Upper Canada® Child Care

WHITE PINES FOREST SCHOOL

Handbook

Let's have an adventure!

CONTENTS

What is Forest School? 2

1. WHITE PINES FOREST SCHOOL 3
2. Our Programs 4
   - WHY IS OUTDOOR PLAY SO IMPORTANT? 4
   - WHERE WE LEARN 4
3. Learning in the Forest 5
4. Risky Play 6
5. Environmental Stewardship 7
6. Guiding Behaviour 8
7. Administration 9
   - PRIVACY, STORYPARK, AND SOCIAL MEDIA 10
   - ILLNESS 10
   - FOOD AND FOOD ALLERGIES 10
   - TOILETING AND HAND WASHING 11
   - INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY 11
   - GROUP SIZE 11
   - EXTREME WEATHER/EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT 12
   - ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES 12
   - CUSTODY AND ACCESS 13
   - CHILD PROTECTION AND VOLUNTEERS 13
   - COMMUNICATION 13
   - PREPARING FOR FOREST SCHOOL 14

WHAT IS FOREST SCHOOL?

Originating in Scandinavia in the early 1950s, Forest Schools are gaining popularity and are now found in many countries. The Forest School education model is centered on building relationships through play and immersive exploration of the outdoors. The benefits of child-centered learning while surrounded by nature are now recognized and widely accepted. Forest School History

Forest School takes place in a woodland or other natural environment such as urban parks, beaches, or meadows, and the majority of a Forest School program is spent exclusively outdoors. The focus is on child-centered learning, where free play and self-led activities are encouraged. At the same time Forest School Educators actively support learning that is driven and inspired by the child's curiosity and inquiry.

Access to the same natural space in different weather conditions and throughout the changing seasons is a key element in Forest Schools. Repeated and extended experiences help children become familiar with and build a connection to that space.

This connection deepens over time which leads to children developing a sense of responsibility for, or 'stewardship' toward the land itself. It is a unique experience which is difficult to replicate in traditional classroom settings.

Many studies have shown that Forest School attendance has a positive impact on a child's overall development. Six Reasons Children Need to Play Outside; Benefits of Children Playing Outside

Benefits include:

- Increased self-esteem and confidence;
- Development of language and communication skills;
- Improved motivation;
- Better concentration and self-regulation;
- Improved physical and social skills; and
- Development of the ability to navigate risk.

Most importantly, Forest School is fun! It is a place where children are free to create their own adventures, test the limits of their abilities, and more fully discover the natural world.

1. WHITE PINES FOREST SCHOOL

White Pines Forest School (WPFS) is located on the grounds of Kettleby Valley Camp, near the town of Kettleby in the heart of York Region.

This land is the traditional, ancestral territory of the Haudenosaunee Mississauga of the Credit First Nation. We acknowledge the First Nations people who were here before us. We are thankful to be able to learn and play in their footsteps, and we are committed to teaching children the spirit of reconciliation and respect.

White Pines Forest School is a branch of Upper Canada Child Care (UCCC), a not-for-profit organization providing childcare services to families in York Region, Toronto, and Simcoe County. Established in 1983, UCCC is dedicated to providing programs that foster a sense of engagement, expression, well-being, and belonging for all of the children we serve.

Teams of UCCC leaders and educators travelled abroad to visit Forest School programs in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. These first-hand experiences sparked our passion for outdoor learning, and triggered a shift in our focus. Today, our childcare programs prioritize exploring "beyond the fence" and regularly access local green spaces for play and exploration. Opening a Forest School of our own was the next logical step.

At White Pines Forest School, our goal is to connect children to nature through Forest School Canada's guiding principles of place-based and experiential learning. Our space offers woodlands, fields, hills, and streams, and children are provided time and freedom to explore and discover.

Testing our Limits

Although we are a branch of Upper Canada Child Care, WPFS is not a childcare centre. We are also not an academic based program that follows an established curriculum. Instead, we are a recreational program where children spend time immersed in nature, and where learning evolves from the children's own curiosity and exploration. Experiences will complement and enhance each child's formal home or school-based learning.

2. OUR PROGRAMS

Snow fort

WPFS offers half-day and full-day outdoor recreational programs for children aged 3-8 years, and family sessions for children ages 0-3 with an adult caregiver. Our recreational program operates one half-day session (9 AM-12 PM) and one full-day session (9 AM-3 PM), on both Thursdays and Fridays. Each term is 11 sessions. **Children aged 3 years may attend three hours weekly; children aged 4-8 years may attend up to six hours weekly.** Families can choose to register for one, two, or all three terms. Our family sessions are held on Mondays (9:30-11:30 AM).

WHY IS OUTDOOR PLAY SO IMPORTANT?

Children's participation in outdoor play is declining. At the same time, they are increasingly exposed to stressful conditions like over-exposure to media and hectic home schedules. Experts believe that increased screen time, combined with a lack of unstructured play may be connected to growing obesity rates and childhood mental health concerns.

On the other hand, spending time in nature has been shown to relieve stress by reducing cortisol in the brain, while promoting happiness by boosting endorphin levels and dopamine production. Capaldi, C.A. et al (2015)

Along with benefits to a child's well-being, regularly spending time in nature allows them to develop a connection to the natural world. Children begin to understand and value the environment, develop an intrinsic motivation to protect it, and start down the path to stewardship.

WHERE WE LEARN

Investigation

At Forest School, we spend our time almost exclusively outdoors, in all types of weather. We believe that children must experience nature in all conditions to truly build a connection to their outdoor spaces. When we have fun outside, regardless of the elements, we are helping future generations feel comfortable spending time outdoors year round. We are as passionate about exploring in the rain and snow as we are about enjoying a sunny day, and we hope to foster the same enthusiasm in the children.

To enjoy time outdoors, children must feel comfortable. Children should arrive dressed for the weather each day, with extra clothes to change into if necessary. We help children prepare for a variety of conditions by teaching them to be aware of their

comfort level, and to change their clothing and activity accordingly. Seasonal lists of required clothing and accessories prior to the start of each term are available in the Administration section of this handbook.

If we experience weather conditions that make it unsafe for us to be outside for our full session, we take shelter in our indoor space.

3. LEARNING IN THE FOREST

Forest School sessions are spontaneous and fluid. How sessions unfold depends on the children present, their discoveries, and interactions that capture their interest. Experiences are also shaped by changing weather and seasons, visiting insects and animals, and discovering flowers and fungi etc.

Familiarity Leads to Stewardship

We believe that unstructured, free play is essential to healthy development and learning. At WPFS children have the time, space, and freedom necessary to settle into the kind of play which can result in rich, deep learning. Educators participate in this play and closely observe, to find cues that will shape future plans for the group.

We also encourage children to develop understanding of their world through experience. Instead of being "experts" who have all the "right answers", our educators will co-learn with children. Educators will encourage questions, while deepening children's thinking by asking questions themselves (e.g. "I wonder why there are so many bugs under this log.") Educators introduce materials such as tools and loose parts that promote building, creating, and problem solving which further enhances the learning environment.

The WPFS experience works to support the development of the "whole child", and we strongly feel that this occurs more organically outdoors. During a typical day, a group might test their balance on fallen logs, or try to catch tadpoles in the stream. Children may work together to build a fort, or may cheer one another on while climbing trees. There may be muffin making in the mud kitchen, or creating homes for fairies. Children spend time in independent play, as well as in collaboration with their friends and educators. Together, these experiences promote social, emotional, and identity development, mental and physical health, as well as cognitive and academic growth.

Though every day is different, each day begins and ends with a group gathering for songs, stories, and sharing of our forest experiences.

4. RISKY PLAY

Risky play is a central feature of Forest School. Risky play is thrilling and exciting because it involves an element of danger or risk of injury.

Children have a natural urge to engage in risky play; they instinctively want to test their physical limits, explore, and push boundaries. Children are also very capable of knowing their own capacities and avoiding challenges they are not physically or emotionally ready to take. Concentration and self-regulation is required to successfully manage risk which in turn builds confidence and emotional resilience.

It is well known that children who regularly engage in risky play are more active, better able to regulate fear and anxiety, and are more adept at assessing dangerous situations. Risky Play for Children

During their sessions at WPFS, children may experience a variety of 'risky' activities: children may play with sticks and rocks, or use sharp tools; they might hike off-trail, explore in and around water; climb trees or rocky outcrops; they may also taste edible plants, and cook over an open fire.

WPFS is committed to creating an environment that supports risky play. We do so **responsibly** by employing the following strategies:

Using a Bow Saw Video Link

- Conducting risk assessments as children's play develops, as well as formal risk-benefit assessments of planned play experiences
- Establishing boundaries and safety guidelines
- Teaching children to actively participate in risk management
- Using safety prompts with empowering wording (e.g. instead of saying "be careful", educators might ask "Do you feel safe? What is your plan for getting down?")
- Providing direct supervision during more challenging activities such as tree climbing and tool use
- Guiding children to safer activities if necessary

"... the more risks you allow children to take, the better they learn to take care of themselves." (Roald Dahl)

5. ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

All of our interactions with our surroundings at WPFS are grounded in ecological awareness and environmental sustainability. We work to help children understand the impact we have on our space, and to teach them to act ethically in the forest. We encourage them to respect the land they use, take responsibility for their actions, and plan for the future, thereby maintaining a healthier planet.

At WPFS we teach and model "Leave No Trace" principles. We teach the children to:

- Plan ahead and prepare for their activities and experiences
- Travel on durable surfaces, and rotate paths to give areas a 'rest'
- Dispose of waste properly
- Leave what is found in nature
- Minimize campfire impacts
- Respect wildlife

"If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, we must allow them to fall in love with the earth before we ask them to save it." (David Sobel)

Mud Kitchen

6. GUIDING BEHAVIOUR

The emotional and physical well-being of children is a priority at WPFS. Educators foster a safe space for everyone by:

- Helping children to develop friendships by focusing on positive interactions, and valuing one another's individuality
- Encouraging children to take an active role in problem solving and peaceful conflict resolution
- Responding sensitively to emotions; we recognize that more difficult feelings may take time to resolve, and we give children the time and support required to recover
- Setting expectations of respect for self, others, the environment, equipment, materials and property

WPFS will not tolerate aggression, physical violence, and profane or threatening language directed towards children, families, or staff. Child behavior that is unsafe for one's self or others will be addressed in the following ways:

- We will work with the child to identify unsafe behaviors and develop a plan to address them.
- Educators will work together to ensure consistent expectations and strategies for the child.
- We will communicate with parents to develop strategies, to be implemented both at home and at Forest School, to support the child's success within the program.
- Educators will follow up with feedback and positive reinforcement.
- In the event that a child's behavior consistently puts themselves or others at risk, and the above measures are not effective, the child may be removed from the program.

Making Hot Dogs and Chili

7. ADMINISTRATION

REGISTRATION, FEE PAYMENTS, AND REFUNDS

Recreational Program Schedule

Spring Term (11 Sessions)		Fall Term (11 Sessions)		Winter Term (11 Sessions)	
Thursday Mar 25 – Jun 3, 2027	**Friday** Mar 26 – Jun 11, 2027	**Thursday** Sep 17 – Nov 26 2026	**Friday** Sep 18 – Nov 27, 2026	**Thursday** Dec 10, 2026 – Mar 4, 2027	**Friday** Dec 11, 2026 – Mar 5, 2027
9 AM–12 PM (3-6 years)	**9 AM–12 PM** (3-6 years)	**9 AM–12 PM** (3-6 years)	**9 AM–12 PM** (3-6 years)	**9 AM–12 PM** (3-6 years)	**9 AM–12 PM** (3-6 years)
9 AM-3 PM (4-8 years)	**9 AM–3 PM** (4-8 years)	**9 AM–3 PM** (4-8 years)	**9 AM–3 PM** (4-8 years)	**9 AM–3 PM** (4-8 years)	**9 AM–3 PM** (4-8 years)

Family Session Schedule (4 Session Minimum)

Spring Term	Fall Term	Winter Term
Mondays Mar 22 – Jun 14, 2027 **9:30 AM–11:30 AM** (0–3 years)	**Mondays** Sep 14-Nov 30, 2026 **9:30 AM–11:30 AM** (0–3 years)	**Mondays** Dec 7, 2026-Mar 8, 2027 **9:30 AM–11:30 AM** (0–3 years)

WPFS Recreational Programs and Family Sessions will not operate on the following days:

- Thanksgiving Day
- Winter holidays (YRDSB Calendar)
- Family Day
- Good Friday
- Easter Monday
- Victoria Day

Fees: Recreational Program is $514 for each half-day term and $963 for each full-day term. Family Sessions are $31 per session per child (4 session minimum). Plus a one-time registration fee of $50.

Contact: Email whitepines@ucccc.ca for program and registration information. Registration information is to be submitted by email. Spaces are allocated on a first come, first served basis.

Payments: Processed exclusively through our automated payment system. Clients must set up their payment account upon registration. Each term must be paid in full, two weeks prior to each child's start date. UCCC will apply administrative charges to accounts for any late payments.

Withdrawal: Two weeks' notice is required. Term fees will be refunded (less two weeks' fees) upon withdrawal. Registration fees will not be refunded.

Inclement Weather: Programs will be cancelled in the event that weather/road conditions make travel unsafe. Families will be notified of closures electronically by 7:30 AM.

Refunds: No refunds will be given for illness or vacation absences, or for closures due to inclement weather.

Privacy, Storypark, and Social Media

White Pines Forest School respects the privacy of the children registered with us. Personal information provided to us, including photographic images, will be processed in accordance with prevailing privacy legislation, and will only be used for purposes for which consent has been given. WPFS will not share details with third parties without consent, except where we are legally obligated to do so.

Client Privacy Policy

In affiliation with Upper Canada Child Care, White Pines Forest School will share experiences on UCCC social media accounts. Featuring children participating in Forest School activities provides a window into our day, and supports awareness of the movement to connect children with nature. Images are only shared with consent.

WPFS uses the communication app Storypark to share directly with families, allowing us to provide them with more detailed information about their child's experiences, as well as keep families up to date with notices and announcements.

Illness

WPFS will follow all local Public Health Unit requirements. Registered families will receive specific information prior to the start of each term.

In order to protect the health of our community, we ask that children remain at home if they have been experiencing the following symptoms in the past 24 hours:

Fever (101F or 38C)
Vomiting or diarrhea
Eye discharge
General lethargy or other symptoms that would impact a child's ability to participate in the program

If a child becomes ill during the day, families will be contacted to pick up. A child may return once they have been treated by a physician (where necessary) and/or are symptom free for 24 hours.

Food and Food Allergies

We take great care to minimize the risk of adverse reactions from exposure to food allergens. It is important that families provide all available information about their child's food allergies upon registration. An action plan will be developed for any child with anaphylaxis, which will include the requirement to carry an EpiPen on their body at all times.

We ask that children come with a healthy packed snack that is easy to eat and not too messy (unpeeled oranges can be a challenge in the woods!). Food should be in labelled, reusable containers that fit into the

child's backpack, and should have minimal packaging. All waste will be sent home in children's food containers. For safety purposes, children will not be allowed to share food.

Please note that WPFS is a nut safe community. Please send only peanut/tree nut-free items for snacks at all times.

Occasionally, we may do some campfire cooking, or provide small snacks for the children. Please note any dietary restrictions upon registration. We will always communicate about foods provided to the children.

Finally, it is important that children have access to drinking water while they are with us. Each child must have a **full**, leak-proof water bottle that is large enough to keep them hydrated, but not too large to carry on their own.

Toileting and Hand Washing

WPFS requires all participants to be fully toilet trained prior to starting, however if a child has an accident we will happily assist them in changing into their spare clothing.

Although we do have access to indoor toilets, occasionally they may not be within a quick walking distance. In cases where a child cannot reach a toilet in time, they are encouraged to make a "forest pee". Educators always have toilet paper and portable hand washing supplies available to support this process.

Handwashing is part of our regular routine, and is done before and after eating and toileting both indoors and in the forest.

Inclusion and Accessibility

WPFS strives to maintain an inclusive, bias-free environment. All participants will be treated equitably, regardless of their race, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, or ability.

At WPFS, every effort is made to accommodate the needs of our community. We are committed to supporting and maintaining relationships with children and families based on respect, and we work closely with families to ensure that we are equipped with the appropriate tools and knowledge to support each child in our program.

Group Size

For the success and safety of our program, WPFS maintains low ratios of one educator for every six children. If additional support is required, a meeting will be arranged to develop an effective plan for accommodation. Please note that we are not able to offer consistent one on one support for children.

Extreme Weather/Emergency Management

We pay close attention to the weather forecast and weather-related safety is considered in daily planning. We stay sheltered during thunder, lightning, and high winds, and we seek shade in the forest on hot, humid days. We avoid the creek during quick spring thaws, and build a warming fire on cold winter days. These decisions are discussed with children to help their growing understanding of how we are able to adapt to our environments.

During extreme heat (+30C) and cold (-25C), educators limit the children's length of exposure based on age and outerwear. We frequently assess children's comfort and safety, watching for both cold and heat-related conditions, and use indoor shelters when required.

White Pines Forest School has emergency plans and procedures in place. All educators are familiar with the plans and review them on an annual basis. Educators maintain current certification in Standard First and Infant/Child CPR, and use their knowledge and experience to assess, attend to, and communicate in the event of an emergency.

Educators have on hand at all times:

1. current emergency contact information for each child
2. complete first aid kit
3. cell phone

WPFS must be updated promptly if there are any changes to a child's emergency contact information.

Arrivals and Departures

Our daily programs start at our Main Lodge. Children should be dropped off up to 10 minutes prior to session start time (no earlier) to ensure the session begins on time. Educators are not available prior to this time as they will be setting up for the day. Families should notify us as soon as possible if unable to attend a session. Groups head to the forest on time and families who arrive late must locate their group in the forest.

Late pick-ups can cause stress for children and create challenges for program operations. It is very important that families arrive on time at the end of each session. Our educators meet after programs to clean up, reflect, and plan for upcoming sessions and cannot accommodate late pick-ups.

Please note, WPFS will only release children to individuals authorized to pick them up. Authorized persons must show photo ID for confirmation.

Custody and Access

In accordance with the law, parents have equal access to a child and to information pertaining to the child's development, health, and welfare. In order to limit access to a non-custodial parent, we must be provided a copy of a written custody order, domestic contract, or separation agreement detailing custodial arrangements.

Child Protection and Volunteers

All individuals, including members of the public and professionals who work closely with children, are required by law to report to a Children's Aid Society suspected cases of child abuse or neglect, or concerns that a child might be at risk. WPFS takes this responsibility seriously, and reporting procedures and training are provided to all staff.

White Pines Forest School values and welcomes the support of volunteers. All volunteers are responsible for submitting a current Criminal Record/Vulnerable Sector check prior to joining the program. Volunteers are encouraged to become familiar with Forest School principles, and are responsible for helping to monitor and support children during the program. Volunteers will be supervised by WPFS educators at all times.

Communication

Generally, we will communicate with families directly, or through Storypark and email. In the event of an emergency at WPFS, families will be contacted immediately by telephone.

WPFS educators spend the majority of their time with Forest School programs and other groups. Although administrative office hours are limited to Monday – Wednesday, between 2 PM and 5 PM, phone messages and emails are checked throughout the day. To reach us, please call 416-399-9276 or send an email to whitepines@ucccc.ca. It is very important to communicate promptly with WPFS information about child illness, absences, and late arrivals; and/or new individuals (who are not parents or listed emergency contacts), who may be picking up a child.

We encourage families to speak with us directly with any questions or when further information is needed regarding their child's time at the Forest School. We value a positive relationship between families and our educators. All concerns are taken seriously by WPFS and will be addressed in a fair and respectful way. Every effort will be made to achieve mutually agreeable resolutions as quickly as possible.

While families are encouraged to address concerns directly with the educators or coordinator of the program, they are also welcome to email info@ucccc.ca directed to Upper Canada Child Care's VP Child Care Programs.

Preparing for Forest School

Children must be comfortable to learn and have fun. In order for children to have a great day in the forest, following supplies are required:

Sunscreen and Bug Spray (A labelled bottle of each one)

We will help children apply sunscreen and bug spray. For those who prefer not to use these products, a suitable replacement would be to dress children appropriately for the conditions (e.g. light-coloured, long pants and sleeves, socks, bug repellent clothing, and bug net hats will help protect from mosquitos and ticks; sun hats and long pants and sleeves will provide protection against sun.)

Clothing and Equipment

Each child will need a well-fitting backpack that they can carry with ease, and that can contain their water, snack and dry/extra clothing layers.

When choosing clothing for Forest School keep in mind that fabric type is important. For example, cotton dries slowly and can cause a child to feel chilled when wet. Although nylon dries quickly, it is not water proof, and will not keep base layers dry. Where possible, we suggest choosing synthetic wool or silk clothing which breathes well, dries quickly, and insulates against the changing weather elements.

As the weather often changes throughout the day and is generally cooler and damper in the forest, we find layering clothing to be most comfortable. We recommend the following weather-specific clothing:

Rainy Day Clothing (Fall/Winter/Spring)

- **Base Layer:** synthetic or wool long john shirt and pants; wool socks
- **Mid Layer:** fleece or wool sweater and pants
- **Outer Layer:** durable, waterproof raincoat and rain-pants; warm toque; waterproof, insulated mittens; waterproof boots.
- **Extra Layers:** 1-2 pairs of wool socks, 1-2 pairs of waterproof insulated mittens; warm toque, mid layer, underwear
- **Optional:** extra boots

Cool Dry Day (Fall/Spring)

- **Base Layer:** synthetic wool or long john shirt and pants; wool socks
- **Mid Layer:** lightweight fleece or wool pants and sweater
- **Outer Layer:** warm jacket, durable rain-pants, waterproof boots, waterproof mittens, warm toque.
- **Extra Layers:** 1-2 pairs of wool socks, 1 pair of waterproof mittens, mid layer, underwear

Warm Rainy Day

- **Base Layer:** lightweight synthetic material t-shirt and long sleeve; lightweight, synthetic material pants (quick dry material is ideal); wool socks
- **Outer Layer:** durable, waterproof raincoat and rain-pants; waterproof boots
- **Extra Layers:** fleece sweater, wool socks, toque
- **Optional:** extra boots

Warm Dry Day

- **Base Layer:** lightweight, long pants that can easily be rolled up; t-shirt; lightweight synthetic socks
- **Outer Layer:** fleece sweater or jacket; closed toe running shoes or hiking boots; sun hat
- **Extra Layer:** extra socks; base layer
- **Optional:** bug Jacket/head net (spring)

Cold Winter Day

- **Base Layer:** wool or synthetic long john shirt and pants; wool socks
- **Mid Layer:** wool or fleece sweater and pants; fleece or wool neck warmer
- **Outer Layer:** warm, waterproof, windproof and breathable snow suit; warm toque; waterproof mittens; warm waterproof boots
- **Extra Layers:** 1 pair of wool socks; warm toque, mid later, 1-2 pairs of insulated mittens
- **Optional:** extra boots, hand warmers, extra snowsuit

It is not necessary to invest in expensive brand names. Thrift stores are great places to find gear at reasonable prices. Good quality children's outdoor gear can be found at Canadian Tire, Mountain Equipment Co-op, or on Amazon. WPFS also offers "Muddy Buddies" for sale.

Children will need a suitable change of clothes daily, provided in a bag marked with their name. Spare clothing will be left with our supplies at our indoor shelter location to reduce bulk in children's backpacks. We will do what we can to ensure belongings are kept safe, however WPFS is not responsible for any lost or missing gear. A lost and found will be maintained and emptied at the end of each session block.

The WPFS team is looking forward to our new adventures; we hope to see you in the forest soon!

"If a child is to keep alive (their) inborn sense of wonder, (they) need the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with (them) the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in." (Rachel Carson)