

Playful Nature Explorers



Parent Handbook 2022-2023

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Welcome to Playful Nature Explorers	3
Welcome to Playful Nature!	3
Our Mission, Values, and Curriculum	4
Our Team	6
Kelsey Brewster, Nature Preschool Educator	6
Jason McClevish, Nature Preschool Educator	6
Lauren Salzman, Education Director	6
Trey Ramsey, Program Administrator	7
Daily Schedule & Drop-Off / Pick-Up	7
Arrival 8:50-9:00am	7
Snack	7
Circle Time	8
Thematic Exploration or Activity	8
Play, play, and more play!	8
Is Playful Nature the right fit for my child?	9
What to Bring: Fall, Winter, Spring	10
Each day your child will need:	10
Snack	11
Restrooms	11
Healthy Child Guidelines	11
Inclement Weather	12
Weather Related Closures	12
Discipline Philosophy	12
Financial Policies	13
Scholarship	14
Cancellation & Refund Policy	14
2022-2023 Program Calendar	15

Welcome to Playful Nature Explorers

...carrot tops poke out of rich brown soil, honey bees pollinate and provide delicious nectar to sweeten our tea, and eyes sparkle with curiosity and wonder.



Welcome to Playful Nature!

Ithaca Children's Garden's very own outdoor preschool program.

ICG's Playful Nature Explorers is research-based, child-centered, and brings a world of discovery, learning, and joy to your child's day and season through nature and play immersion.

Like learning a new language, building a relationship with the natural world is best when started young. Play is the universal language of childhood!

While Playful Nature Explorers is committed to being outside in all types of weather, the program does have a Yurt on site that

serves as our indoor classroom and safe shelter in case of dangerously cold temperatures or thunderstorms.

Following the rhythm of the seasons, our play-based curriculum allows the natural curiosity of young children to lead our explorations, experiments, and creative expressions.

At Ithaca Children's Garden, we believe that all children deserve a vibrant, nature-rich childhood that models and fosters respect for self, others, and our magnificent world.

Our Mission, Values, and Curriculum



Ithaca Children's Garden MISSION: connecting children to nature to create a more beautiful, resilient, and just world.

Research suggests that one of the best ways to grow environmental stewardship is through meaningful, child-led outdoor play. It is through play that children develop a relationship with the natural world. It is that relationship that propels them to care for the environment throughout their lifetime.

At ICG, children get the absolute best: Opportunities for authentic child-led free play, with expert mentorship and care. Children who have rich and numerous opportunities for play in childhood are better prepared for life's challenges with social and physical competencies, problem-solving skills, self-awareness, and academic success.

We understand throughout history not all children have been given equal opportunities. We believe every child deserves to learn and play outdoors and are committed to creating a safe and inclusive environment for all children of

every background and ability. Playful Nature is committed to creating a community atmosphere where everyone is valued, respected and heard.

Our curriculum is shaped accordingly. We apply Playwork Principles (<http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples>) in the design of our garden and with the stages and ages we work with.

Playful Nature follows ICG's unique garden and play-based curriculum. Snack and small group explorations provide opportunities to build community. Small group activities, book sharing, working together in our Kitchen Garden, silly songs, games, and parachute plays are some of the ways we weave our community of young learners together.

The rhythms of the seasons inform our activities and explorations. Our emergent curriculum responds to children's interests and focuses on seasonally relevant topics. Opportunities for deeper exploration and learning are sprinkled throughout the day as children are invited to explore with Jason or Kelsey. Art, science, cooking, gardening, exploration and games are some of the ways we learn together. And we'll do all of it with the unique needs of our community of learners at the center.



Our Team



Kelsey Brewster, Nature Preschool Educator

With freedom to explore the outdoors as a child, Kelsey has now dedicated her adulthood to providing the same to children in a preschool setting. She has spent the last few years supporting kids in fostering their connection to the natural world by giving them the space to grow and explore.

kelsey@ithacachildrengarden.org



Jason McClevish, Nature Preschool Educator

Jason strives to engage and revel in the blessings and growth that are at hand, and is excited to share his varied strengths and love of the outside to support a broader spectrum of fellow empowered beings. There is nowhere better than Ithaca Children's Garden for our shared play and experience, so let's grow together there! jason@ithacachildrengarden.org



Lauren Salzman, Education Director

Lauren has more than 15 years (7+ with ICG!) experience leading educational programming with nonprofits, nature centers, museums and community organizations. As an avid naturalist, Lauren has always loved plants and studying the natural world. lauren@ithacachildrengarden.org



Trey Ramsey, Program Administrator

Public gardens are the perfect place for Trey (they/them) to combine their love of the outdoors with their passion for education and social justice. They have years of working with plants and insects, fighting for LGBTQ justice, and trying to make the world a greener, more welcoming place. Outside of work, Trey enjoys hiking, gardening, LEGOs, and Dungeons and Dragons.

trey@ithacachildrengarden.org

Daily Schedule & Drop-Off / Pick-Up

Most days, drop off and pick up will be located between the Troll House and Gaia. During the winter months or in case of heavy rain, we will start and end our days in the Yurt. Please notify staff through Brightwheel¹ if you will be arriving after 9:15AM. We will communicate to families through the Brightwheel app about any change to pick up or drop off.

While our day-to-day activities will be informed by the season, weather, and the interests of the children, we will maintain a familiar rhythm in our days:

Arrival 8:50-9:00am

While we wait for all of our friends to arrive, children are welcome to explore and engage in child-led play at Gaia, the Troll House, and in the Bioswale.

Snack

We will all visit the bathroom and handwashing station together and encourage bathroom use during this time. Everyone will wash their hands before snack.

Snacking is encouraged during this time but we do allow for multiple opportunities to have snacks throughout the morning as children learn to listen to their bodies.

¹ Brightwheel is our family communication platform

Circle Time

Circle time is seen as an early childhood necessity; it gives the teacher a platform to restate rules, share a song or a book, or hear from the students. While circle time has its benefits, it can also interrupt the child's play by being pulled into an adult-led activity that only allows for child participation if the child is calm and able to join. At Playful Nature Explorers, we put the child first. Our circle time looks a little different from the ones you may be accustomed to. They are not scheduled and not always planned. Instead, a child may ask for a book and that educator will announce that a book is being read on the blanket. There may be a large group to come listen or it may only be an educator and the child who asked initially. If play seems to be coming to a natural end, drums might be heard to signify that there is a song about to be sung if children would like to join the circle. Vital pieces of information can be shared during this time but the circle could also end with the book. A discussion of what the kids have found that morning might carry on after the song, but kids also might run away before the song ends to get back to their most important job: play.

Community building is an important piece of the puzzle. Kids build their empathy, language, and listening skills when they sit together and share what they did over the weekend or stories of their life. They learn about other's traditions and cultures while they are simply chatting away or being in the same play place as each other. Circle time can offer a space to work on these important skills, but this sharing also occurs naturally as kids come together to solve a problem in their play, as they sit down together for a snack, or share information during an activity. This type of community building is authentic and instinctual allowing for stronger bonds to form.

Thematic Exploration or Activity

Responsive activities are offered throughout the morning depending on the group's interest and seasonal offerings.

Play, play, and more play!

Authentic child-directed outdoor free play is the largest part of our day. We choose a location and through every experience there, the children get to know the land and create seasonal memories.

Goodbyes 12:00

Is Playful Nature the right fit for my child?

Playful Nature welcomes ages 2.5-6. We request that all Explorers are day time potty trained. We understand that occasional accidents happen and they will be handled with kindness and respect.

Because of our qualified staff, individualized attention and the nature of our child-centered curriculum, we are often a terrific fit for children with a rainbow of temperaments and experiences. However it is always in the best interest of your child to talk with Kelsey, or Jason about any concerns you have about extra needs or accommodations that will help your child thrive ahead of time.



We welcome both parents and children to visit Playful Nature prior to beginning the program. We are happy to accommodate a gradual transition to independence, especially among our younger explorers.

What to Bring: Fall, Winter, Spring

Set your child up for success!

Each day your child will need:

- a backpack
- 2 complete changes of clothes (including socks and underwear) in labeled gallon-size ziploc bags
- a hearty, healthy snack (playing outside makes your child hungry!)
- a full water bottle
- shoes or boots that can get muddy and wet
- seasonally appropriate outerwear
- 3 masks (please wear 1 upon arrival and have 2 in your backpack) * *ICG will be continuously updating mask and covid guidance as advised by New York State and the Tompkins County Health Department.*

We will be outside in all seasons and virtually all weather. For children to enjoy their time, they must be appropriately dressed to stay warm and dry.

In spring and fall, please dress your child in layers as the temperature can change dramatically over the course of the morning. Waterproof jacket, rain pants, and mud boots are recommended. A hat on sunny or chilly days is helpful.

In winter, all children need snow pants, a winter jacket, a hat, mittens, and waterproof snow boots. Scarves and neck warmers are also a good idea. We recommend you send 2-3 pairs of mittens each day so they can be changed when they get wet.

Dressing in layers keeps children warm and dry during outdoor play, essential to a positive experience :

- a base layer to keep you dry (avoid cotton that absorbs perspiration)
- a mid-layer to keep you warm
- an outer layer to retain heat and protect against rain, snow, & wind.
 - snow pants, winter coat, waterproof snow boots
 - hats, neckwarmer or scarf
 - mittens (2-3 pair)

- mittens are generally easier for young children to put on independently and keep hands warmer than gloves

If you want to learn even more about dressing for the weather in our Upstate climate, take a look at this complete [ICG Guide to Dressing for Success in all Seasons](#)

Snack

Please send a hearty, nutritious snack and full water bottle each day. We ask that you put messy snacks in a resealable container. Nobody likes to find a yogurt covered backpack at the end of a hot morning.

Restrooms

Participants will use ICG's accessible porta potty and outdoor hand-washing stations or hand sanitizer. It will be disinfected each morning before the program. The yurt design includes an ADA one-stall restroom with handwashing sink, which we expect to be ready for occupancy in Fall 2022.

Healthy Child Guidelines

Playful Nature is an active, busy, outdoor program. In order to get the most out of the morning together and participate fully, children need to feel well enough to play outside for three hours.

Playful Nature will follow all New York State and Tompkins County recommendations for participation guidelines. Our COVID protocol will follow the Ithaca City School District policies.

If your child becomes ill during program we will call you to pick them up.



Inclement Weather

Playful Nature will meet and play in the Yurt during inclement weather. This includes when the temperatures fall below 18 degrees Fahrenheit including windchill. We will also meet or retreat to this location if there is a storm advisory, driving rain, or any other weather situation that our educators feel might compromise the health, safety or wellbeing of our preschool community. ICG staff will be sure to communicate to families the status of where to drop off and pick up your child. We may be able to play outside during a break in the weather or for a short amount of time during cold temperatures, so please pack clothing appropriate for the weather conditions.

Weather Related Closures

If the Ithaca City School District cancels school due to snow or hazardous weather, Playful Nature Garden Preschool will be canceled.

If the Ithaca City School District delays opening by one hour, we will open one hour late. If they delay 2 hours, we will cancel program.

Weather related closures are not refunded.

Discipline Philosophy

At Ithaca Children's Garden we model and encourage our young learners to observe three guiding principles:

Take care of yourself * Take care of others * Take care of the environment

With the guidance of our staff and their peers, children develop their understanding of these three principles and how they apply to their words and actions.

Our extensive knowledge and experience in early child development and positive discipline practices allow us to meet children where they are. Staff respond to behavior as developing communication, and work for understanding first, then support each child in practicing skills in a supportive environment.

Financial Policies

A \$30 application fee is required, which will be applied to your first month's tuition. Once your schedule is confirmed and a tuition agreement signed, a deposit equal to one half month's tuition is required to reserve your space in the program. It will be applied to your last month's tuition.

- A \$30 non-refundable application fee is required at time of registration. This will be applied to your first month's tuition. Should Ithaca Children's Garden (ICG) not be able to enroll your child due to space and available schedules, the fee will be refunded.
- A deposit equal to the amount of half one month's tuition is due to confirm and reserve your space in the program. The deposit will be applied to your last month's tuition.
- Tuition for the month is due on the date indicated above. Payments exceeding 15 days overdue will be assessed a 1.5% late fee.
- Any non sufficient funds payments returned to us by the bank will incur a \$30 fee.
- We require 2 months' written notice if you wish to withdraw from the tuition agreement, during which time you are still responsible for any monthly payments even if your child no longer attends the program.
- ICG may be able to waive the notice requirement on a case-by-case basis, such as in cases of financial hardship or severe illness.
- No refunds or credit will be issued for absences or weather-related closures.
- Program fees, including the deposit, will be billed through the Brightwheel app. You are expected to sign up for and use the app. We also use Brightwheel for other program communications.

Academic Year (9/14-6/17)

4 day: \$500/month

3 day: \$410/month

2 day: \$315/month

****Priority is given to children signed up for 4 days a week****

Register for Academic Year	
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\$500/month	4 days
\$410/month	3 days
\$315/month	2 days

Payment Options:

Monthly invoices and other program fees, including for the program deposit, will be issued through Brightwheel (which you can access via an app or web browser). You will have the option to set up recurring billing on a credit/debit card, to make one-off payments via a card, or to pay offline via check . If paying with a check, you may submit it at drop-off or pick-up on or before the due date. When you receive a tuition agreement and a request for deposit, you will be able to choose from the payment options outlined below.

Recurring Payment: Set up a recurring payment with your credit or debit card via the Brightwheel app. Your monthly payment will be processed on the first day of the month.

By Check: You may submit a check at drop off/pick up on the due date.

Scholarship

The scholarship application is now included in the registration form. If your financial situation changes after registering or enrolling, please reach out to us at register@ithacachildrengarden.org and we will be happy to work with you regarding scholarships.

Cancellation & Refund Policy

We require 60 days' written notice if you wish to withdraw from your tuition agreement, during which time you are still responsible for any monthly payments even if your child no longer attends the program. Your deposit will be applied to your last month within this time.

ICG may be able to waive the notice requirement on a case-by-case basis, such as in cases of financial hardship or severe illness.

No refunds or credit will be issued for absences or weather-related closures.

2022-2023 Program Calendar

September 12 - June 15

9:00am-12:00pm

Holidays & Breaks

9/26: Rosh Hashanah

10/5: Yom Kippur

10/10: Indigenous Peoples' Day

11/23-11/25: Thanksgiving Break

12/21-1/1: Winter Holiday Break

1/16: Martin Luther King Jr. Day

2/20-2/24: Mid-Winter Break

4/10-4/14: Spring Break

5/29: Memorial Day

