



# **Earthworks Forest School Program**

**2025-2026 Parent Handbook**

## Who We Are:

EarthWorks is a youth development program offered by The Center for Youth that focuses on 21st Century Skills, experiential learning, STEAM and environmental enrichment, and personal wellness. By partnering with community leaders and educators we develop programs that build healthy, lasting, bonds between land and community.

Environmental science, forestry, and education are at the heart of what we do. Earthworks offers the skills and experience to facilitate safe, nature-based programs among diverse groups while helping them to develop skills and experiences that connect youth with their world and each other.

Earthworks staff is highly trained, diversely practiced, individuals with over 20 years of combined experience developing environmental and educational programs. They guide students through the natural world to educate, inspire, and empower youth by allowing them to develop connections with themselves and their world through meaningful experiences.

## Our Approach

Earthworks used a combined approach to education that includes ideas and methods from *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*, Project Adventure, Project WET, and Project WILD along with many other resources in order to develop our unique Forest School curriculum.

While the purpose of our Forest School is to educate youth on the natural world, the bulk of our day consists of unstructured play. This is because we understand that curiosity is oftentimes the main driving force behind a child's learning process. More importantly, we do not expect our Forest Schoolers to sit still for long! That being said, we incorporate movement, purposeful game-play, and unstructured free play times, where children can climb, run, jump and talk into the plans for each day of Forest School.



Our daily focus consists of intentional work, cooperative play, careful observation, and wilderness exploration. Some example activities include: splitting wood, sustaining warmth and fire, building survival shelters, cooking over a flame, and participating in awareness challenges. They work together, using their strong imaginations and ideas to sort out all types of social situations with each other. We witness them problem-solving to create the worlds they envision. It might not look like much, but this type of play is developing both fine and gross motor skills, executive function, spatial awareness, kindness and empathy, balance, and coordination. The cognitive benefits of outdoor play are immeasurable.

We hope to encourage children to carefully understand what they experience through the senses, and promote the natural curiosity of observing nature. Ultimately, we hope children enjoy working together and experience the important bond that we all share with nature.

## **About Our Forest Schools**

### **When**

Our Forest Schools are held from September to May with a brief break for the month of January. Each Forest School is held once a week in increments of 7-week sessions and depending on the location, can include two 7-week sessions held back-to-back. Depending on the day of the week and the location, our Forest Schools are for 3-hour increments and run from either 9-12 pm or 12-3 pm.

### **Where**

Earthworks is fortunate enough to partner with two separate parks departments in the Greater Rochester Area. It is because of these partnerships that we hold our Forest Schools in the following locations:

#### **Penfield**

Veterans Memorial Park

3100 Atlantic Ave

Penfield, NY 14526

## **Ages**

Earthworks Forest Schools are open for students from ages 4+. Based on the content that we cover, the activities that we do, and the weather we are immersed in we have restricted Forest School registration to this age range after years of experience running this program. Below is more information on each session and the age ranges they are geared towards:

### **Guided Forest School Age 4-5**

Guided Forest School is a nature-based program designed for children ages 4 to 5 and their parents or guardians. This immersive outdoor experience introduces young learners to the wonders of the natural world while emphasizing the importance of environmental connection and stewardship. Through guided activities, hands-on exploration, and nature-focused games, families will develop a deeper appreciation for the outdoors. Parents play an active role in supporting their child's learning journey, helping to foster curiosity, confidence, and a lifelong relationship with nature.

### **Penfield Forest School Ages 5-11**

Each session will include outdoor play, practical skill-building, outdoor survival techniques, and hands-on learning opportunities. Students who join us will be encouraged to cooperate, problem-solve and work together to reach success. Our classes take place entirely outside, and we encourage students to come to class prepared for the changing weather conditions.

### **Nature Leaders Forest School Age 12+**

Uniquely tailored to young adult minds, our Nature Leaders Forest School will encourage students to think outside the box and apply the scientific method to the world around them.

Each session will include a STEAM-based lesson, practical skill-building, outdoor survival techniques, and hands-on learning opportunities. Students joining us will be encouraged to cooperate, problem-solve and work together to succeed. Our classes take place entirely outside, and we encourage students to come to class prepared for the changing weather conditions.

Located In Veterans Memorial Park in Penfield.

For the benefit of the group and the individual student, we want to be sure that our new enrollees can feel successful in our programs, in which they will need to meet many of their personal needs autonomously and exercise personal responsibility to attend. Your child is ready to enroll in Earthworks Forest School programs when they are able to meet all of the following criteria:

- Carry their backpack and other belongings independently
- Open all lunch and snack containers and wrappers independently
- Attend to their own clothing independently (tying, zipping, buckling, adjusting layers, etc.)
- Keep track of their personal water bottle and food and eat and drink, as needed
- Use the restroom independently
- Apply sunscreen and insect repellent independently, as needed
- Remain with our group while in our camp area and maintain a reasonable pace with our group while on hikes and walks
- Participate in and understand the importance of Leave-No-Trace Carry-In and Carry-Out practices

## **What to Expect**

Program drop off begins promptly 5-10 minutes before class begins and pick up needs to be on time; either at 3 pm or 12 pm promptly. If you plan to run late for either pick up or drop off, please call, text, or email us ahead of time to let us know. Parents will be expected to check in with Earthworks Instructors to verbally sign children in and out each day to ensure that they have all the necessary gear to participate in class.

Upon drop-off, the adventure begins! Students will be encouraged to jump into a fun game and explore the area. Once everyone in the class has arrived, we will promptly head into the woods in order to be immersed in nature for as much time as possible. Parents play an important role by dropping off their children with confidence, supporting effective communication between teachers and their children, and supporting their experiences in Forest School with a positive attitude acknowledging their joys, as well as their challenges.

# Packing List/What to Leave Home:



Earthworks Forest Schools are focused on nature immersion and outdoor adventure. We are proud to say that this is one of the key reasons why children and adults grow to appreciate and love our programs – the goal is to be challenged, get dirty and learn with the freedom to explore! Given these goals, there are few, if any times that class will be offered in an indoor setting.

Please understand that this class runs for 3 hours and while we know that children are very resilient and full of energy, it is also good to know that they have the necessary items to keep them energized, happy and healthy if they need them. We will be checking in with parents before each class to ensure that everyone is prepared. Those who are not able to carry their own bags or are missing items will be asked to remain with their

parents until their clothing and day pack are complete.

Please bring the following items to every session:

- ❖ Backpack
- ❖ Water bottle
  - On cold days, you may also want to consider sending them in with some mildly warm tea to sip on in addition to the regular water bottle.
- ❖ Snack
- ❖ Lunch
- ❖ A small journal and pencil/pen for writing

## What to Wear:

For all outdoor classes in cold weather, layering will be especially important to keep your children comfortably warm and dry. Stay away from 100% cotton fabric in cooler weather



(which is most of the year around here). Wool is always recommended, but synthetic fabrics such as fleece or polyester are preferable over cotton.

We ask that parents make sure kids have dressed appropriately for seasonal weather and the environment. As you know, "there is no bad weather, just bad clothing." Because most of our programming occurs during the cooler months, the following list is cold-weather specific.

**Please note: When cotton gets wet, it will NOT keep your child warm.**



### Layers:

- ❖ Head:
  - Hat (in colder weather, one that covers the ears)
  - Scarf that they can pull up over their face or balaclava (if needed)
- ❖ Torso:
  - Baselayer (wool or synthetic recommended)
  - Middle-layer shirt (wool or fleece recommended)
  - Raincoat or windbreaker (when needed)
  - Down coats are great when used with a shell layer (underneath and water-resistant outer layer)
- ❖ Legs:
  - Baselayer (wool or synthetic recommended)
  - Middle-layer fleece is recommended (if needed)

- Pants (wool or water resistant recommended)
- Outer pants (rain pants optional but can keep your child dry).
- Snowsuits in winter!
- ❖ Feet:
  - Socks (base layer) synthetic, silk, or wool mix best for cool and cold
  - Over Socks (bigger) wool blends\*
  - Extra pair of socks (any kind) as a spare, in your child's backpack
  - Waterproof boots for muddy and wet conditions
  - Snow boots when needed
- ❖ Hands: Mittens or gloves in colder weather (double layer with waterproof outer shell works great)
  - *At least* one extra pair of mittens
  - Thin, non-cotton, lunch gloves for cold days. These enable your child to handle food items and still keep their fingers warm.

## **Bug and Sun Protection**

NOTE: It is very important to do a thorough tick check after Forest School! Removing a tick early and safely is a great defense against tick-borne illness. Always save the tick in a zip-lock bag to have for testing if necessary.

A brimmed hat is one of the best defenses against the sun and buzzing bugs! Consider both the child and the environment when deciding on insect deterrents. Those containing pyrethrins or DEET are highly effective, but should never be used on children's skin. Note that long-lasting pyrethrins, sprayed on boots and pants, can be just as effective, but can also be hazardous to aquatic life if freshly sprayed (for example, that morning). Please read the cautionary labels. Many safe and natural bug sprays are available! Ask us for suggestions if you are unsure!

Another great way to stay protected is with clothing. Keeping covered with long sleeves, long pants (and boots or socks over pants), and a wide-brim hat, are very safe and effective methods for dealing with both sun and bugs! On warmer days, we recommend moisture-wicking synthetic fabrics or linen as the best option for coverage while staying cool. Keep in mind, a spring day when no leaves are on the trees, or even a sunny winter day, can expose your child to too much sun. We recommend applying sunscreen every day before Forest School in order to prevent sun damage.



Masks: If public health and program officials deem it necessary, families should be prepared to return to the masking policy.

## What to Leave at Home

- ❖ **Electronics:** We ask that kids not bring electronics or toys as they can be very distracting (phones can be kept packed away in bags) and take away from the “wild” feeling of our time outside.
- ❖ **Tools:** Earthworks will have tools and supplies each day, so it is not necessary to have your children bring their own unless you expressly confirm this with your instructors.
- ❖ **Sharps:** Please do NOT send potentially hazardous objects. On occasion, tools may be appropriate but must be shown to a teacher and used only in the Cutting Circle area. Always check with an instructor before sending a tool out into the woods with your child.
- ❖ **Toys:** Bringing toys from home is discouraged. Personal toys can get dirty and broken and may cause problems when others want to play with them. Better yet—if your child would like to bring a doll, truck, or horse they can let us know and we could try making one out of natural materials. The forest holds cordage materials, acorns, wood, sticks (there are hundreds of things to do with a stick!), mud, bark, leaves and so many things for your child to play with! Encourage your child that their beloved toy will be waiting when they get home, but they can create a toy at Forest School.
- ❖ We do make exceptions for sleds and skis if we have appropriate conditions and space to use them.



## **Health and Medical**

### **Medications**

We ask that if your child has an allergy, medical condition or illness that requires medication or special attention to please notify us ahead of time our guides can be informed and prepared. If there are medications that need to be administered by an adult, please make sure they are handed directly to our guides prior to the start of the program. If your child is sick or injured, they must be cleared by a doctor prior to attending the program.

### **First Aid**

Our instructors have first aid training and carry first aid kits at all times, along with each child's medical information. If your child requires medication and you cannot provide it before the day begins, let us know so that special arrangements can be made.

Scraped knees, nicks, and bumps are cared for at the camp. Our approach is that little events are part of the learning process. All minor injuries are met with assurance and cleanliness, and encouragement with your child's ability to have confidence in themselves. Staff will discuss any minor injuries with parents at the end of the day. Any injury involving a bump on the head or one of any other concerns will initiate a call home from one of your instructors. Such a call home does not deem an emergency, or that a child needs an immediate pick-up, but that you, the parent, have time to make any decisions regarding care before you arrive for pick-up.

## **Sickness**

The Forest School program can be physically demanding for little ones. Please be aware when deciding if your child is well enough to attend, that a child unable to participate fully due to illness will have a negative experience and requires a greater share of instructor time and attention. We, unfortunately, do not have the staff resources to nurse a sick child. If your child becomes unwell we will keep him or her comfortable and call you to come to pick him or her up.

# **Inclement Weather**

## **Cancellations**

If the weather does take a turn for the worse, and driving conditions are bad, we will inform folks of class cancellation no later than one hour before the program starts. We also reserve the right to cancel our class up to 3 hours ahead of time if severe weather is forecasted; including heavy rain, hail, or frigid temperatures. We will do our best to cancel the night before class. If for some reason a program day is canceled due to weather or an unpredictable event, we will do our best to reschedule for a later date. Full refunds will be applied to cancellations prior to one week before the sessions start.