

NatureYear Parent Handbook

2018 - 2019

Essential Information

Phone: 203-389-4333 x 1213

Program Director: Rebecca Holcombe

Drop off time:
8:50 - 9:20 AM

Email: Rholcombe@commongroundct.org

Pick up time:
2:50 - 3:00 PM

Daily Packing List

Dressed for the weather (see seasonal clothing list)

Closed toed shoes

Backpack with snack/lunch

Waterbottle (and optional thermos of warm drink when it is cold)

Seasonally appropriate change of clothes in backpack

All clothes and belongings labeled with name

NatureYear Program Philosophy

Extended periods of time to imagine, play, and explore in nature are an essential part of childhood. Our core values, which inform daily program routines, are:

Value of child directed play: Play is how children explore their world and learn about social relationships. Teachers act as observers and facilitators as needed to introduce a new opportunity or to help a child explore something that he or she is curious about.

Diversity: We embrace diversity of all kinds in the natural world and in the people in our community. Teachers work to foster appreciation of differences and an understanding that we all have unique life experiences and gifts to share.

Community and friendship: We are all on the same team - we work to support each other in both play and learning. Teachers actively guide children in developing social skills and relationships, and seek to build a strong sense of community responsibility for each other and for the spaces that we use.

Exploration, curiosity, and new experiences: Self-confidence and independence are built through the freedom to explore and try new things, including reasonable risk taking as a part of the learning process. Teachers encourage an "I can do it myself" and "I can try again" attitude as children have new experiences and test their limits and skills.

Annual Schedule

Mondays: Sept 10, 2018 - June 3, 2019

- Closed for holidays on Oct 8, Dec 24, Dec 31, Jan 21, Feb 18, May 27

Tuesdays: Sept 11, 2018 - June 4, 2019

- Closed for holidays on Dec 25 and Jan 1
- Closed for staff workshops on Nov 6, Feb 19 and April 23

Wednesdays: Sept 12, 2018 - June 5, 2019

- Closed for holidays on Dec 26 and Jan 2
- Closed for staff workshops on Oct 31, Nov 21, and April 17

Thursdays: Sept 13, 2018 - June 6, 2019

- Closed for holidays on Nov 22 and Dec 27
- Closed for staff workshops on Jan 24, April 17, and May 16

Fridays: Sept 14, 2018 - June 7, 2019:

- Closed for holidays on Nov 23, Dec 28, and April 19
- Closed for staff workshops on Dec 21 and March 22

Parent Visiting Days are offered once per season on the day that your child is enrolled. Family Playdates are offered on Saturday mornings in the fall and spring. Schedules for these will be set at a later date

Arrival and Dismissal Procedures

Morning arrival:

- Our drop-off period is 9 - 9:20 AM. Please plan to arrive and have completed your morning drop-off routine no later than 9:20 AM.
- A teacher will be waiting by the parking lot from 8:50 - 9:20 AM for curbside drop off. Just pull up and we will sign children in and walk them up to the cabin as a group at 9:20.
- OR, you can park in the lot and walk your child to the cabin anytime from 9 - 9:30 AM.

Afternoon dismissal:

- Please plan to meet us at the dismissal area by the farmhouse promptly at 3 PM. If it is actively raining we typically try to come down to the sheltered area next to the parking lot to spare parents waiting in the rain!
- Always sign your child out with a program teacher.
- We have many programs and classes on our campus and we ask that you depart after pick-up time. Unfortunately we do not have facility space to have families stay to continue playing on campus. You are welcome to remain parked in our lot and go have more adventures in West Rock Park if you'd like to!
- A late pick-up fee of \$20 for every 15 minute period will apply to children who are picked up late more than two times over the program year.

Daily Schedule

Part of the philosophy behind the NatureYear program is to not to let schedules get in the way of authentic learning. For that reason, we have a daily structure that is flexible depending on the weather, child interest, or what is happening in the forest or on site at any given time. However, we know that all children benefit from routines and from knowing what to expect.

9:00 - 9:20 AM: Arrival

Arrive dressed for the weather and ready to play outside! A teacher will be waiting by the parking lot for curbside drop off from 9 - 9:25 AM, or parents are welcome to park and walk their child to the cabin anytime from 9 - 9:30 AM. Teachers will have several morning activities and/or helping jobs for children to choose from as we wait for all our friends to arrive.

Caring for our Community: Daily Chores

Immediately after arrival time, children are asked to choose a chore and participate in caring for our learning and play spaces. These chores vary with the season. Examples include splitting firewood, gathering kindling, caring for farm animals, watering in the garden, and sweeping and tidying our cabin.

Welcoming Circle and Snack

Each day, we will gather and greet each other and talk about the things that are happening on the farm and in the forest. It is an important time to check in with each other, talk about our day, and learn about seasonal happenings in nature. Children typically eat their snack (brought from home) as we sit down to begin our Welcoming Circle.

Special Places

Most days after our meeting we take a few minutes to visit our Special Place. This is a place, apart from others, that each child has chosen for themselves in the forest surrounding our cabin. At our Special Place, we take some time to sit quietly, to pay attention to our surroundings and to observe the way the environment changes throughout the year.

Activity Time

After we are refueled from snack (and have made any necessary bathroom stops), children will have open-ended time to play and discover in nature. Areas we may explore include the learning garden, wetland, mud kitchen, cooking activities, animal yards, forest and fort building, or anywhere else that our imaginations and curiosity lead us! Some days, we may all go on a hike into the woods together. This is our large block of time to take on projects and/or venture further out into West Rock Park.

Each teacher enters the day with an idea of something to explore or discover, and describes that activity during the Welcoming Circle. Children choose the activity that is most appealing to them and join that teacher. Some activities are more teacher-directed (for example, learning how to split firewood with an axe), and some start with inspiration from a teacher and then follow the children's interests (for example, a hike to a vernal pool to check out salamander eggs that turns into following fox tracks in the mud and building forts in nearby brush).

We usually eat lunch in our small activity groups and then meet back at the cabin around 1 PM.

Free Time and Child Led Activities

Most afternoons include time for free play and child-led activities. The group gathers and each child who has a skill or an idea that they would like to share makes a proposal for their activity. Children who did

not elect to lead an activity choose which of the proposed activities they want to participate in or go to an agreed upon area for free play, and teachers supervise and facilitate as needed. Child-led activities are often inspired by our morning adventures. Examples have included games, nature arts (nature masks with mud and leaves!), imaginative play (make a tree stump band and a bakery!), and extended time with the farm animals, garden, and wetland. This time helps develop leadership skills, as well as cooperative decision making and social skills.

2:50 - 3 PM: Closing Circle and Dismissal

At the end of our daily adventures, we will always gather and close out our time together. Parents are asked to meet us at the farmhouse promptly at 3 PM.

Celebrating Birthdays & Holidays

The NatureYear class celebrates the changing of the seasons and children's birthdays four times each year on the program day closest to that season's solstice or equinox. We have a birthday ceremony that involves a special tree stump, kind words, and good wishes! We ask that families do not bring food or other treats to share for birthdays or holidays.

Clothing

Outdoor adventures in all weather can be great fun as long as children have the right clothes! We have some loaner gear available, and most gear (except perhaps wool socks, long underwear, and good, waterproof mittens) can often be found at local thrift shops.

More specific seasonal gear guides and a daily packing list will be shared in advance of each season.

In all seasons, children should bring or wear:

- Shoes with a closed toe and closed heel that are good for running, hiking, and playing. No sandals or slip on shoes.
- A small backpack that the child can carry, with their snack, lunch and water bottle in it.
- A gear bag (duffel bag or similar) with seasonally appropriate change of clothes and additional gear as needed

In warm weather, children should bring or wear:

- Lightweight long pants (or leggings) are recommended. Long pants help protect against poison ivy, ticks, mosquitoes, and scrapes when playing in the woods.
- A windbreaker or sweatshirt in their backpack
- A hat (baseball hat, sun hat..whatever your child likes)
- Shoes that can get wet. This might mean having a pair of water shoes in the backpack.

In cold weather, children should bring or wear:

- Layered clothing, including a baselayer next to the skin that is NOT cotton.
- A middle insulating layer - this might be fleece, or a "puffer" style down or synthetic jacket
- A wind and waterproof outer layer (some coats may combine the middle and outer layer)
- Long, gaiter-style mittens (not gloves)
- A fleece neck gaiter (easier and less bulky than a scarf)
- A fleece or wool hat that covers the ears well (ear flaps are great)
- Wool socks and insulated boots

Snack, lunch, and cooking activities

Children should bring a snack and a lunch each day. Your child's snack/lunch should fit into his or her backpack, along with a water bottle. On cold days, a thermos of hot soup, tea, or hot chocolate is a good idea, too.

Microwave ovens are not available – please do not send food that needs to be heated. Please use an insulated lunch bag and an icepack if your child's lunch needs to be kept cold. Lunches are not refrigerated.

Allergies and food restrictions: You may pack any foods you wish in your child's bag – we do not restrict any specific foods. If your child has a food allergy that could be triggered by being in the presence of a specific food, please contact us so we can discuss how to best provide for your child.

Some days will include cooking with food from the farm, and recipes will also include some store-bought ingredients. Please be sure to let program staff know about any allergies or other food restrictions for your child.

Safety and Risk Assessment

One of the many benefits of allowing children to have lots of time to play freely outdoors is that they gain in self-confidence and independence, in part by taking reasonable risks and testing their limits. Our goal is to allow reasonable risk taking, balanced with watchfulness for true safety hazards.

Please do NOT send children with knives, bladed tools of any kind, or any form of fire starting tools. Safe, supervised knife use and fire starting techniques may be taught to children if appropriate, and parents will be informed about these activities.

Please note that there may be **age and situationally appropriate exceptions** for many of the broad policies below. For example, certain kinds of climbing may be permissible for a 10 year old but not for a 5 year old.

Our teachers set the following expectations for the children:

Climbing: Children love to balance on logs and climb up trees! Children are permitted to climb as high as they are tall, and must be able to reach that height by themselves (teachers will not lift them up to a place that they cannot reach themselves).

Throwing: Children are permitted to throw sticks, acorns, and other natural objects AWAY from the group, and away from trails or other places people might be walking. Teachers will help define throwing zones when needed.

Fire: We will frequently gather at our fire circle. Children are taught to sit on the stumps that surround the fire. If a child or teacher needs to move to a different spot, he or she must turn their body and put their feet outside the stump circle before standing up. Campfires are closely supervised and extinguished thoroughly when not in use.

Exploring: Children are taught to stay within the boundaries set by teachers at all times. This typically means that children are directly in sight of a teacher, but occasionally the forest topography means a child is out of sight, but within boundaries and within voice range. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that young children do not accidentally stray from the group. Children who deliberately run from or leave the group will be asked to withdraw for safety reasons.

Wildlife: Children are taught to be gentle with living things and to ask a teacher before touching or picking up any wildlife they find in the woods or on the farm.

Wild Edibles: Teachers will explore some basic, easily identifiable wild edibles with children (wineberries, wood sorrel, and white pine needles, for example). As part of this exploration, children are taught to never eat anything from nature without permission from an adult.

Sticks: Playing with sticks is part of childhood. We know that children will collect, carry, swing, dig, throw, and swordfight with sticks. Children are taught that they must carry sticks with one end in their hand and the other end pointing down. Just like with throwing, children who wish to swing sticks are directed to find a safe space away from other people. Fantasy play, including swordfighting, is generally acceptable as long as the play does not involve physical contact and the level of imaginary violence is not distressing to children who are not involved in the game. Teachers will redirect play that crosses physical or emotional safety boundaries.

Water: Our explorations may take us to Wintergreen Brook, or as far as Lake Wintergreen for older children. Children are closely supervised at all times when playing in the water. Because streams may have sharp rocks or other debris, children are required to wear rain boots, water shoes, closed toed sandals, or old sneakers for wading.

Temperature and Extreme Weather: We will be outside in almost all weather! There is no standard guideline for when it is too hot or cold to be outside. A sunny, 20 degree February day with no wind can feel much warmer than a 50 degree April day with wind and rain! Teachers will be mindful of temperature, precipitation, and wind chill, as well as of the physical and emotional state of the children. The group will move to a heated space if extreme cold is impacting the group. Indoor spaces will also be used in the event of thunderstorms or hail.

Bathrooms and Changing Clothes

We will stop by the farmhouse for bathroom visits before heading off on any trail-based adventures. When we are away from our immediate campus, children will be directed to use the woods for any toileting needs.

We have both male and female teachers and believe that all teachers can help any child (male or female) change clothes if adult assistance is required and desired by the child. Please let us know if you have individual questions or concerns about your child being helped (if needed) by male or female staff with clothing changing needs.

Health and Safety

Illness

Children must stay home if they are too sick to participate in typical program activities (including being outside and being physically active). If your child becomes sick during the program and cannot participate in activities a staff person will call you and we ask that you make arrangements to pick up your child as promptly as possible.

Children may not attend if they have had any of the following in the previous 24 hours:

- Fever over 100 degrees
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Any illness known to be contagious (other than typical childhood sniffles)

How we treat injuries

Scrapes, cuts, and insect stings are typical as we play and explore. Cuts and scrapes are washed with soap and water and covered with a clean bandage. If your child comes home with a band-aid on, please know that the cut may require further cleaning and inspection by a parent. Bumps and bee-stings are treated with ice. We will call and notify a parent about any significant injury so that you are aware of it before pick-up time.

In the case of a medical emergency, we will care for your child, call 911, and call a parent immediately.

Handwashing

We get into plenty of messes at Common Ground! Hand sanitizer is available outside all animal yards. Staff remind children to wash their hands when leaving the animal yards and before eating. Soap and water will always be used when available, but sometimes when we are eating in the woods or on the trail we will use hand sanitizer instead.

Ticks, mosquitoes, and poison ivy

Deer ticks (which can spread Lyme Disease) are found throughout Connecticut. Staff will help prevent children from encountering ticks by keeping children out of prime tick habitat – areas of tall grass and weeds. However, the exploratory nature of the program means that children are likely to encounter ticks and other insects. Parents can help prevent tick (and mosquito) bites by applying bug repellent to children each morning in the fall and spring. For ticks, don't forget to spray shoes and socks, as they typically climb on from ground level. Please do a full body tick check at home with your child after each program day.

Staff will teach children to identify poison ivy, however we realize that many children are too young or too busy having fun to remember to look out for it. We keep the farm and campus areas as free of poison ivy as possible, and staff will be mindful of poison ivy patches in the woods while adventuring. If your child develops a rash that you suspect to be poison ivy, make sure to wash the clothes and shoes they wore that day in hot soapy water right away, as poison ivy can continue to spread from oils remaining on the clothes.

Communication

Daily: Our teachers are happy to hear updates on anything that we need to be aware of for the day when you come for arrival time. Teachers are also excited to share some highlights of our day at pick-up time. If you have concerns, or if teachers or parents would like to connect for a longer conversation for any reason, an opportunity to talk may be scheduled outside of program hours.

Ongoing: Be sure to follow CommonGroundNatureYear on Instagram! This is a primary way that we share pictures and information about our activities. We will email you with important program news or reminders as the need comes up. Parents are always welcome to reach out with questions, concerns, or feedback.

Parent and Family Engagement

Meet the Teachers Day: A weekend day in September will be scheduled before the first day of the program for children and families to explore the campus, meet their teachers, and meet some new friends who will be enrolled in their NatureYear group.

Tag-Along Days: In each season, we will have a few days where parents are invited to sign-up to join their child for the full program day to see what we are up to.

Saturday family events: Special mornings for the whole family are offered once in the fall and once in the spring. These are mornings for hikes, campfires, and playtime in the woods for all of our NatureYear teachers, students, and families.

Parent/Teacher conferences: Parents will have the option to sign up for an individual conference time with one of their child's teachers in the month of February. This is a great time to connect about your child's NatureYear experience!

Behavior Management Philosophy

Our goal is for children to be successful and happy in programs at Common Ground. We believe that no child arrives at Common Ground looking to have a "bad day" or to get in trouble. We seek to accommodate individual needs, adapt programs as possible, and problem solve with children, their parents, and other teaching professionals in order to help children have an amazing experience at Common Ground!

Children's physical and emotional safety is a priority in all programs. We understand that children may still be developing impulse control and learning about social relationships, and no child is expected to have "perfect" behavior every day. Running, being loud, being messy, physical play with others, and other similar behaviors are not automatically labeled as "bad behavior" - they are welcomed as long as they do not disrupt the experience of others or endanger anyone.

Behavior Management Strategies

Common Ground staff will help prevent conflict by making sure that all children understand rules and expectations, and by making it clear that staff are always willing and available to help sort out a problem, and by actively monitoring and interacting with children. When conflict or inappropriate behavior does arise, we will use the following strategies (as appropriate to the situation):

- **Redirection:** Offering an alternative behavior or choice. For example, “You cannot throw acorns here because you might hit a friend with one, but you can throw acorns over there, away from the group.”
- **Reminder of Expectations:** A teacher may remind a child of program expectations – this reminder may also serve as a warning before further consequences are applied. For example, “ I see that you are running after the chickens. Our program rule is that we walk calmly so that we do not scare the chickens. I expect you to walk.”
- **Verbal Intervention and Problem Solving:** A teacher may verbally intervene to stop inappropriate or hurtful behavior. For example, “It sounds like you two are arguing over this fort. Do you need help solving a problem?”
- **Logical Consequences:** A teacher may remove or restrict an object, activity, etc. to help a child understand the consequence of their behavior. This is not restriction from all activity, it is a temporary restriction from the area of conflict. For example, “I asked you to stop running in the chicken yard but I still see you running. I need you to leave this area and choose another activity. You can come back and try again in 15 minutes.”
- **Taking Space:** A teacher may ask a child to step away from the group and take some space. We strive to use other behavioral interventions first, but removal may be the first step if the behavior is dangerous to self or others or significantly disruptive to the experience of others.

The purpose of taking space is to allow the child to relax and calm down in a safe space, away from peers. Children who are taking space are supervised and have the opportunity to talk to staff when they are ready to problem solve together. The child may return to the activity as soon as the child and staff person agree that he or she is ready.

An additional removal from activities within the same day may result in the child being brought to the Program Director to take space and talk together. If removal from an activity occurs two or more times in the same day, a parent may be notified at pick up time.

Persistent Inappropriate Behavior and Removal from Program

Persistent Inappropriate Behavior is any behavior that is regularly repeated after the behavioral guidance and intervention strategies above have been used. A parent will be contacted in the case of persistent inappropriate behavior, and the parent and Program Director will agree on a plan and timeline for addressing the behavior at Common Ground.

If the behavior continues (or is not steadily improving) after the behavioral intervention plan has been implemented, parents may be asked to withdraw their child.

Immediate Program Withdrawal

Certain behaviors may result in parents being asked to withdraw their child immediately, even if none of the steps above have been applied. Those behaviors may include anything that presents a significant danger to the child or others, substantial and willful property damage, or intentionally running away or trying to run away from our campus.

Refund Policy

Tuition refunds are not available for days that a parent is asked to keep a child home for behavioral reasons. If Common Ground requests that a child be withdrawn, tuition is not refundable for the two week period following the withdrawal. Tuition for any future weeks will be refunded in full. Children

who are requested to withdraw from the program are welcome to enroll again in a future program if the parent feels the child has learned new skills to manage the behavior. We believe that children learn and grow, and children who had a tough season are always welcomed back for a fresh start.

Prohibited Methods of Discipline

Our program prohibits the use of the following:

- Physical punishment, including threats to use such methods
- Any consequence intended to embarrass or humiliate
- Restriction from food, water, bathroom, shade, warmth, or other basic needs
- Punishment for toileting accidents
- Physical restraint, except as absolutely necessary to protect a child or others from harm

Snow Days

We follow Common Ground High School for determining program closures due to inclement weather. If local news indicates that Common Ground High School is closed then the NatureYear Program is also closed.

If there is a delay, the NatureYear Program will operate as follows:

- ONE HOUR delay means that we will still open as usual at 9 AM
(CGHS opens at 8 AM, so a one hour delay means that CGHS is opening at 9 AM)
- 90 MINUTE DELAY means that we will open at 9:30 AM
(CGHS opens at 8 AM, so a 90 minute delay means that CGHS is opening at 9:30 AM).
- TWO HOUR DELAY means that we will open at 10 AM
(CGHS opens at 8 AM, so a two hour delay means that CGHS is opening at 10 AM)

If there is an early dismissal due to snow, parents will be notified by email.

Why do we close if children are prepared for the weather? We have to follow the closing schedule set by CGHS because it determines how snow and ice are removed from our site. Even if you can safely travel to us and your child is prepared for the weather, it may be impossible to park or safely walk on campus. We are not able to offer make-up snow days because we need to start preparing for summer camp as soon as NatureYear ends in June!

Tuition policy

Tuition may be paid by cash, check, credit card, or money order. Tuition payments are due on the first Monday of every month from September - April. Tuition must be paid by the due date each month. Payments received more than 24 hours after the due date will incur a \$25 late fee. There is a fee of \$25 on all returned checks. Children may not attend the program until their account payments are up to date. If the next monthly tuition payment date is reached without the overdue balance paid in full then the child's program spot may be opened up for others to enroll (and tuition is still due for all previous weeks). If a child is withdrawn from the program, tuition for any remaining classes is not refundable unless we can fill the child's spot in the program. We will work with parents to consider exceptional circumstances - tuition policies are not intended to be punitive. They are essential to make sure that program costs are covered.