



Nature's Tracks
~Forest Play Programs~

Parent Handbook
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Welcome to Nature's Tracks Forest Play!

Our philosophy for our Forest Play programs has evolved through years of experience working with children, youth and adults in wilderness areas and parks, studying nature connection mentoring, and through our own experiences as parents of young children. Positive experiences in nature can heighten our children's natural curiosity, awe and wonder. Through play, stories, natural living skills and the art of observation, listening and questioning, we aim to nurture positive relationships with all life.

We've put this **Parent Handbook** together to provide you with some important information and to answer common questions we get about our program. If you have additional questions, please don't hesitate to contact us.

We are looking forward to growing the relationship we have with many of you and getting to know those of you who are joining our program for the first time.

Thank you for supporting
Nature's Tracks Forest Play!



WHO ARE WE?

We are nature connection mentors, professionally accredited guides and parents who believe nature is one of our greatest teachers. Our vision is to nurture positive relations with all life by fostering a deep connection with the natural world.

Our Team

Dave Verhulst

Dave has been sharing his passion for the natural and cultural history of wild places in Alberta since 2000. He has a Master's degree in Recreation Management, is an accredited Master Interpretive Guide through the Interpretive

Guides Association and a Wilderness First Responder.

Dave has had a colourful career in the outdoors - In addition to his work with Nature's Tracks Forest Play, he works as a facilitator for the Pacific Centre for Leadership, for Leadership Development at the Banff Centre and as a Nordic Ski Instructor. He has also worked as Fire Communications Officer for Parks Canada, Executive Director of the Interpretive Guides Association, a canoeing guide and as a park interpreter in the mountain national parks and in Dinosaur Provincial Park. He loves playing outside, sharing stories and connecting both children and adults with the magic of the natural world.

Leanne Allison

Leanne Allison is a local filmmaker and adventurer with a passion for connecting kids with nature. Her knack for storytelling and a lifetime of long remote wilderness trips make her a natural fit for Forest Play. Her 10 year old son is a long-time Forest Play participant and his enthusiasm for the program was a big motivation to get involved.

[Click here for links to her award-winning films produced by the National Film Board of Canada.](#)

Christie Thomson

First and foremost Christie likes to laugh, learn and play outside with kids. She loves campfires, good stories, and believes that connecting with nature is fundamental for good health.

Christie's career in outdoor/environmental education started when she worked as an Ontario camp counsellor roughly 15 years ago. Since then, she's developed and delivered children's programs for the Prairie Learning Centre, Friends of Jasper, and Massawippi Water Protection Association. Christie is a qualified teacher and recently explored how we can teach and learn for meaningful/spiritual relations with nature in her Master's thesis. She is excited to be a part of the Forest Play team and looks forward to exploring the wonders Canmore's forests through this new lens.

Ronna Schneberger

Ronna has been a professional guide and naturalist since 1993 in the mountain parks. She has a degree in Recreation Management and enjoys sharing stories about the unique natural and cultural history of the Rockies with people from near and far. She is a certified Hiking Guide with the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, a Nordic ski instructor, Wilderness First Responder and is a Master Interpreter accredited by the Interpretive Guides Association. It is her

goal to help people develop a reverence for this wondrous place, and teach them how to enhance their personal connection with nature and themselves where ever they live.

All paid staff working in our program have completed a criminal record check through the RCMP and are trained in First Aid and CPR. A minimum of one staff member in all programs is trained and current in Wilderness First Aid (80 hr course).

Mentoring Philosophy

We believe nature experiences should be fun, magical and facilitated in a way that children feel safe and supported as they explore the edges of their world. When children are connected to the natural world, they are more connected to themselves, they are happier and more hopeful. We assist children in building new strengths and awareness of who they are as individuals and members of a larger community.

Children learn best when they are curious and having fun. We emphasize experiential and play-based learning through sensory awareness and active contact with the environment.

We have built Nature's Tracks Forest Play programs around cycles in nature and the life stages children naturally move through. Our programming foundation is the 8 Shields/Coyote Mentoring Model (www.8shields.org). It is unique blend of traditional knowledge from cultures around the world, scientific research on nature connection and is grounded in the rhythms of the natural world

Coyote Mentoring/8 Shields Mentoring

Coyote mentoring is a method of sharing knowledge of, and connection to, nature. It taps into the passions that exist within each child and inspires them to extend and expand this motivation. The model evolved out of how traditional hunter-gatherer cultures around the globe passed on knowledge and connection to their children. It was mapped by Jon Young and is often called the “invisible school” because it is a cultural learning model that gets kids learning and connected without them knowing it.

Coyote Mentoring is founded on the gift principle – the knowledge that everyone comes into the world bearing unique gifts to share with their community. Our job as parents, friends, teachers and mentors is to help children grow more fully into their gifts. We do this by gently drawing children to the edge of their knowledge and experience and guiding them into new territory.



At it's best (and over the long term), Coyote Mentoring helps awaken the "8 Attributes of connection."



When we grow more fully into ourselves more of these attributes emerge and we feel more alive and healthy.

Fully awakening these eight attributes takes a life time and the work of a village. At Forest Play, we are committed to modeling these attributes to the best of our ability and working with children to awaken them as they move forward within our program.

We use a number of techniques or “Core Routines” to draw out these 8 attributes. **Core Routines** are learning habits people practice to learn nature’s ways. Here is a short list of some of the core routines we practice within Forest Play on a regular basis:

- 1) **Sit spot** – With most young children, this time of being quiet with all senses alert takes place during games like hide and seek. This time is important and establishes brain patterns that will help them have a more refined sit spot as they get older. As the child matures, the skill also matures.
- 2) **Story of the day** – at the end of each day, we review some of the highlights and provide space for reflection and recalling stories from the day. As parents, you play a key role in receiving the stories from your child. It is critical that the story is received well by those who are told about it. Pay attention & ask questions that take them deeper. Celebrate the wonder and magic that is shared. Share your own stories too.
- 3) **Expanding our senses** – Children are naturally in tune with their senses. We regularly get kids to smell, taste, listen, touch, and see things that stretch their awareness and knowledge. This might include tasting rose hips, feeling the difference between common juniper and creeping juniper, smelling pine needles and fir needles, searching for objects that are hidden, etc. It might also be practicing “deer ears,” “owl eyes” and other techniques specifically designed to enhance sensory awareness.
- 4) **Questioning & Tracking** –Questioning is used to increase awareness and attention to specific identifying information. This type of questioning often encourages children to form their answers in their own mind without saying them out-loud, so that other learners can form their own knowledge.
- 5) **Animal forms** - Children learn to move as different animals, learning new ways of moving for strength and flexibility as well as identifying the strengths of each animal.
- 6) **Exploring Field guides** – we turn to field guides to find some of the answers to our questions. More often than not, the answers we find lead to more questions and the magic continues!
- 7) **Thanksgiving-** We spend time each day bringing awareness to those things that we are thankful for.

The Natural Learning Cycle:

The 8 Shields mentoring model is based on the patterns that can be observed in nature – patterns that affect us on a day to day basis, but that many of us are unconscious of. If you were to choose a point on a compass to place the sunrise, or the Spring thaw, or a child's birth, you would probably place them in the East. When you associate these cycles with the basic directions you get the "feeling" for the symbolic or archetypal energy of each "shield" or direction. This is how we guide our planning, instruction and reflection process. We will provide more information about this concept to anyone who expresses interest.



Parent Involvement

Parent interaction and involvement is valued and encouraged. Children need a village and you, as parents, know your child better than anyone else. If you are interested in volunteering in your child's program, please contact Program staff.

What does your child need to bring to Forest Play?

Children will be outdoors everyday they are with us throughout the seasons. Weather in the Canadian Rockies is variable and we can experience snow, cold, heat, rain and sun in every season. It is imperative that children arrive prepared for outdoor play and adventure. Children who are well dressed and prepared are comfortable, happy and able to participate fully in all activities.

What to Bring:

- Food and water
 - Half day programs:* snacks and lunch (if applicable for your program) and at least 500 ml of water. For winter programs, we highly recommend a small thermos for warm drinks (tea, hot chocolate, etc).
 - Full day programs:* snacks (enough for morning and afternoon snack), Lunch and at least 1 litre of water. For winter programs, we highly recommend a small thermos for warm drinks (tea, hot chocolate, etc).

- Clothing that is appropriate for the weather. Please monitor the weather, dress your child in layers and always pack extra layers for your child as the weather can change a lot over the course of a day.

Items to pack and/or wear will depend on the season. Here is a general list:

- Rain gear (pants and jacket)
- Touque
- Mittens or gloves (yes, we sometimes need these in summer)
- Coat/Fleece
- Sturdy footwear (rain boots for wet weather, insulated snow boots in winter and sturdy running/hiking shoes in fall, spring and summer. NO flip flops or CROCS please!)
- Sunhat/sunscreen
- Personal Medications (if needed)
- Extra Clothing: Please pack a change of seasonably appropriate clothing; socks, top, pants, underwear (in a zip lock bag). For fall, winter and spring programs, please pack an extra pair of mittens.
- Daypack – a size comfortable for your child to carry (we'll be moving from spot to spot, so there will be opportunities to put it down while we are playing games or doing camp

Dressing for Winter Programs

Children who are well prepared and dressed can enjoy winter even on very cold days. We have a tipi with a fire as a warming shelter and even with outside temperatures of -26 C we are able to get the temperature inside the Tipi to +9 C. Being warm in winter requires appropriate layering. Here are some tips for layering (from the feet to the head) that will keep your child warm and happy:

Feet:

- Wear warm wool or wool-poly blend socks (When we slide down slopes, they often get snow in their boots because their internal gaiters slide up. When cotton socks get wet, they are VERY cold, so please do not send your child with cotton socks). If your child's boots are big, consider wearing two pairs of socks (note: if your child's boots are snug with one layer of socks, do not add a second layer - squished toes get cold quickly)
- Wear warm winter boots - Bogs generally are not warm enough for temperatures below -10C (despite what the advertising says). Boots

should have thick insulation - particularly around the bottom part of the boot.

Legs:

- long underwear (poly or wool blends are best)
- Fleece pants are great to wear over top of the long underwear (if you don't have fleece pants, wear a warmer layer of pants over top of the long underwear)
- snow pants/ski pants - these insulated pants are GREAT for trapping the heat and keeping kids warm as they play in the snow

Torso:

- base layer (light poly or wool-blend shirt is best to wear against the skin because it wicks moisture away from the skin)
- insulation layer (fleece or wool sweater - depending on the thickness, consider wearing two or three layers of insulation)
- snow jacket/ski jacket (something thick with lots of insulation)

Hands:

- dress kids in the warmest MITTENS you have and send along an extra pair in case one pair gets wet

Head & Face

- a Touque (warm, insulated hat) is a must
- a balaclava or scarf or neck tube/ Buff is great for helping keep neck, ears, face and noses warm when we are outside



Programming Schedule and Holidays

Prior to the start of each program you register your child for, an email will be sent outlining the dates for each program. We do not offer Forest Play on the following days:

- Labour Day
- Thanksgiving
- Winter/Christmas Vacation
- Family Day
- Easter Friday
- Victoria Day
- Canada Day
- Civic Holiday (August long weekend)

Schedule & Fees

After School Program Schedule

Forest Play for 4 & 5 year olds

Days: Mondays, Tuesdays and/or Wednesdays

Time: 12:30- 4:00pm

Forest Play for 6-10 year olds:

Days: Fridays

Session 1 meets from 1pm to 4:30pm and follows the regular CRPS Friday schedule (dates on website)

Session 2 falls on opposite Fridays to the CRPS schedule (dates on website)

Time: 1pm-4:30pm

Summer Camps – see website for specific dates and times
(www.canmoreforestplay.com)

Program Fees:

Fees will be due no later than 1 week prior to the first day of the program. Totals will be emailed to registered participants and/or posted on the website. Summer programs must be paid in full. Afterschool programs can either be paid seasonally in one lump sum or in monthly installments. If these options do not work, please contact us to set up an alternate arrangement.

Preference is given to families who sign their children up for a program in it's entirety (seasonally or as noted in the schedule).

If space remains in a program, we will consider “drop-ins” but this must be discussed/arranged the NIGHT BEFORE (at the latest) the start of a program with the program manager.

Payment Options:

Fees may be paid by cash, cheque (made to “Nature’s Tracks”), or e-transfer (send to: ntforestplay@gmail.com)

Late Fees

Unless a previous arrangement has been made with Nature’s Tracks Forest Play, any payments not made within 10 days from the due date are subject to a late fee of \$25.00. If program fees are not paid within 30 days of the program start date, the child will not be invited back to class until tuition is paid in full. If alternate payment plans are required, please contact the office.

Please note:

- credit is not given due to absence or delinquency.
- A \$25.00 returned check fee will be charged for NSF returned checks.

Additional Childcare

Additional childcare hours may be arranged on an individual basis *providing staff are available and it is pre-arranged with the leaders.*

Withdrawals

Parents may withdraw a child from the program at any time. If the program is cancelled by Nature’s Tracks for any reason, a full refund will be provided. If you cancel your registration 2 weeks ahead of time, a full refund will be provided minus a \$25 administration fee. If you cancel within 2 weeks and we are able to fill that spot with another child, a full refund will be provided minus a \$25 administration fee. If we are not able to fill that spot with another child, we will refund 50% of the program cost. In the event of a last minute emergency (illness, death in family) contact the office to discuss refund options.



Late Pick Up

We understand that there are unforeseen events and emergencies that may arise in your schedule. If for any reason you should be delayed when picking up your child, please call/text us and inform us that you will be late as soon as you possibly can. If you do not arrive within 15 minutes of the scheduled pick up time, we will begin calling the emergency contacts that you have provided to pick up your child. If individuals are consistently late, we may charge a late fee of \$10/half hour.

Allergies

If your child has any allergies, please notify leaders before the start of each program. If your child's allergy information changes in the year, please provide all updates.

If your child has been prescribed an EpiPen, she/he must keep it on their person at all times. A fanny pack works well for this purpose. In cold weather, please ensure that your child knows to keep the EpiPen close to his/her body to ensure that the EpiPen does not freeze.

If there is a child with a severe, life-threatening allergy to a particular food or substance, that food or substance will be banned from their program. Families will be notified at the beginning of the program which foods or substances are not allowed and must not to be included in their child/ren's snacks and lunches.

Illness

The most comforting place where a child can be properly nursed through an illness is at home. If your child has any of the following, please keep your child at home until she/he is symptom free for at least 24 hours:

- fever, deep productive cough, watery eyes, sore throat, diarrhea, a new unexplained rash, any infectious condition (e.g. pink eye) or has been vomiting prior to the school day;
- headache and stiff neck, or any complaints of unexplained or undiagnosed pain;
- a known or suspected communicable disease;
- displays any other signs or symptoms of illness.

If your child starts displaying symptoms of illness or becomes sick while at Forest Play, you will be contacted to pick up your child. Please ensure that your child stays at home until she/he no longer poses a health risk to other children or teachers.

Emergency Illness & First Aid

In case of illness or accident requiring first aid, program leaders (with First Aid training) will administer first aid. Each leader has a travel first aid kit and can assist with basic first aid. If further medical assistance is necessary, emergency assistance will be called for and parents or an emergency contact person will be contacted.

If a child requires immediate medical attention and must be transported to a health facility for emergency assistance, staff will go with the child to the health facility by ambulance and stay with him/her until a parent or emergency contact person arrives. Every effort will be made to contact a parent before the child leaves Forest Play. However, the health of the child is the primary concern.

If further medical assistance is not necessary, but staff judge that the child should be removed from the program, the parent or emergency contact person will be called to pick up the child.

Medication

Please notify the program manager if your child has any medical issues or is on any kind of medication. We cannot administer medication, except for an Epipen and Benedryl, to a child as a life saving treatment. If your child requires an Epipen, please notify staff and provide an Epipen with clearly marked instructions.

Medical Emergencies

In the event of a medical or dental emergency or accident, we will contact 911 and the parents of the child.

Emergency Procedures

In case of an emergency (fire, floods, mudslides, etc.) parents and or emergency contacts will be notified by telephone. In the event of evacuation, parents will be contacted and instructed to pick their children up immediately. In order for your children to be safe, it is vital that we have your current contact information on file.

Very Cold Weather Days

At Forest Play, we run our programs outdoors and have a wall tent as a warm up shelter for winter programs. For days where the weather forecast is colder than -25 Celcius, we will contact parents to communicate what our cold weather plan is. In all likelihood we will continue the program because we have a shelter with a fire, so relief from the cold is available. We may also book a back-up option (e.g. the Day Lodge at the Canmore Nordic Centre)

Mandatory Reporting

Staff at Nature's Tracks Forest Play are obliged to report any suspected cases of

child abuse and/or neglect.

Wildlife Safety, Natural Hazards and Awareness

Keeping children safe while at Forest Play is our number one priority. We stay up to date with wildlife reports in the areas we use, actively look for sign during our programs and have connections with local wildlife experts.

Throughout our programs, we use a variety of techniques (including games, scenarios and stories) to raise awareness of natural hazards and how to respond if we encounter any wildlife.



At times, the stories and activities we use have scared some children. Although this is not our intent, we would like to inform parents that this is a possibility and encourage all parents whose children express concern or worry to let program leaders know. We will not modify our emphasis on safety, but can take steps to connect with individual children who we know are scared and modify stories so they are reassured that Forest Play is a safe place to be.

One of our key strategies for staying safe at forest play is to stay together as a group- this is the first step in preventing dangerous wildlife encounters. As a result, we take the issue of staying together as a group very seriously. We have zero tolerance for children who decide to “run away” from the group and are not willing to listen to staff regarding safety issues.

Depending on the situation and based on our judgment, parents will be asked to pick up their children who have run away from the group - **IMMEDIATELY**. In these situations, children will not be invited back to Forest Play.

Rudeness, Being Mean and Bullying

At Forest Play, we know children are learning how to socialize and get along with peers. Part of this learning involves some conflict. Our core philosophy involves building respect for others. As we work through the issues that arise between

children, we feel it is helpful to distinguish between several types of behaviour – behaviour that is rude, behaviour that is mean and behaviour that is characteristic of bullying.

Rude behavior is inadvertently saying or doing something that hurts someone else (e.g. jumping ahead in line, accidentally stepping on another child's lunch). Incidents of rudeness are typically spontaneous, unplanned, based on thoughtlessness and poor manners. These incidents will be dealt with on a case by case basis to help children become aware of their actions and to avoid repetition.

Mean behaviour is purposefully saying or doing something to hurt someone once (or maybe twice). Children can be mean to each other when they criticize clothing, appearance, intelligence, etc. Mean behaviour aims to hurt or depreciate someone and is often motivated by angry feelings. We know mean behavior can hurt deeply and children be held accountable for mean behaviour and strategies will be developed to avoid repetition and to support those involved.

Bullying: Experts agree that bullying entails three key elements: an intent to harm, a power imbalance and repeated acts or threats of aggressive behavior. Kids who bully say or do something intentionally hurtful to others and they keep doing it, with no sense of regret or remorse -- even when targets of bullying show or express their hurt or tell the aggressors to stop.

Bullying may be physical, verbal, relational or carried out via technology.

At Forest Play, bullying is inexcusable, and we have a firm policy against all types of bullying. Our philosophy is to foster within children a respect for all life and develop a deep connection to the natural world through direct experience, cooperation and skill acquisition. We work together as a team to ensure that program participants gain self-confidence, make new friends, and go home with great memories.

Persons who are bullied may not have the same potential to get the most out of their experience. We address all incidents of bullying seriously and promote communication so both staff, parents and program participants will be comfortable alerting us to any problems during their experience at Forest Play. Every person has the right to expect to have the best possible experience at Forest Play, and by working together as a team to identify and manage bullying, we can help ensure that all children have a great experience at Forest Play.

Guidance and Discipline Policy

The foundation of the guidance and discipline policy at Forest Play Program is to encourage positive behavior and social competence.

Our underlying assumptions:

- All children want to feel a sense of “belonging”; they want to feel important and included.
- All children desire positive attention from the adults around them; however, when they do not gain positive attention, they will seek negative attention.
- All behavior is a form of communication. Children are trying to meet their needs (to gain attention, to obtain something, to avoid something). It is our job as mentors to understand what they need and to teach them a more appropriate way of getting their need met.
- We put our greatest effort in *preventing* inappropriate behavior. Forest Play provides a supportive and nurturing environment where communication from each child is valued and encouraged. We create an environment where positive behavior is reinforced and where inappropriate behavior is not necessary. We teach children how to use words to express what they want, what they need, and how they feel. We teach them how to treat themselves and others with respect, and we facilitate verbal problem solving when children are in conflict.

We Promote “The Three Rs”

- 1. Respect Yourself**
- 2. Respect Others**
- 3. Respect the Environment**

Even when all preventative measures have been put in place to encourage positive behavior, children will sometimes test the limits! Our response to inappropriate or negative behavior may include: redirecting the child’s activity, ignoring attention seeking behavior, discussing the situation with the child, and/or using firm, clear and concise language to instruct the child as to a more positive way to express her/himself. In situations when a child is having difficulty changing her/his behavior, and the above techniques have been unsuccessful, the staff will use a logical consequence. This may include removing her/him from the situation for a brief period of time. Program staff would then explain to the child what is expected in order to rejoin the activity.



In the event that a problem behavior persists, Program staff will keep in close communication with the child's family in order to develop a comprehensive plan to improve her/his behavior.

It Takes a Village

It takes a village to raise a child to his/or potential. We look forward to getting to know you and your family over the course of the time your child is in Forest Play. We feel lucky to have the opportunity to work with so many wonderful families and are always amazed at the growth we see in the children who have been in our program for longer periods of time.

