place where learners can be fully “in” their bodies, testing their limits and experiencing themselves as strong, confident physical beings. Sensory experiences are an important part of this, too. We know physical strength and sensory experiences are essential for optimal brain development, so we make sure our learners get lots of both.

Peacemaking—we create and maintain a culture where peace is honored, and when conflict arises, we address it using the concepts of empathy, inner peace, listening and using fine words, and looking for what everyone can agree on.

Ancestors—young learners are often surprised to learn that their parents have parents, their grandparents have grandparents, and on and on into the past. We teach respect for past generations, what they discovered, and what we can learn from them. As a corollary, we teach respect for future generations and what we can leave them.

Deep Nature Connection—is the feeling of being truly “at home” in nature, with a deep sense of loving and understanding the natural world of which you are a part. It leads both to an ethic of caring for Mama Earth and a sense of wholeness.

CURRICULUM AND CORE ROUTINES

“I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more.” John Burroughs

Our curriculum:

Nature is the teacher.

We are mentors helping learners connect with themselves, each other, nature and what has come before us.

We work with the learner's natural curiosity and passions. We gently motivate them to push their own comfort zones or “edges,” reading the ability level of each learner to provide appropriate challenges. We provide a safe, community-oriented learning environment where each individual's gifts are honored and learners develop positive relationships with themselves and others. Learners love it when adults play, learn and wonder with them; as mentors we are part of the group too! We engage their imaginations and help them focus their minds and incorporate lots of sensory experiences to cultivate a true love of learning.

Young learners learn through play and mimicry. Most of what we do each day looks and feels like play. Mentors and volunteers are also role models for dressing for the weather, being safe around fire, being active learners, being kind and respectful, caring for the land and more so the learners have positive models to mimic.

Every day, we use core routines to build the skills and habits of loving to learn, being happy, focusing attention, being physically active, being helpful, caretaking Mama Earth, being loving and quieting the mind.

Our Core Routines:

All sessions are designed and led by a Level 3 Forest School leader and qualified staff and volunteers. Each session is learner led and learners are given the freedom and responsibility to explore their interests and therefore initiate and direct their own learning. Our core routines include:

Giving Thanks—we start or end the day with a gratitude circle, and pause at other times as well to acknowledge what we value and think outside ourselves. We call in the 4 Directions and acknowledge those that came before us.

Hazard Identification—what every beginner needs to know to stay safe outdoors. We also work to develop common sense— “the least common”.

Sensory Awareness Activities—exercising our senses sharpens them and contributes to sensory integration. Attaching sensory information to a learning experience also makes it more memorable, and focusing on the senses relaxes and quiets the mind and body.

Games—sometimes organized, often not. Many are the wonderful, spontaneous creations of imaginative kids.

Animal Forms—thinking and moving like specific animals, we exercise our bodies, senses, and imaginations. Imagining being an animal may help a child learn how to empathize.

Group Singing and Storytelling—staples of every day. Songs and stories are used in so many ways: to inspire, teach, set the mood, lighten the workload, practice listening skills, bring a group together, and more.

Learners Telling Their Stories—For young learners, talking about what they just did is a chance to practice language skills as well as reflect on and integrate new experiences.

Ancestral Skills—such as shelter building, fire making, gathering, basket- and tool-making are hands-on activities that involve experiential problem solving and creativity; they also give learners a boost towards self-sufficiency and feeling “at home” in nature.

Celebration—inspires learning and builds community. There is always something to celebrate! Our celebration brings us full circle, back to gratitude.

FOREST SCHOOL AGREEMENTS, ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

“If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it. Perhaps this is what Thoreau had in mind when he said, “the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think the same is true of human beings.” David Sobel

Agreements:

All mentors and learners participating are encouraged to be involved in the decisions and agreements about their environment and safety; however, there are a few basic guidelines that the learners will be made aware of at the start of their Forest School experience. Behind each guideline, there is a range of learning opportunities that will encourage learners to engage with and understand these guidelines. **Each season, we will also work with our learners to co-create a larger Forest School Manifesto filled with agreements dedicated to themselves, each other and the greater world around us.**

1. The Forest School Way: Take care of yourself. Take care of each other. Take care of Mama Earth
2. Treat others as THEY would like to be treated (The “Platinum Rule”.)
3. Honorably Harvest. Ask permission before harvesting, Take only what you need and leave some for others, Never take the first and never take the last.

Our Mentors:

Each of our mentors are Level 3 Forest School practitioners and are endorsed by the Forest School Association. In addition to having diverse backgrounds, wild ones of their own, our mentors have trained for 300+ hours as Forest School practitioners and each year, we travel around the world to continue our nature connection education.

All additional staff and volunteers have undergone an appropriate process to assess their skills and suitability for working with young learners and have been subject to background

checks. Qualified outdoor first aiders staff all sessions and all staff have access to a recommended first aid kit.

- Our Forest School was founded by [Jordan Manfredi](#), a Level 3 Forest School Practitioner, former Tinkergarten leader and university professor. Jordan is a mama to two, Lily Love and Bear and loves being downright silly. She wholeheartedly believes in children, nature and magic.
- Our lead forest fairy, [Stacey Robinson](#) is also a Level 3 Forest School Practitioner and a former Tinkergarten leader with a background in Environmental policy. Stacey is also a mama to two, Bria and Milo and loves learning about the history of place through its plants.
- [Melissa Mapes](#) is an earth worker by day, and birth worker by night. She was born and raised in East Hampton and is a mother of two. She is a Level 3 certified forest school leader and our resident artists and is passionate about holding space for little ones to discover the magic of nature. She wholeheartedly believes in giving children the opportunity to expand their spiritual, emotional and physical attributes through risk taking and exploring, allowing them to establish a deep connection to nature at a young age with the dream of creating eco-conscious caretakers for the future of our planet.
- Our assistant leader, [Kristina Klimek](#) is a mother to Sunny Willow, a yoga therapist and an herbalist. Her undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies led her to the path of children's nature-based education. Kristina is passionate about inspiring children and adults alike to cultivate a heart centered relationship with Mother Earth and to align with the healing powers of nature.
- Assistant Mentor, [Romina Kramer](#) was a child immigrant; American grown with Ecuadorian roots. She's an Occupational Therapist registered and licensed in New York and a Stony Brook University graduate, working extensively in pediatric neuroscience. Her passion in supporting people to remember that they are perfectly made has led her to work as an out-patient rehab and school-based O.T. Motherhood has helped to deepen her love for neuroscience and social-emotional development as she bears witness to her son, Alexander's inquisitive and exploratory nature. She's a true believer that humanity needs to go back to the basics, to connect with nature in order to heal, to relearn to trust their intuition and be in awe of the world's beauty.
- [Winne Kuemmel](#), assistant mentor is a certified teacher with a background in special education. She is a Tinkergarten leader and mom to two boys, Dempsey and Julian. Her passion for learning through play has led her into the forest where she believes lies the heart of education. She is inspired by the imagination of children and how nature can be such a powerful playground for us all.

- Assistant mentor, [Jennifer Oehler](#) is a mother of two boys and has recently graduated from the Occupational Therapy Assistant program through SCCC with honors. Jennifer has been a creature of the forest since she was a child herself. She believes in the importance of self-discovery and healthy development for our children through the exploration of nature and boundary testing. Her insight into child-development through the lens of Occupational Therapy helps foster the personal growth and sensory development of our learners. She strongly believes children and adults alike benefit from a deep, meaningful connection with nature.

Our Community:

Community of Caregivers

Creating a sense of community around this Forest School model is helpful for ensuring a cultural understanding about the importance of connecting young learners with nature and to help caregivers feel supported with other caregivers who believe our program is the right choice for their family. We encourage caregivers to socialize in nature outside of class time so their learners deepen their connection with each other and reinforce their knowledge about nature. Furthermore, we provide a lending library and financial assistance both for tuition and clothing purchase. No child will be turned away from Forest School, regardless of race, gender identity, class, religion, ethnicity and/or ability.

Additionally, we know that the learner's caregivers are the most important role models in the lives of the learner and our goal is to partner with caregivers to create the greatest support system for the learners. With this in mind, we invite our caregivers to join us in our home in the woods to better understand the Forest School philosophy and the power of play, in real time. This way, we can work together, in and out of Forest School to create an environment dedicated to each unique learner and their growth.

We also host at least 2 community gatherings a year where all families are invited. We do this so it feels like we are part of a small community within the context of our larger civic community. These Wheel of the Year, seasonally inspired events include a St. Martin's Lantern Walk in November and a Beltain May Day Celebration in May. Each of these events is well attended and creates a warm connection between all the Aishling families, our program, and our site.

We remain dedicated to assisting caregivers' needs, as caregivers provide the supportive backbone to our program.

Community with Learners

Creating community among the learners is paramount. We emphasize respect for each other, empathy towards our friends and a social group that feels safe and supportive. We talk extensively about consent, boundaries and what it means to be a friend to all. At the start of the school year we talk about how we are all a forest family and the Forest School Way: **1. Take Care of Yourself, 2. Take Care of Each Other and 3. Take Care of Mama Earth**

Ecological Community

We refer to our site as our “Home in the Woods” knowing that it is our responsibility to care for and protect the living beings that also call it home. We learn about our land and how to identify indigenous plants and animals. For it we can’t name it, we can save it. Our attention to and care of the site is one of our gifts to the land. Laughing, engaged and attentive learners can help a place feel more alive. Each class, we will give thanks to the gifts the land offers: nourishment, sunshine and shade, areas to rest and to play, fresh air, and space for bare feet.

We often move our 'main home' area after a few seasons to give the original site time to recover from so much active use.

We also understand that we are guests on this ancestral land and will acknowledge, respect and pay tribute those that came before us. The CEED land has been blessed by the Shinnecock and Unkechaug Indian Nations and below is our land acknowledgement co-created by Ranger Eric Powers of CEED and Chief Harry Wallace of the Unkechaug Nation:

“I live in the Brookhaven area and it is with gratitude and humility that I acknowledge that I am speaking from the ancestral homelands of the Unkechaug people, who are the indigenous people of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from their homes, they have endured and today their main community is located in Mastic on the Poospatuck Reservation. We pay honor and respect to the spirit of their ancestors and we commit to building a more respectful, equitable and inclusive life for us all.”

Roles & Expectations:

What Your Learner Can Expect From Us

- To offer a positive, friendly learning environment. To hold space for each learner.
- To be loved, nurtured and celebrated as an individual.

- To be taught and mentored patiently in the areas of nature connection, social skills development, and community membership.

What Caregivers Can Expect From Us

- To manage physical risks appropriately. We will identify hazards and point them out to our learners. We will be as safe as necessary, not as possible.
- To communicate with you if your learner is having difficulty meeting our expectations, and together we will make a plan for helping your learner succeed.
- To communicate weather and gear needs on a regular basis. You can expect a weather update prior to each class from us.
- To regularly update, in person, via text and via email on what we've been doing. We will not take regular photos while in the woods, as photo taking can be distracting to play. We may take 1-2 photos per session for our recap emails.

What We Need From Your Learner

- To treat self and others with kindness and respect
- To follow guidelines
- To stay with the group
- To treat Mama Earth with kindness and respect

What We Need From Caregivers

- To communicate with us any special needs or concerns.
- To understand that rough play will occur throughout the season, as that is developmentally appropriate inside the context of dynamic, unstructured play and socio-emotional learning. We will continuously check in with the learners and help them to explore their boundaries and consent.
- To know that traditional academic learning does not occur at Forest School. We will not be teaching learners how to read or write. If the learner brings a desire to dig into those areas further, we will support them. Nature and Play is our only curriculum and this is because it's backed by brain research as the most developmentally appropriate type of learning for young learners. Play-based research articles can be found [here](#) and are updated on a regular basis.
- To arrive on time. Our community-meeting circle ends a half hour after arrival. We cannot accommodate learners arriving after that time, as we will be in the woods.

- To bring your learner to school each day prepared for the weather and with plenty of food and water. If your learner does not have the proper gear for the weather, he/she/they will not be permitted to stay at Forest School until they are properly geared up.
- To manage your learner's time and needs. Overscheduling your little(s) day does not help them thrive, as overstimulation can lead to fatigue and stress. Please do not plan back to back activities before or after Forest School and please provide snacks for after Forest School as your learner may be hungry from playing hard.
- Your feedback on how we are doing and your ideas or wishes for the program

* Please discuss these with your learner, as you deem appropriate. We are looking for these behaviors to occur most of the time, but we understand that learners will be inconsistent in how completely they meet these expectations. We will grow with them.

CAREGIVER INVOLVEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

“Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives.” Thomas Berry

Caregiver Involvement:

We hope you will be excited to get involved in our Forest School community. It is our goal to create a culture and community of connection and we can't do that without you. Besides, it's fun! Opportunities for involvement include helping out at open houses, joining us in the woods during Forest School sessions, attending end of program celebrations and helping organize and/or attending other community events.

We also need your help to support your learner's experience and extend the learning and connections beyond Forest School. There are many ways you can be supportive, including having a positive attitude yourself about things your learner does that might seem “yucky” or scary (getting wet or muddy, touching bugs and slugs, being outside in the cold) and role modeling being relaxed and happy about saying goodbye at drop-off time. We will communicate with you regularly about what we've been up to so you can ask your learner questions; telling their stories is an important way for learners to integrate their new knowledge. Feel free to ask us for even more information to inform your queries.

There are also opportunities for you to learn more about the mentoring model we use and become able to use some of the techniques yourself at home. A terrific resource is Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature, by Jon Young, Ellen Haas, and Evan McGown. We will also offer up our Lending Library for you to use and will hand out relevant articles during drop-off and pick-up. In addition, we will be looking to offer Forest School training programs in the near future.

Communication & Caregivers with Us:

Your primary route for communicating with Aishling Forest School is with your mentors, face to face. We are always open to making ourselves available after each session. If a private meeting is desired, feel free to reach out to us and we'll gladly set something up.

We can also be reached via email and/or via cell (call/text):

Jordan: Jordan@aishlingforestschool.com/ cell: (917) 705-0046
Stacey: Szpyt@gmail.com/ cell: (201) 819-3824
Melissa: Melissa@theaishlingforestschool.com/ cell: (631) 377-6264
Kristina: motherearthyogallc@gmail.com/ cell: (631) 487-4980
Winnie: wkuemmel3@gmail.com/ cell: (631) 793-6118
Jennifer: Oehler.JenniferM@gmail.com/ cell: (631) 241-4032
Romina: rominaisabelk@gmail.com/ cell: (631) 879-8517

Texts are generally preferred over calls during program times and to let us know if you're going to be late.

**We encourage your feedback. If we don't know about a problem, we can't fix it.
Thank you, in advance.**

Us with Caregivers:

While your child is at Forest School, we may call you if there are problems or questions. Outside of program hours, email and group texts are our main method of communication and we really rely on it to share important, sometimes health-and-safety related information. If email is not an effective way of reaching you within a 48-hour timeframe, please let us know what would be better.

Please note that we do not allow electronic devices in our woods, as to maintain the experience of nature immersion and to minimize distractions. Our mentors will have a cell phone on them at all times, in case of emergency.

Among Caregivers:

We do not give out caregiver contact information. We do create group texts for weather and class updates and caregivers may wish to reach out to the other caregivers individually. We also encourage our caregivers to stay and play in our main meeting area, to chat, relax, read from our Lending Library, carpool, set up play dates etc. The space is yours to enjoy, as well!

DROP OFF/PICK UP INSTRUCTIONS AND WHAT TO BRING

**“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”
- Albert Einstein**

Our opening circle begins 15 minutes after the start of class. 10 minutes prior to the end of class, we walk back up to our community area for tick checks and pick up.

Our community-meeting circle ends approx. 45 minutes after arrival. We cannot accommodate learners arriving after that time, as we will be in the woods. If you are running more than 15 minutes late, please text one of your mentors.

Please note that late pickups (20 minutes after the end of class) will incur a fee of \$20 for each 15 minutes or portion thereof. Drop off and pick up will take place in designated community areas.

On the first day of the season, we will need a few extra minutes with you in order to receive your learner's extra gear bag.

What to Bring:

Come rain, sun or snow, we will be outside. In extreme weather (see our Weather Policy below) Forest School will be cancelled and you will be notified via text. For you and your learner's safety and enjoyment, it's essential that they have what they need each time they arrive at Forest School. If even one caregiver or learner is unable to stay warm, it can affect the program, as we may need to shorten our program for safety. Keep in mind that even on dry days learners may get wet and wet can equal cold! If a learner arrives at school without the proper gear, our mentors may decide it is not safe for him or her to stay. In this situation, you would be asked to return with your learner later in the day with adequate gear.

A note about fabrics: Cotton conducts away body heat if it gets wet- even damp with sweat. This makes it great for t-shirts on hot summer days (and fine on warm days in the fall and spring) but in general we avoid cotton the rest of the year. Polyester, silk and wool are recommended in an outdoor environment that is sometimes wet.

We encourage you to do some “pre-season” warm-ups by labeling all your gear, having your learner practice getting their gear on and off and going on a few hikes with all their gear. We

also encourage you to have your learner practice cleaning up their lunches after they are done and putting their remaining snacks and water bottles back in their backpacks. Please note, that packing in and out personal gear is a learner's responsibility and the more practice they have the better.

Please also bring extra gear for your little learners. We will be getting dirty! On the first day of the season, please bring the required extra gear in a plastic grocery bag with a name on it. Anytime you need to replenish the bag, bring replacement items the same way. The plastic bag is what we will use to send wet gear home. Please use and bring only clothing and footwear that you don't mind getting wet and dirty. Please label all items, including backpacks, with a name.

Note: The required items do NOT need to be purchased new. Check out thrift stores or let your friends know that you're looking for hand-me-downs.

What NOT to Bring:

- Please do NOT send glass containers, e.g. for snacks or water. Even when covered in plastic mesh, there is too great a risk that these items will break and leave glass shards in our woods.
- Snacks that create a lot of trash. Bento-boxes are great options that can provide a lot of litter-free variety.
- Also, please do not bring toys, electronic devices or potentially hazardous objects to school.

Fall/Early Winter to Bring:

Every day of the program, the learner will have two sources of gear: what they are wearing and what is in their backpack.

How to dress (Fall/Early Winter):

Learners should dress for the weather that is forecasted that day. The following list of appropriate clothing is for EVERYONE participating in Forest School; learners, mentors, and assisting caregivers.

- Permethrin pretreated Oaki rain suit or seasonally appropriate outerwear
- Snow suit as needed
- Hooded top/fleece or thick sweater

- Thick socks (thermal or two pairs of thin ones. Cotton socks are not recommended. Polyester, silk or wool socks are much better.)
- Pants (Jeans are not recommended as they can be uncomfortable and take a long time to dry. Quick-drying polyester pants, like jogging pants or fleece pants are better)
- Pre-treated Wellington rubber boots, hiking boots, or warm, waterproof closed toed shoes

The Backpack (Fall/Early Winter):

- **Healthy snacks and water** in easy to carry containers. Please pack nutrient-dense, healthy snacks and plenty of water. Tupperware and bento-boxes work well, as do “thermos”-type insulated containers. Please don’t send glass! All snacks must be peanut free. There are many kids’ water bottles available; check for leak-proofness and ease of use by your learner. During cold weather (45 degrees or colder), a thermos of warm water or herbal tea helps learners drink more and stay hydrated.
- **One small non-breakable hot cup** for drinking wild teas. We often have hot cocoa (vegan available), in addition to our herbal wild teas.
- Optional hat: Warm hats (wool or fleece, not cotton) really help warm the whole body when the weather is cold, or even on a cool morning.
- If sunscreen or bug repellent is necessary, please apply them to your child in the morning. If you want to re-apply these during the day, please put them in a bag with your name on it to be left in her backpack. Due to skin allergies and preferences, we are unable to supply these products, and we don’t want our learners handling them on their own.
- Mittens: If it’s cold enough to need mittens use non-cotton and preferably waterproof. Mittens are MUCH warmer than gloves.

Spring/Early Summer to Bring:

Every day of the program, the learner will have two sources of gear:

what they are wearing and what's in their backpack.

How to dress (Spring/Early Summer):

Learners should dress for the weather that is forecast that day. The following list of appropriate clothing is for EVERYONE participating in Forest School;

- Permethrin pretreated Oaki rain suit or seasonally appropriate outerwear. Oaki wear can get hot in the warmer months, so having a lighter pre-treated option is helpful.
- Long sleeve t shirt or t shirt - if the learner is wearing a shirt, please make sure there is tick repellent on the skin
- Light trousers. **NO SHORTS.** Legs to be covered in woodland to prevent ticks and poison ivy.
- Socks
- Sneakers, shoes or Wellington boots. **NO OPEN TOED SHOES.**

The Backpack (Spring/Early Summer):

- **Healthy snacks and water** in easy to carry containers.. Please pack nutrient-dense, healthy snacks and plenty of water. Tupperware and bento-boxes work well, as do “thermos”-type insulated containers. Please don't send glass! All snacks must be peanut free. There are many kids' water bottles available; check for leak-proofness and ease of use by your learner.
- **One small non-breakable hot cup** for drinking wild teas.
- Optional hat and sunglasses: sun hats (such as baseball caps) really help to keep cool and protect the face and eyes from the sun. Sunglasses can also be helpful in keeping UV rays out of our learner's eyes. We recommend unbreakable polarized sports sunglasses with a headband.
- If sunscreen or bug repellent is necessary, please apply them to your child in the morning. If you want us to re-apply these during the day, please put them in a bag with your child's name on it to be left in her backpack. Due to skin allergies and preferences, we are unable to supply these products, and we don't want our learners handling them on their own.

Healthy Snacks:

It's advised that you pack a nutrient-dense, healthy snack or two in your child's backpack. Snacks are important for your learner's ability to stay warm and energized. Families are responsible for sending a variety of healthy snacks each day. On occasion, we will be providing homemade, organic, nutritious snacks made by our resident, Foodie Fairy Ariana Curcio. These snacks will be offered at the beginning of class for learners and caregivers to enjoy. Ariana will also provide recipes if you'd like to recreate at home.

When in doubt, send more than you think you should! It's important for learners to have snacks that provide long-burning energy (aka low-glycemic foods). Examples include sunflower butter, cheese, yogurt, meat, hummus, coconut oil, fruit, veggies, and oatmeal. Please do not provide snacks with nuts. Having snacks ready in the car after class is also a good idea!

Some days we will have a fire and we will let you know prior; in case we do, you might want to include some food that can be stuck on a stick and roasted over the coals (examples: apple slices, whole bananas etc.) A banana in its skin is easy to throw on the coals and turns into yummy banana pudding.

We sometimes provide a special snack as part of an activity or birthday celebration, such as apples that we roast on the fire or wild foods (which might include domestic ingredients, such as a batter for making damper bread). Be sure to let us know about any food sensitivities or dietary preferences.

If you want to send a snack to share, such as for a birthday or cultural celebration, please let us know (in advance if possible) and give the treat to a mentor.

AISHLING FOREST SCHOOL

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

“Unlike television, nature does not steal time; it amplifies it. Nature offers healing for a child living in a destructive family or neighborhood.” - Richard Louv

Weather Policy:

There is a lot to learn and much play to be had in the rain and snow and classes will run in both. This same “game on!” policy holds true if the weather is hot, cold or windy. With the right clothing, learners will typically have a great learning experience outside.

There are however, certain conditions that we deem not conducive to safe and productive learning- if weather is dangerously hot (above 90 degrees Fahrenheit) or cold (below 32 degrees Fahrenheit), if winds are high (over 25mph) or if there is a threat of lightning, classes will be relocated (to a non- wooded area if high winds) or cancelled. On the day prior to each class, leaders will group text with weather announcements, any changes to class and suggestions for clothing. Based on the weather, we may need to shorten or cancel classes. Below is a helpful weather guideline chart that we will be referring to prior to each class:

Understand the Weather

Wind-Chill

- 30° is **chilly** and generally uncomfortable
- 15° to 30° is **cold**
- 0° to 15° is **very cold**
- -20° to 0° is **bitter cold** with significant risk of **frostbite**
- -20° to -60° is **extreme cold** and **frostbite** is likely
- -60° is **frigid** and exposed **skin will freeze** in 1 minute

Heat Index

- 80° or below is considered **comfortable**
- 90° beginning to feel **uncomfortable**
- 100° **uncomfortable** and may be **hazardous**
- 110° considered **dangerous**

All temperatures are in degrees Fahrenheit Weather Guidelines for Children

Weather Guidelines for Children

		Wind-Chill Factor Chart (in Fahrenheit)								
		Wind Speed in mph								
Air Temperature		Calm	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40
	40	40	36	34	32	30	29	28	28	27
	30	30	25	21	19	17	16	15	14	13
	20	20	13	9	6	4	3	1	0	-1
	10	10	1	-4	-7	-9	-11	-12	-14	-15
	0	0	-11	-16	-19	-22	-24	-26	-27	-29
-10	-10	-22	-28	-32	-35	-37	-39	-41	-43	

 Comfortable for out door play  Caution  Danger

		Heat Index Chart (in Fahrenheit %)												
		Relative Humidity (Percent)												
Air Temperature (F)		40	45	50	55	60	65	70	75	80	85	90	95	100
	80	80	80	81	81	82	82	83	84	84	85	86	86	87
	84	83	84	85	86	88	89	90	92	94	96	98	100	103
	90	91	93	95	97	100	103	105	109	113	117	122	127	132
	94	97	100	103	106	110	114	119	124	129	135			
	100	109	114	118	124	129	130							
104	119	124	131	137										

Refund and Makeup-Class Policy:

Some classes may need to be shortened (those circumstances highlighted in yellow above) or cancelled (those circumstances highlighted in red above) due to weather or other emergency circumstances. If we need to cancel more than 3 classes in a season, we will look to provide up to 2 makeup classes prior to the following season. If that isn't possible, we will refund \$100 to your final tuition payment. If financial assistance is needed, please do not hesitate to reach out to either Jordan to look into possible arrangements.

Sick and Injured Learner Policy:

Forest School is an active, outdoor program. Your learner needs to feel well enough to participate in order to be out with us. After an illness or injury, your learner must be able to keep up with the group and participate safely in order to attend. We do not have the staff resources to nurse a sick child, so if your child becomes unwell and in need of one-on-one attention during program hours, we will call you to come and pick her/ him/they up.

The CDC recommends that people with influenza-like illness remain at home until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100-degree F) or signs of a fever without the use of fever-reducing medications.

Medication Administration Policy:

Caregivers are required to provide a doctor's written order and information for any medication (prescription or O.T.C.) that your learner may be taking during programs. All medication must be in its original container. When you sign your child into a program a designated instructor will sign in any medication and will carry it until needed by your learner. When the program is over, be sure to sign out your child's medication.

By NYS Health Department regulations, all medications must be self-administered unless the child is unable to do so.

Toileting Arrangements:

- Learners can go for a 'wild wee' in our woods or a 'wild pooh' at our designated outhouse, which will include toilet paper and wipes. Mentors are available to help learners with toileting, as well.
- Diligent hand washing is an important part of maintaining our physical health. Learners are required to wash hands thoroughly for 30 seconds with a scrub brush.
- Hand sanitizer gel will be carried in the emergency rucksack.

Wetting or Soiling:

- If a learner has a wetting or soiling incident they will be changed into their change of clothes.

Conscious and Respectful Learning and Behavior Policy:

Aishling Forest School accepts the feelings and emotions affecting conduct at Forest School and works to help learners understand, celebrate and manage those feelings as appropriate to themselves and others.

At Aishling Forest School, we believe in conscious and respectful learning. Our wholehearted learning manifesto (for learners, mentors, caregivers and volunteers) includes:

- Starting from a place of love, love for yourself and for others. Our goal is to help learners to know that they are cared for and loveable. They will learn this from our words and actions. The lessons of love and respect are in how we treat each other, how you treat yourself and how you treat your environment.
- As a whole, we will practice courage at our school by showing up, letting ourselves be seen and honoring vulnerability. We will also practice anti-racism, inclusion, boundaries and consent.
- Our mentors and learners will engage with the world from a place of worthiness. We will all learn that we are worthy of love, belonging and joy every time our learners see us practice self-compassion and through our ability to embrace our own imperfections.
- We will share our stories of struggle and strength. There will always be room for both at Forest School.
- We will teach compassion for yourself, others and Mama Earth by practicing compassion with ourselves first: then with each other.
- We will set and respect boundaries; we will honor hard work, hope and perseverance. Rest and play will be school values, as well as school practices.
- All will learn accountability and respect by watching us each make mistakes and make amends, and by watching how we ask for what we need and talk about how we feel. We want others to know joy, so together we will practice gratitude.

- We want to all feel joy, so together we will learn how to be vulnerable.
- When uncertainty and scarcity visit, we will encourage all to draw from the spirit that is a part of our everyday life.
- Together, we may cry and face fear and grief. As mentors, caregivers and volunteers, we may want to take away someone else's pain, but instead we will sit with our learners and teach them how to feel it.
- We will laugh, sing and dance and create. We will have permission to be ourselves with each other. No matter what, each of us belongs here.
- The greatest gift we can give to ourselves and to our learners is to live with love and to dare greatly.
- We will not teach or love or show anything perfectly, but we will let each other see us and hold sacred the gift of seeing our learners. Truly, deeply seeing them.

Conscious and Respectful Learning and Behavior Practices:

- Our basic expectations are that learners stay with the group, follow guidelines, and treat everyone (and Mama Earth) with kindness and respect. We recognize that these are skills young learners of all abilities are just beginning to acquire and our goal is to role model, coach and facilitate them. We do this by using reminders and logical consequences and teaching what we call peacemaking: managing conflict through empathy, inner peace, communication and validation and seeking agreement.
- If peacemaking is called for, we implement this by allowing the learner recovery time, to sit with a leader, take some deep breaths and to re-center themselves. The mentor's job is not to solve the issue but to hold space for the learner and to let them feel what they are feeling. Once all involved are grounded and able to thoughtfully discuss the situation, they can then discuss possible resolutions. This may need to take place during the start of the next session. We will

also refer to our learner-led agreements and hold community-wide discussions, if needed.

- If, after some coaching, the learner consistently has difficulty meeting any of our basic expectations, we will let caregivers know, so we can all put our heads together about how best to support the learner.
- We would also inform a caregiver—during program hours, if appropriate—if your learner behaves in a way that could be a danger to the learner or others.
- Deescalation techniques will be used if a learner’s behavior becomes unsafe to themselves or others. If needed, the learner will be temporarily removed from play and reassessed with the learner’s caregiver. We will continue to provide intervention techniques to the learner and their caregivers to best support the learner in their time of need.

Equality & Diversity Policy:

Statement of Intent: Aishling Forest School is committed to providing equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice for all children and families, regardless of race, gender identity, class, religion, ethnicity and/or ability

We aim to:

- Provide a secure environment in which offers all learners of different abilities an opportunity to flourish and in which all contributions are valued.
- Include and value the contribution of all families to our understanding of equality and diversity;
- Provide positive non-stereotyping information about different ethnic groups, gender-identities and uniquely abled people;
- Improve our knowledge and understanding of issues of equality and diversity
- Make inclusion a thread which runs through all of the activities at Forest School

Glossary of terms & abbreviations

- **Equity** – equity is often conflated with the term “Equality” (meaning sameness). In fact, true equity implies that an individual may need to experience or receive something different (not equal) in order to maintain fairness and access.

- **Diversity** – the recognition that there are many different groups of people in society; the practice of including and involving people from a range of different groups, including but not limited to, social and ethnic backgrounds, different genders, sexual orientations, and abilities.
- **Inclusion** – the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised. It is the process whereby different groups or individuals are culturally and socially accepted, valued and welcomed. This is an organisational effort.
- **LGBTIQA+** – including, but not limited to, individuals who self-define as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning, Asexual, Ally, Pansexual, Agender, Gender Queer, Bigender, Gender Variant, Pangender.
- **Neurodiversity** – the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits regarded as part of normal variation in the human population. Neurodiversity is the idea that neurological variations are known and valued as any other human variation. These variations can include, but are not limited to: Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD or dyspraxia), Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), Tourette Syndrome (TS), Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) and others.

Our Equality and Diversity Methods:

Admissions-

- Our Forest School is open to all members of the community.
- We reflect the diversity of our members in our publicity and promotional materials.
- We do not discriminate against a learner or refuse entry because of race, gender identity, ability and/or income.
- We ensure our caregivers are made aware of our equal opportunities policy.
- We develop an action plan with the caregivers to ensure that people with any special needs can thrive in Forest School.

Employment-

- We aim to offer employment opportunities to all qualified adults and seek to diversify our mentorship, which includes hiring diverse outside experts in their fields and bringing them into Forest School sessions and/or to mentor our organization
- Mentors are employed based on their qualifications and experience and subject to Background Checks. All job descriptions and job announcements include a commitment to equality and diversity as part of their specifications.

Training-

- We seek out training opportunities for mentors to enable them to develop practices which enable all children to flourish.
- We review our practices to ensure that we are fully implementing our policy for equality and diversity.

Curriculum-

- Nature and play do not discriminate and thus our Forest School encourages learners to develop positive attitudes to people who are different from themselves. It encourages children to empathize with others and to begin to develop the skills of critical thinking.
- We do this by:
 - Making learners feel valued and celebrated;
 - Ensuring that learners have equal access to play and learning;
 - Supporting a wide range of neurodiversity, mental health and behavioral needs outdoors;
 - Reflecting the widest possible range of communities in the choice of resources and tools;
 - Avoiding stereotypes and derogatory language and creating an environment of mutual respect and tolerance;
 - Helping learners to understand that discriminatory behavior and remarks are unacceptable
 - Ensuring what is offered is inclusive of learners with unique educational needs and learners with different abilities; and
 - Ensuring that learners whose first language is not English have full access to are supported in their learning.

Valuing Diversity in Families-

- We welcome the diversity of family life and work with all families. We offer financial assistance whenever needed.
- We encourage learners to contribute stories of their everyday life and each child to have a voice to share their stories, ideas and opinions.
- We encourage caregivers to take part in our Forest School and to share their stories and unique experiences and talents.
- For families who have a first language other than English, we value the contribution their culture and language offer.

Food-

- We work in partnership with caregivers to ensure that the medical, cultural and dietary needs of learners are met.
- We help learners to learn about a wide range of food, cultural approaches to mealtimes and eating and to respect the differences among them.

This policy was adopted at Aishling Forest School meeting and adapted from the Two Rivers Forest School.

Date: May 2021

Date for next review: May 2022

MORE OF OUR FAVORITE NATURE QUOTES:

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.” Rachel Carson

“Every tree and plant in the meadow seemed to be dancing, those which average eyes would see as fixed.” Rumi

“Time spent amongst trees is never wasted time.” Katrina Mayer

“May your search through nature lead you to yourself.” Author Unknown

“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.” William Shakespeare

“We don’t own this land, though we act as we do. It belongs to the children of our children’s kids.” The Grateful Dead

“Nature never did betray the heart that loved her.” William Wadsworth

“I am in love with this world. I have nestled lovingly in it. I have climbed its mountains, roamed in its forests, crossed its deserts, sailed its waters, felt the stings of its frost, the drench of its rains, the oppression of its heats, the fury of its winds and always have beauty and joy waited upon my goings and comings.” John Burroughs

“There is no bad weather. Bad weather is merely the fear of spoiling one’s clothes. Fancy clothing is one of the greatest obstacles to the knowledge of nature.” Ranger Eric Powers

“It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.” Kahil Gabran

“Nature does not rush, yet everything is accomplished.” Lao Tzu