

PARENT & GUARDIAN HANDBOOK



 Nature Preschool
at Irvine Nature Center

 **naeyc**[®]
Accredited

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WELCOME TO THE NATURE PRESCHOOL AT IRVINE NATURE CENTER!

Dear Families,

The preschool years are a precious time different from all other periods of childhood. No longer totally dependent on their parents, your children are striking out to forge their own discoveries, relationships, and methods of expression through many first experiences. Simultaneously, they continue to look towards important adults in their lives for guidance, love, and care. And what incredible sway these adults have in impacting what kinds of people children grow into! It is an honor that you have chosen us to play this role in your child's life in the coming year.

Over the next months, your child will grow and learn in countless ways. They will grow strong and courageous as they tackle new trails and scramble over new logs. They will make new connections and understandings of the worlds of math, science, art, and literature and continue to find their voice as they label and share these discoveries. They will learn about the intricate web of life that surrounds us and how we fit into it. Moreover, they will establish rich relationships with others in our community and a deep connection to nature. Your child will do all of this through doing: hands-on experimentation, self-directed exploration, and play. Oh so much play!

This handbook is designed to share our philosophy and answer questions about policies and procedures. If you have further questions or any concerns about our policies or your child's experience, please contact me at RooneyK@ExploreNature.org or 443-738-9223. I look forward to hearing from you!

In All Types of Weather,



Katie Rooney
Director of Early Childhood Education Programs
Irvine Nature Center





MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of The Nature Preschool at Irvine is to foster appreciation for the natural world while providing children with hands-on experiences for skill development in all areas of learning.

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

We believe that childhood should be joyful and wholesome; that the earliest, most memorable kind of learning includes climbing trees, catching frogs, and making mud pies. We believe that empathy, love, curiosity, and respect are the truest foundation of learning.

When thoughtful nature-based curriculum is combined with direct experiences in nature, a transformative change takes place. This connection is both powerful and empowering. We believe it is every child's right, as an integral part of the natural community, to develop a foundation of academic skills through encounters in the natural world.

WHY NATURE-BASED CURRICULUM?

There is a growing body of research that links nature-based learning with higher scores on standardized tests, improved physical fitness, a more developed understanding of science and math concepts, reduced effects of ADHD, and better academic performance all around.*

Nature-based curriculum encourages healthy minds and bodies. Being connected to nature is wired in the essence of every human being. However, busy modern lives have left many people, including children, disconnected from this core. A nature-based curriculum guarantees children an opportunity to build a lasting connection with nature through sensory learning.

Our program provides a complete framework of academic skills children need to be prepared for kindergarten. Physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and creative skills blossom in these formative years. But we are always learning through the lens of nature.



ABOUT THE NATURE PRESCHOOL

In contrast to traditional preschool programs, the Nature Preschool allows children to:

- Have extended outdoor time each day.
- Interact with and care for live animals native to our community.
- Learn directly from biofacts and artifacts.
- Develop earth-friendly habits such as recycling and composting.
- Eat, grow, and prepare healthy foods for snack.
- Create and reflect on learning through a variety of expressive art forms using natural and recycled materials.
- Learn through a combination of guided and self-guided wild nature play.

CHILD-CENTERED LEARNING

Our educational philosophy underscores our commitment to child-centered learning. Educators guide students to new learning as children ask questions, express curiosity or concern, and show enthusiasm towards discoveries. Students experiment, problem-solve, and explore with their senses. Students voice opinions and express ideas through language and the arts. Students develop friendships and learn from one another through cooperative play. In other words, students actively participate in all aspects of learning!

We integrate many approaches to support each child's learning and growth by:

- Providing a supportive, safe learning environment to encourage discovery, questioning and experimentation;
- offering sensory opportunities with live animals, natural objects, artifacts, trail games, outdoor interpretation, and creative arts activities;
- engaging cognitive growth and problem solving skills through hands-on games and activities;
- developing physical motor skills through active learning and play;
- promoting social skills and positive self-image through group play, cooperative learning, and appropriate risk-taking;
- cultivating empathy through discussion and celebrating diversity of all living things;
- nurturing self expression and creativity through arts, singing, storytelling, and reflective time in nature;
- encouraging family involvement through community celebrations, field trips, and classroom visits, to help students appreciate the wisdom of their first teachers — their families;
- partnering with parents to celebrate their child's talents and best-meet the needs of each child in our care;
- instilling respect and appreciation for the natural world.





HOW DOES NATURE-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORK?

We strive for learning to flow naturally through child-led exploration and play, both indoors and out. There is a balance of formal and informal learning. It helps to understand the following terms which help describe the aspects of our learning:

Informal learning: knowledge acquired through discovery, natural interactions with others, and environs

Formal learning: knowledge acquired through a structured curricula or content presented by teacher

Sensory learning: activities or materials for exploring that incorporate sight, smell, touch, taste, or sound

Experiential learning: knowledge acquired through direct, hands-on, sensory learning experiences

Unstructured play: play that does not involve adult rules, adult narration, or adult direction*

Wild nature play: unstructured play in a natural environment

Child-led/centered/driven: following children's interest in activities, topics, or places to allow them to make true meaning out of experiences

Risk-taking play: play that allows children to determine their own physical capabilities (e.g. climbing a tree); children learn to assess their own risks independent of adults telling them what they are able to do/capable of doing*

Emergent curriculum: refers to the fluid nature of learning by which children's ideas emerge as they interact with others and the learning environment and the facilitation of further investigation of these topics

Provocation: an invitation to explore, examine, create, or reflect based on given materials; there is not one correct way for the child to interpret a provocation

**Teachers are always responsible for removing hazards and checking for unsafe conditions anywhere a child plays. Adults are always there to support, guide or help a child as needed.*

MORE ABOUT CHILD-CENTERED LEARNING

OUR CURRICULUM IS INFLUENCED BY:

- Our original Nature Pedagogy that combines Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and Montessori philosophies of child-centered learning and emergent curriculum with nature-based learning
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards
- Guidelines for Excellence in Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs created by the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)
- MSDE standards for early learners
- Our students and their families

WE DEVELOP LANGUAGE & LITERACY BY:

- Exposing students to letters, letter combinations, and words
- Modeling writing and offering writing opportunities each day
- Providing a print-rich classroom environment
(i.e. magazines, books, field guides, and poems)
- Storytelling, listening to and retelling stories
- Inviting students to “write” their own stories through dictation, early writing, or drawing
- Encouraging dramatic play
- Singing, rhyming and experimenting with sounds
- Generating lists or reading to perform a task
(i.e. recipe or game instructions)
- Identifying characters, storylines to promote comprehension
- Introducing new vocabulary, words from other languages, symbols, and sign language
- Modeling and encouraging conversational language skills

WE EXPLORE MATH IDEAS BY:

- Finding, following, and repeating patterns
- Counting within context
- Figuring out what is missing among groups
- Estimating
- Songs, stories, and games with counting
- Using number and time words
- Graphing and charting
- Grouping (i.e. dozen, pair, many)
- Shape recognition and creation
- Classifying and grouping objects
- Sorting and matching objects
- Measuring and using scales
- Tracking seasonal and time progressions
- Counting with one-to-one correspondence
- Examining series of objects
- Comparing groups of objects to describe quantity and size

LICENSING & ACCREDITATION

The Nature Preschool is licensed by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) Office of Child Care. This means we must comply with the regulations outlined by MSDE, including the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR). If you wish, you may review Maryland's guide to regulated childcare and the regulations, both available in the cubby rooms.

In addition to our preschool license, we are nationally accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC is internationally known for its rigorous standards that guide the highest quality early childhood education programs.

Finally, we periodically refer to the North American Association for Environmental Education's Guidelines for Excellence.



THE NATURE PRESCHOOL STAFF

Our teachers come from diverse backgrounds, but they all share one thing in common: a love of nature and preschoolers! Teachers are knowledgeable about developmentally appropriate practices for early childhood learners and have a wealth of teaching experience.



CLASS STAFFING

Two co-teachers staff each class of 15 students. In addition, Irvine partners with local universities to mentor new teachers. We also have wonderful volunteers who work with us. At times there may be three or four adults working with a group of students. Since we are licensed by the Maryland State Department of Education, all staff and volunteers must comply with state guidelines. This includes fingerprinting, background checks, First Aid/CPR training, and ongoing professional development as required.

ENROLLMENT & PAYMENT INFORMATION

Enrollment is for the duration of the program: September through May. Children must be three years old and toilet-proficient before attending. Applications are accepted year-round and placement is first come, first served. To enroll, fill out an application form and submit it with the application fee. If space is available, we will send an enrollment contract. Within two weeks you must sign and return the contract, along with your non-refundable down payment of 10% of the annual tuition.

Priority Enrollment: Current students returning to The Nature Preschool, siblings of alumni, and families seeking Aftercare receive priority enrollment. Within those priorities and in general admission, applications and contracts are processed in the order that they are received. Priority is given as follows:

- 1) Current returning students (see more information below)
- 2) Siblings of Alumni (through mid-February)
- 3) Families seeking Aftercare (through March)

Re-enrollment: Families interested in enrolling their child in a second or third year at the Nature Preschool must submit a Re-Enrollment form every year. This form with updated class information will be provided in December prior to the year in consideration. Re-Enrollment Forms must be submitted by the due date on the form in order to be considered with priority. Re-enrolling students will need to return the offered contract by the due date in order to secure enrollment. A delay in submitting the contract and down-payment will likely result in losing your spot.

Please note, siblings must submit an application with a nonrefundable application fee as a new student.

Wait List: We do our best to place your child in your preferred or second choice time slot. If we are unable to do so, we will contact you to offer alternate openings. If we are still unable to enroll your child, we will place them on a wait list. If an opening arises, we will notify you.

Confirmation: Once enrollment is confirmed, you will receive a copy of the signed contract along with health and emergency forms, and a general release agreement. These items must be completed and returned by August 1 of the year your child begins school.

Siblings: Siblings enrolled in The Nature Preschool simultaneously receive a \$200 discount to one child's annual tuition fee.

Payment: Each family is responsible for tuition regardless of their child's attendance. Tuition for our calendar year (September - May) can be paid annually or monthly. Please note that you are billed on the first day of each month. This payment is automatically applied to your credit card unless you have indicated you wish to pay by check or use our online payment system. Contact Tara Lilley, Environmental Education Program Coordinator, if you have questions about billing. (443-738-9211 or LilleyT@ExploreNature.org)

Tax Identification Number: 52-1231286

*NOTE: There is no reduction in tuition for missed days or for days classes are closed or cancelled.
There are no make-up classes.*

EARLY BIRD CARE

What is Early Bird Care? It is a before-care option that takes place from 8:30 - 9 a.m., offered to students in our morning and full day classes. Children engage in quiet activities or games during this time or assist teachers in setting up provocations.

When is it available? Enrollment can be for 1, 2, 3, or 5 days a week. Occasional use of Early Bird Care is dependent upon availability for that day. In order to arrange a single day please contact Katie in advance to ensure space is available.

NOTE: Drop-in early care is not available. All early care must be arranged ahead of time and is only available for morning and full day classes.

How do I enroll? Please contact Katie Rooney at RooneyK@ExploreNature.org or call 443-738-9223 to add Early Bird Care to your tuition agreement. If you are enrolling siblings, you will need to complete a separate addendum for EACH child.

FERN CLUB AFTERCARE

What is Fern Club? It is an AfterCare offered to students in our afternoon and full day classes. Fern Club follows the same teaching philosophy and curricula of the Nature Preschool classes with a heavy focus on child-directed nature play. AfterCare teachers meet the same requirements as regular preschool teachers and will be in regular communication with classroom teachers to provide a consistent, loving, enriching environment for students. Students will go outside daily but return to the center by 5pm.

When is it available? Fern Club is offered every day the Nature Preschool is in session*, 2 - 6pm. Students enrolled in the afternoon class can enroll at a discounted rate for participation 4 - 6pm. Enrollment is offered on a semester or annual basis for 2, 3, or 5 days a week. Students may be picked up at any time, but tuition is a flat rate regardless of actual pick up time.

NOTE: AfterCare will not be provided during monthly Preschool Staff meetings held on pre-determined Mondays. These dates are included in The Nature Preschool Events Calendar provided with contracts and at the beginning of the school year.

How do I enroll? You can enroll in AfterCare at the time of application (and receive priority consideration with your application) or later in the school year at a pro-rated amount. Please contact Katie Rooney at RooneyK@ExploreNature.org or call 443-738-9223 to add Fern Club to your tuition agreement. If you are enrolling siblings, you will need to complete a separate addendum for EACH child.



ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

When you arrive, please sign in on the attendance roster then help your child place belongings in cubby, use the restroom and wash hands. If necessary, please apply insect repellent or sunscreen to your child before you leave. Imagination Stations will be waiting for your child upon arrival.

If your child must go home with someone other than his or her regular guardian, please fill out a permission slip stating the person's name, contact information and your authorization. Please give the slip directly to your child's teacher. For your child's safety, we may ask to see a Driver's License to confirm that individual's identity upon their arrival.

At pick-up time, please sign out on the attendance roster and wait for your child to be dismissed by the teacher. Muddy clothes or hands may need extra attention before going home. Please leave the classroom promptly as teachers need to prepare for the next class.

**NOTE: Parents/guardians must touch base with a teacher and sign children in and out on the roster at drop-off and pick-up each day.*

ABSENCE

If your child must miss class due to illness or another reason, please let us know so that we can keep an accurate record of attendance. You may call the main line at 443-738-9200 or Katie Rooney at 443-738-9223. If you do not speak to staff, please email your child's teachers and Katie. For more information, please see page 18.

LATE POLICY

Please call to inform your child's teacher if you will be late to pick up. If tardiness becomes an on-going issue, a late fee of \$15 will be charged for the first 15 minutes and an additional \$1 per minute after that.

SIBLINGS IN CLASS

While many siblings enjoy playing in our classrooms during drop off or pick up, we ask that you never leave siblings unattended. Additionally, children should not play in the classroom when teachers are not present (with or without adults). Class time is reserved for enrolled participants only. Throughout the year we offer special events and activities which often include family members so that everyone can participate.

A DAY AT THE NATURE PRESCHOOL

Our days flow naturally with our flexible but routine schedule. We start our day with Imagination Stations for self-directed play. After clean-up, students gather for circle time filled with greetings, songs, group activities, and investigations. Before we head outside for outdoor learning we enjoy a snack and use the bathroom. Our outdoor activities encompass creative arts, writing, nature investigations, science experiments, and child-led exploration and unstructured play. Before leaving for the day, we gather in a closing circle to review our day and say goodbye. We invite and embrace emergent curriculum as we follow students' interests. Our teachers are facilitators of learning, they are in tune with students' needs, skills, and discoveries.

In severe cold, wind, or rain, we will still go outdoors. It may be for a shorter period of time. In this case, we extend our time with Imagination Stations and/or incorporate a special project, experiment, or large motor activity.

SNACK, LUNCH, REST TIME & MORE

Our full day classes take place from 9 a.m. - 2 p.m. After a busy morning at The Nature Preschool, children eat lunch, rest, and play! Outdoor time or an enriching activity and closing circle concludes our day.

LUNCH

Please provide a peanut-free lunch for your child including a drink and ice pack.* Please pack lunch in reusable or recyclable containers. Composting is available in our classroom.

****Do not bring peanut products. We are a peanut-free school because some children have life threatening allergies to peanuts.***

REST TIME

During this quiet time, children rest their bodies while listening to music or a story. They may also look at books and draw. **Your child will need the following:** Nap mat such as a Wildkin Mat and an item to snuggle with.

NOTE: ALL nap items should be rolled up and placed in the nap storage cubby. Please label all items. These items must go home weekly to be laundered.

WHEN IT'S YOUR TURN TO BRING SNACK

Each family is responsible for bringing snack to class twice during the school year. Your child's teacher will post and send home a snack schedule which includes the names of families who are responsible for snack each week. Dietary restrictions and food allergies are noted on the snack schedule. All snacks must strictly follow these guidelines. ****We do not serve peanut or meat products.***

We strive to offer natural, healthy snacks such as fruits, vegetables, cheese, yogurt, beans, rice, whole grain cereals, or breads. We try to avoid food that contains dyes and preservatives or highly sugary snacks. The Maryland State Department of Education requires that foods be whole fruits or vegetables, or are produced in a licensed facility. This means we cannot serve fruits or vegetables that parents washed and cut at home or baked goods prepared at home. Teachers must wash and cut all produce. Please feel free to coordinate with your child's teacher to bring ingredients for the children to make a favorite recipe during class. Feel free to stay and help! We love cooking!

We cannot serve: homemade products or peanut products to any child. We also cannot serve whole grapes, tree nuts, popcorn, raw peas, hard pretzels, or chunks of raw carrots to children who are 3 years old. We also do not serve products containing meat.

Allergies: Please disclose your child's dietary restrictions and allergies on the health inventory form prior to the start of class. We will accommodate your child's needs as best we can, however, in some cases we may request that you provide a supplemental snack.

****Do not bring peanut products. Some children have life- threatening allergies to peanuts.***

Eating Together: Children learn a great deal by socializing with peers and adults during snack and meal times. We often serve snacks "family style" so children learn how to take appropriate portions, use table manners for passing food, and practice motor skills necessary for pouring, scooping, using tongs, etc.

ADJUSTMENT TO THE NATURE PRESCHOOL

Starting preschool is a big step for most kids. Some children are excited to participate and they easily acclimate to class. Other children are nervous at first but quickly 'warm up' as they get engaged in activities. Still others may have a longer adjustment period as they gradually become comfortable with a new environment and expectations.

Occasionally a child who is eager at first may have difficulty later when they realize the change is permanent. This adjustment is not necessarily related to a child's maturity level; every child handles new situations in his or her own way. We acknowledge these differences and provide support and encouragement to help each child adjust to our program.

As a parent/guardian, you have unique insight as to how your child reacts to new settings. There are many ways to prepare your child for class, such as talking about it a few weeks before school starts. As your child asks questions, answer them positively and honestly. "You're going to explore outside, meet animals and new friends, sing, make art projects and learn lots of new things. It will be a fun adventure!"

You may want to set up a visit to Irvine with your child to get familiar with the trails. This may alleviate some trepidation about unfamiliar settings. You may also want to use our "potty" a few times prior to the start of the school year. We offer many Parent/Child classes as well as Summer Nature Camps if you are looking for more ways to acclimate your child before the school year.

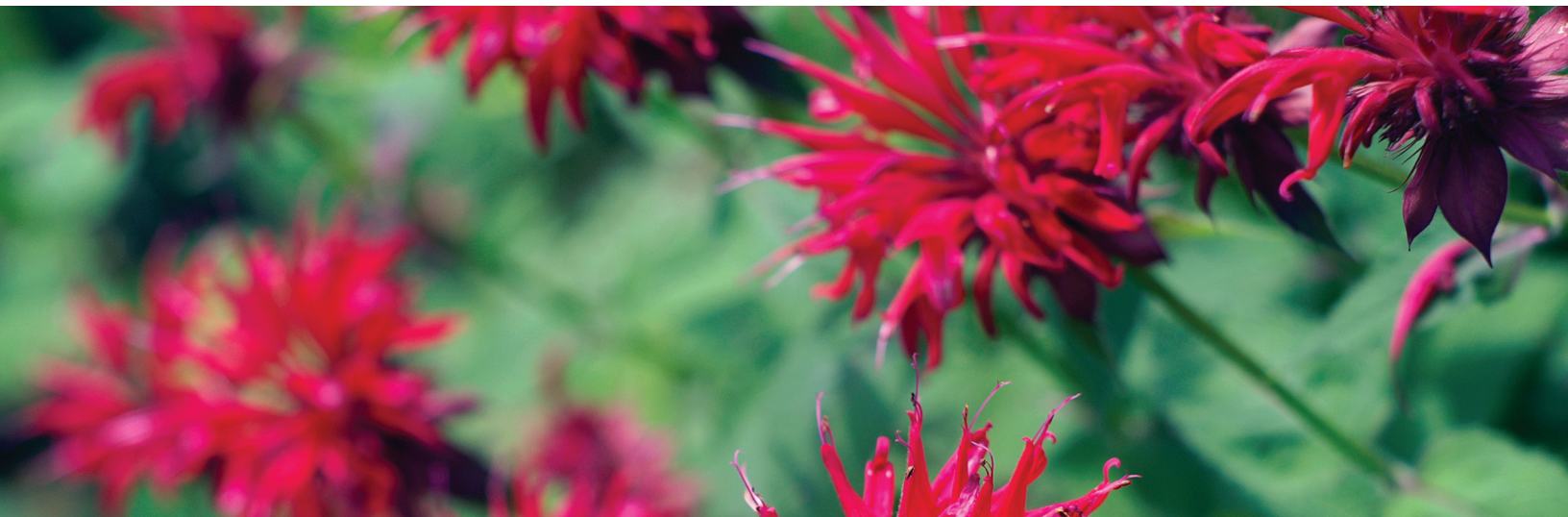
When you drop off, assure your child that you will be excited to hear all about the day when it is time to be picked up. You might even give your child a challenge: "While you are in class today, pick something special to tell me about — I can't wait to hear about your day!" Also let them know who is picking them up or when you will see them next.

If your child is experiencing a very difficult transition, please share your concerns with the teachers so that they can help provide a happy, smooth transition.

ITEMS FROM HOME

Security objects from home are allowed, but help your child understand the risks of loss and damage. These objects will be stored in your child's cubby during instruction and trail activities.

NOTE: Toys that encourage aggressive play, including weapons of any kind, are not permitted.



OUR APPROACH TO DISCIPLINE

The physical and emotional well-being of every child is of utmost importance. Every child will be made to feel safe and protected while in our care. We cultivate a calm, empathetic atmosphere with clear expectations for all participants. To maintain this atmosphere, a balance of structured learning and self-directed play means that children are engaged in positive activities. Adults are always available to model or facilitate appropriate strategies for children to solve social problems, such as sharing or including peers in group play.

Whenever a child is having a hard time controlling his or her behavior, adults assist in a calm, helpful manner. We practice conflict resolution that encourages children to identify and express what they are feeling to become more emotionally literate and empathetic. We help children understand the connection between their behavior and consequences. Our discipline and behavior management is centered around positive reinforcement. Other methods of discipline include setting clear rules, redirection, reminders of expectations, and encouragement.

Teachers routinely observe the children to become aware of triggers that may predict challenging behavior. These may include particular events, activities, interactions, or other contextual factors unique to an individual child. Through close observation and assessment of the function of the child's behavior, teachers are better equipped to develop individualized plans for each child's success.

Techniques that are NOT used include physical punishments, withholding of snacks, bribery, psychological abuse, derogatory remarks, coercion, threats, or any other methods that may frighten or humiliate children.

We communicate regularly with parents. If a student is not responding to disciplinary efforts, we will work with parents/guardians to address behaviors of concern and implement an education support plan designed to meet the child's unique needs. These plans balance the needs of the entire class with the supports necessary for individual children to be successful and are revisited at a minimum of a semester basis or more often as needed.

The ultimate goal of our discipline policy is for all children to be a loved, celebrated member of our learning community. Thus, exclusion from activities or the program are used only when all other efforts have been exhausted. If the consistent implementation of an education support plan does not result in improved behavior or the behaviors pose a significant safety concern to the child, other students, or staff, the Nature Preschool may require a meeting with parents in which these behaviors and next steps are discussed. The Director and classroom teacher will share on-going concerns with parents and devise an intervention plan that may include exclusion from activities or require a shadow of a family member or trusted adult.

If the behavior continues or the behaviors are a severe and immediate threat to self or others the Nature Preschool may require the student to take a break from class for a period of 1 school day to a full week, depending on the severity of the behavior. Such a decision will be made in consultation with the family. During any break of a week or more, classroom teachers and administrators will seek out additional support to best meet the needs of the child and share these efforts with the family. Upon re-entry into the program, if the concerning dangerous behavior continues after a period of one month with no sustained improvement, a Continued Attendance Meeting will be held and attended by the Director, at least one classroom teacher, Irvine's Director of Education, parents, and any service providers that work with that child to explore the ability of the Nature Preschool to continue to meet the needs of the child. If the decision is made to terminate enrollment in the Nature Preschool, the Nature Preschool will make an effort to assist the family in accessing alternative school placement and/or services.

The Nature Preschool complies with all federal and state civil rights laws and will consider exclusion and expulsion only in the most dire of circumstances based solely on the safety of the child and other children in attendance.

CLOTHING

Outdoor discovery requires freedom of movement in non-restrictive clothing that protects us from the weather. Please dress your child in clothing that can get messy so they will feel free to participate in messy projects, and splash in mud puddles. We provide smocks for art projects, however we will not force any child to wear a smock. **Expect that your child (and their clothing) will get dirty!** If at any time your child's clothing becomes wet and uncomfortable, we will assist them in changing into their extra set of clothes.

When we head outdoors, we will help your child change into boots (if necessary). Please provide appropriate footwear for any weather to ensure your child can freely explore. Children need comfortable, protective shoes with gripping soles for running, jumping, and climbing. Sneakers or well-fitting hiking boots are best. Your child will need rain boots for wet and rainy days and also for visiting the stream.* When we return from wet or muddy trail walks, we will take our shoes off and leave them in the cubby room. Please make sure your child has a spare pair of socks or slippers in case of wet feet.

*** As weather can change unexpectedly, please leave a pair of rainboots at school or bring them every day.**

CHANGE OF CLOTHES

Please provide an extra set of clothing to leave at school. The clothing should be stored in a shoebox in your child's cubby. The extra set of clothing should include: shirt, pants, underwear, and socks. **Be sure to label all items and remember to exchange this clothing as your child grows into new sizes and when the seasons change.**

COLD WEATHER ATTIRE

We go outdoors every day! Please dress your children in weather-appropriate clothing for outdoor play. Please check the weather forecast to assist as the weather does change during the day. We highly recommend dressing your child in layers.

NEEDED CLOTHING (PLEASE LABEL ALL ITEMS):

WINTER

snow boots
Snow jacket
Snow pants or snow suit
Scarf/ neck warmer
Waterproof gloves/mittens
Hat
Second layer
Warm Socks
Change of clothes

SPRING

Rubber boots
Rain jacket
Rain pants or rain suit
Hat
Change of clothes
Close-toed shoes

FALL

Rubber boots
Rain jacket
Rain pants or rain suit
Hat
Waterproof gloves
Change of clothes
Close-toed shoes



BUG SPRAY AND SUNSCREEN

We highly encourage families to apply sunscreen and bug spray before drop off. Students in the full day program may leave these items with teachers for reapplication after lunch. All bug spray and sunscreen must be labeled with the child's name and added to the medication authorization form.

TICKS

****PLEASE CHECK YOUR CHILD FOR TICKS AFTER CLASS EVERY DAY****

Ticks are part of nature, unfortunately an unpleasant part. They can carry diseases like Lyme and Anaplasmosis. To keep children as safe as possible from ticks, we do frequent “spot checks” during class and when we return from our hike at the end of class. We also use lint rollers on clothing and sit on sheets while participating in activities outdoors. We will discuss a few key points about ticks with the students such as what they look like and what to do if they see a tick. Teachers carry “tick kits” in trail bags to ensure safe removal of a tick if one is attached. Ticks are very tiny, especially deer ticks. Dressing children in long sleeves and pants that are light colored, and tucking pants into socks are some ways to prevent the ticks getting onto children’s bodies. We strongly encourage you to check for ticks every day after class. We also recommend a bath or shower for children after class. You can find more information at the Center for Disease Control & Prevention’s website.

POISON IVY & BEES

Our teachers identify poison ivy and steer clear of it on the trails. Place a call to your physician if you are suspicious of any rash your child has.

Bees are celebrated at The Nature Preschool! They are the unsung heroes of the food chain. We encourage children to respect, but not touch, our buzzing friends. In the unlikely event of a sting, we will monitor the child’s condition and notify parents.

NOTE: If your child requires an EpiPen if stung, please give one to your child’s teacher at the start of the school year, along with the required Medication Authorization Form signed by a physician. EpiPen must be kept in the original prescription box.

...AND MUD!

Our bodies and clothes get messy — and muddy! Shoes get muddy, pants may become grass-stained, and shirts may drip with paint, clay, or glue. Sometimes all this learning is even in our hair! Because we encourage this kind of whole-hearted, whole-bodied learning, we urge you to dress your child in clothes that are not restrictive and that can get dirty. Our classes exemplify what it means to learn by doing.



EMERGENCIES & SAFETY

All staff members are trained in First Aid and CPR. In the event of an accident that requires medical attention beyond basic first aid, we will do one of the following:

- Call parents/guardians and emergency contacts to collect the child immediately to seek medical attention; or
- If severe and immediate help is deemed necessary, we will call 911 and a staff member will accompany the child to the emergency room until parents/guardians arrive.

All teachers carry walkie-talkies and have emergency contact information in trail bags. Key staff members in the building also use walkies to relay any important safety information to teachers.

In the case of a weather-related emergency while indoors, students will shelter in place in their classrooms away from windows. Teachers regularly check the weather before heading outdoors if dangerous conditions are expected and make plans accordingly. If weather occurs unexpectedly or quickly, teachers are informed via radio to take shelter. They will either take children back to the Center, time permitting, or take shelter in the barn or Ed Hut.

In the case of a fire, classes exit quickly and safely out of the nearest exit and convene in the Amphitheater.

If we must evacuate Irvine's grounds we will meet at Jemicy School directly across from Irvine's main entrance.

For information on our emergency procedures in the case of an intruder, please contact the director directly. We do not publish this information in order to protect the safety of students and staff.

If any of the above instances were to occur, families will be contacted by staff of the Preschool to notify them of the emergency and any changes to pick-up procedures for that day.

SAFETY DRILLS

We conduct regular safety drills as required by MSDE to help prepare students in case of an emergency. Every effort will be made to keep these activities straightforward. We do not want to frighten the children, but we do want them to feel prepared and calm in case of an emergency.



SNOW & EXTREME WEATHER

Weather related closings and delays are based on concern for safety of families and staff. If inclement conditions make driving dangerous, we will delay or cancel class.

Irvine Nature Center determines its own closings and delays. The Nature Preschool reserves the right to make adjustments to weather related closings as we see fit. Safety will always be first in guiding our decision. There will be no make up days, or refunds in tuition, due to closures.



WEATHER POLICY DETAILS

If Irvine delays opening until 10:00am, The Nature Preschool will open at 10:30am. If Irvine delays opening until 11:00am, The Nature Preschool will open at 11:30am. In this case, morning class on that day will be canceled and full day classes will run from 11:30am - 2:00pm. Our afternoon schedule will take place as usual, unless otherwise notified. For afternoon class cancellation we will message families by 11:15 a.m. **There will be no Early Bird Care on days when there is a delayed opening.**

In the event of severe weather developing after arrival, The Nature Preschool reserves the right to dismiss early to ensure the safety of students, their families, and our staff. Such early dismissal will be done only in extreme circumstances. If the director and the executive director of Irvine deem that it is unsafe for class to continue as normal, parents will be informed via email or phone call. **On days that The Nature Preschool cancels afternoon classes or dismisses early, there will be no After Care.**

In the event of a delayed opening, please give your child a snack before class. We will not provide snack on short days. Please also dress your child in cold weather gear so that sign-in can take place in the Outdoor Classroom. By starting our day outside, we can utilize more of our time since children will be ready for outdoor learning right away.

Please check your email for a message from the preschool director regarding school delays or closures. As always, please do not come to school if your location is not yet safe for travel.

For any weather-related questions call the main line at 443-738-9200. Alternatively, visit www.ExploreNature.org, check Irvine's social media pages, or tune in to WBAL or WJZ for a weather update.

If you have questions, feel free to contact Katie Rooney, at 443-738-9223 or via email at: RooneyK@ExploreNature.org.

ILLNESS

The Nature Preschool takes precautions to prevent the spread of illness by maintaining a clean environment, providing substitutes for staff and setting clear limits on the health of children in attendance. Frequent hand washing is also an important habit that prevents the spread of illness. To keep all children and staff healthy, we need your cooperation! This means keeping your child home if you suspect they are sick or if they are experiencing any of the symptoms in the box below.

Recovering children are more likely to pick up a new illness. Keep in mind that we spend time outdoors daily, **so if your child is not well enough to go outside, please keep them at home as there is no option for your child to stay indoors.**

If students are exposed to a contagious illness such as chicken pox or strep, notices will be posted and sent home within 24 hours of us being notified. We maintain confidentiality as to the contagious student to protect your privacy.

In addition, for the safety of all children, if we are notified that a child enrolled in the preschool becomes ill with a vaccine-preventable disease, families of children who have elected to not immunize their children will be excluded from the program until the health department deems the period of exposure and risk has passed. The Director of the preschool will reach out to those families within 24 hours of the notification.

We make annual contact with the Baltimore County Department of Health to keep abreast on the spread of illness or outbreaks of communicable disease.

PLEASE KEEP YOUR CHILD HOME WHEN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CONDITIONS ARE PRESENT:

- Green or yellow runny nose (clear runny noses are okay)
- Fever of 100 degrees Fahrenheit OR when your child has had a fever in the last 24 hours (fevers tend to rise as the day progresses)
- Significant respiratory distress (e.g.: chronic or continuous coughing/wheezing)
- Lice or other infestation
- Cuts or wounds with bleeding or oozing
- Diarrhea, vomiting or stomach complaints
- Symptoms of unknown origin, such as a rash
- An illness during its contagious stage such as "pink eye"
- Your child requires one-on-one care OR more care than staff can provide without compromising the health and safety of other children in the class.

If any of these symptoms are present during drop off, or if your child is not feeling well, the teacher will request that the child go home to prevent the spread of illness.

ILLNESS (cont'd)

GETTING SICK AT SCHOOL

If your child becomes ill during class and requires more care than the staff can provide without compromising the health and safety of other children; or if a child's condition is suspected to be contagious and requires exclusion, then they will be isolated from the group to rest comfortably with a familiar caregiver. You will be contacted immediately to pick them up. If we cannot reach you, we will call the other contacts listed with your emergency information.

ABSENCE DUE TO ILLNESS

If your child must miss a class due to illness, please call the main line at 443-738-9200 or the Director of the Preschool at 443-738-9223. If you do not speak to staff, please send the director and/or teachers an email.

If a child is absent for more than three days due to acute illness, MSDE requires a doctor's note stating the child is well enough to return to school. Please give a courtesy call if your child is out sick.

MEDICINE AT SCHOOL

Please be advised that staff will not administer medication to students unless a Medication Authorization Form has been provided by the parent and signed by the child's physician. This includes EpiPens and inhalers! If your child has a prescribed EpiPen or inhaler, please ensure the additional required forms are completed. All medication must be in its original container with your child's name clearly on it. Medication is kept in teachers' trail bags at all times during the school day and in a lockbox before and after.

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

The Nature Preschool makes every effort to meet the dynamic needs of students. Information regarding your child's needs, interests, and abilities is collected at the start of the school year. If you believe your child may have needs which require additional planning or preparation on the staff's behalf, please let us know when you enroll.

Dietary restrictions and allergies are common. We do our best to accommodate each student's needs. If your child has a unique situation, please speak to the director or your child's teacher before the start of the school year.

NOTE: We are not equipped to accommodate certain acute health conditions or special needs so discuss any specific concerns with the Director in advance



EXPLORE, RESPECT, PROTECT

We welcome families to visit Irvine outside of class time. There are many events that are free or discounted for members. As a member, we hope you will take advantage of these events. Feel free to also enjoy Irvine after class. You can visit the Exhibit Hall, Outdoor Classroom, hike the trails or have a picnic.

Please refrain from using the tent and fern rooms as these are reserved spaces. Please remember to follow any rules that are observed during class time. Class rules include: be kind, be good to the Earth and animals, use respectful voices and gentle hands. Irvine Nature Center also practices the “leave no trace ” motto.

Please remember that the exhibit hall is open for people to enjoy and interact with nature in a safe space. Maintaining a quiet indoor voice helps provide a nurturing space for both guests and our animal ambassadors. The Outdoor Classroom and trail are perfect for boisterous loud play!

In an effort to be good to the Earth and for the health of all of Irvine’s visitors, we ask that you refrain from leaving cars idling in the parking lot unless in cases of extreme heat or cold. Thank you!

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND SPECIAL EVENTS

We encourage you to play an active role in our program! Your preschooler counts on you for support and encouragement outside of their new world of learning. For ways to stay in the loop check out the Communications section of this handbook on page 23. Please also review The Nature Preschool Calendar of Events. We hope these events will allow you to socialize with other families while enhancing your child’s learning.

A couple other special ways to get involved are below:

Family Traditions

Join us during class to share a special seasonal tradition that your family celebrates. This may be in the form of a story, cooking, creative arts project, or other engaging activity. We welcome all traditions and hope you will consider what you can share with your child’s class! Please contact your child’s teacher directly to schedule a family tradition day.

Special Guests

We invite you to join us for a trail walk or lead an art project or activity during Imagination Stations, read or tell a story to the class, or teach us a song or dance during circle time, whatever your creativity allows! Please discuss your ideas with the teachers, as we love parent involvement during class!

The Nature Preschool Parent Group (NPPG)

We hope you will join The NPPG. Nature preschool parents are a valuable part of Irvine and we welcome your participation to make Irvine a stronger learning community. This group meets periodically to help plan family events and prep materials for them, and to connect with one another to support children and teachers of The Nature Preschool. Annual dues are just \$10 and help provide food for family events and gifts of appreciation for teachers. If you’d like, please join the Nature Preschool Parent Group on Facebook.

SPECIAL EVENTS AT THE PRESCHOOL

We recognize that certain times may not work for your family to attend an event so we have scheduled some events to take place during class, and others will be held during the evening. We hope you can join us for some of these special family events! Siblings are always welcome! For dates and times, please see the Nature Preschool Calendar of Events.

Preschool Family Orientation

Parents, make a date with your child to meet our teaching staff and other preschool families. This casual drop-in event allows you and your child to tour our classrooms and grounds by way of a scavenger hunt.

NPPG Sunset Social

It's our version of back-to-school night just for parents! This is the first meeting of the Nature Preschool Parent Group (NPPG) to kick off our year. Spend time with your child's teachers, ask questions, mingle with other parents. We will provide drinks around the campfire!

Fall Campfire and Night Hike

The night glows in autumn magic. Join us for a nocturnal hike followed by warm cider and seasonal treats around the campfire to celebrate the change in seasons.

Winter Solstice Celebration

Join your child towards the end of their regular class time for a special tribute to the longest night of the year through a hike, craft, and song.

Spring Campfire and Sing-a-long

Join us to welcome the noisy season of spring through song! Gather around the campfire and bring your own instrument as we wake up Mother Nature.

Summer Celebration

Join your child towards the end of their regular class time for a special good-bye to the school year and hello to summer. We'll share songs, memories, and a special treat!

NOTE: Please bring canteens, mugs or sippy cups for your family when attending our events. This cuts down on waste and dishwashing!



SPECIAL EVENTS (cont'd)

HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

Holidays are exciting for our little ones! At The Nature Preschool, we downplay commercial aspects of holidays and focus on the seasonal and family tradition aspects of holiday celebrations. We acknowledge holidays and cultural events through wholesome activities such as songs, stories, and food tasting. Please let us know how we can celebrate a holiday that is special to you or contact your child's teacher to arrange a time to share a Family Tradition.

BIRTHDAYS

Every child is unique and celebrated at the Nature Preschool. We celebrate each child's birthday as close to their actual date or half-birthday (for summer birthdays) as possible. On their special day, your child will have an opportunity to add their piece to a larger birthday art installation that will hang in their classroom for years to come.

Since we promote healthy eating habits and try to alleviate potential allergy complications, we do not celebrate birthdays with sugary foods. Instead, we encourage you to donate a book to The Nature Preschool library, join the class to read a special book, hike, or to make a treat. If you choose to donate a book, it may be a new or used book donated anytime during the year. We will place a bookplate inside the cover with your child's name and date of birth. Each time we read your book, we will fondly remember your child. Thank you for helping our library grow!

FIELD TRIPS

While we have amazing grounds to explore and learn from, the preschool typically has a small number of field trips each year. Parents will be notified in advance of the details of these trips as well as any additional cost. In order for all students to participate, we ask that some parents act as chaperones to eliminate the need for every child to have an accompanying caregiver. We will collaborate on carpooling to provide transportation to and from the field trip destination. Parents not attending the field trip will be required to install appropriate car seats in the chaperone's car prior to the departure time of the field trip. More specific information will be provided in advance of the trip.



COMMUNICATION

Communication between staff and parents/guardians enriches the educational experience of our students. We regularly touch base with parents to provide feedback. Staff will always make time to chat with you via phone, email, or in person during non-instruction times if you have a concern or just want to share something with us. Please keep the lines of communication open with us and let us know of any significant events or changes in your child's life. Visitors, moving, new babies, divorce, illness, or death can affect children in class. When we are informed about these changes we are better equipped to offer support and encouragement for your child. If you notice any unexplained change in your child's behavior, feel free to discuss it with our staff.

NOTE: The teachers' first priority is with students when they are present. If you have a concern that needs discussion, please request a meeting outside of class time.

PARENT AND TEACHER CONFERENCES

This is a great way to stay informed about your child's progress. We perform on-going assessments of physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development. Parents and teachers have the opportunity for scheduled conferences twice per year. There is no class on conference days so that teachers and parents can meet. During conferences, teachers share your child's portfolio of work samples, anecdotes, and photos demonstrating your child's school activities and growth. Before spring conferences, parents will receive a snapshot of their child's development as a starting point for discussion. We encourage families to help care for one another's children during conferences, as they are for adults only.

WEEKLY CORRESPONDANCE FROM THE NATURE PRESCHOOL

At the end of each week, we send an email with reminders, important dates, flyers, etc. We also share links to our ongoing collection of class photos. Occasionally, you will find a link to our BLOG, explorenature.org/preschool-blog. The blog posts are full of descriptions and photos that showcase what we're up to.

PARENT BULLETIN BOARD AND CUBBIES

We often post flyers or sign-ups on the parent board or cubbies. Please check these spaces to stay in the loop. If you do not regularly drop off/pick up your child and don't have an opportunity to see these items, please contact your child's teacher.

PARENT DROP-BOX

The drop-boxes located near the cubbies in each classroom are a convenient way to return a form, make a payment, or leave a note for a staff member. Please make sure you are placing your item in the box and not behind it. Please do not put pick-up permission slips or notes that require immediate attention in the parent drop-box; give these directly to your child's teachers.

COMMUNICATION (cont'd)

GRIEVANCES

If you disagree with an action taken by a staff member or would like to make a complaint, please make direct, initial contact with that staff member to share your concern through email, phone, or by setting up a time to meet outside of class time. If you are not comfortable speaking with that staff member or do not receive a satisfactory response, please contact the Director of The Nature Preschool, Katie Rooney. If you still do not receive a satisfactory response, please contact the Director of Education or Director of Operations.

All feedback and complaints will be addressed in verbal and/or written form within a two-week time frame (see contact info on the inside of back cover page).

REPORTING CHILD ABUSE

Some communications are subject to state laws regarding confidentiality. According to Section 5-704 of the Family Law volume of the Annotated Code of the State of Maryland, any teacher or other professional employee of the school who has reason to believe that a child has been subject to abuse or neglect must immediately inform the Director of the Nature Preschool and the Director of Operations. In complying with the mandate to report, the person so reporting is given immunity from criminal or civil penalties or liability when that person, in good faith, makes a report. Such reports are confidential.

Staff suspecting such abuse are required to notify the local department of social services about suspected cases of child abuse or neglect as soon as possible. A DHR Reporting form/SSA 180 must be completed within 48 hours following the verbal report. The verbal report should be made immediately upon the reporter having a suspicion that child abuse or neglect has occurred. A copy of the form must also be provided to the local State's Attorney's office. Notification of the Director of the Nature Preschool or the Director of Operations does not substitute for the staff member's need to call the local department of social services, complete the form 180 and notify the State's Attorney's office.

If at any time an Irvine staff person is accused of abusing or neglecting a child, the accused staff person will be immediately removed from direct contact with students. They will be removed from all classroom and trail activities while a complete investigation is made into the accusations.

Any Irvine staff person that is informed of any suspicion or accusation of abuse or neglect by a staff person is required to report that information immediately to the Director of the Nature Preschool who will in turn remove the staff person from the class. The Director of the Nature Preschool will inform the Director of Education and the Director of Operations. The reporting staff person will notify the local department of social services about suspected cases of child abuse or neglect as soon as possible. In addition, the Director will inform the MD State Department of Education (as required by licensing) and NAEYC. The accused staff member will not be permitted to return to work until the investigation is complete based on the determination of the Department of Social Services.

If you, as a parent or guardian, suspect a staff person of any abuse or neglect, please inform the Director of the Preschool, Katie Rooney, immediately.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Our student evaluation is rooted in authentic assessment. Differing learning styles, interests, and skill levels become evident as teachers informally observe students daily. Assessment tools help us gain insight about children's cognitive, language, social-emotional, physical, and self-help skills. Evaluations are varied (see below) and are sensitive to family culture, experience, abilities, and home language to ensure they are meaningful and relevant to each child.

Teacher journals and written anecdotes track developmental milestones. Portfolios offer a collection of work that demonstrates how skills develop over time. Rating scales offer developmental snapshots of students as observed by parents and teachers. This kind of on-going authentic assessment, combined with frequent parent dialogue, helps provide insight about progress made over the course of a school year. Unlike tightly structured standardized evaluations, authentic assessment highlights a child's progress in a dynamic, holistic way. It provides a true vision of what skills a child has achieved and what they have yet to master (NAEYC, 2003; revised in 2009). The following strategies are used to help assess student performance:

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT is the documentation and analysis of a student's actual work collected over time in his or her real world environment.

AUTHENTIC TRACKING is a collection of informal observations based on teacher journals or anecdotal records. The teacher must therefore be an observer and researcher.

STUDENT PORTFOLIO is a collection of a child's work that helps to illustrate the progress and skill development a child makes over the course of the school year. Work samples may include mark-making or writing; cutting; artwork that reflects patterns, sorting, counting, or sequencing; evidence of fine motor skills such as weaving, lacing, or beading; language samples including anecdotes and creative storytelling; photographs that illustrate skill development in all areas.

Because we utilize authentic assessment, it is informal and happens as a routine part of teacher observations. Student assessment is on-going as teachers plan curriculum tailored to each child's needs. We track student progress and gather materials for student portfolios throughout the year. This information helps guide our curriculum and ensures that we are providing the right opportunities, specific to each child, for skill development. Teachers meet frequently and incorporate assessment information into lesson plans. Assessment also helps us make improvements to our preschool program overall. We invite parents to be part of the assessment process by sharing or suggesting areas of development where their child may need extra support. Please share your thoughts with staff to participate in the evaluation process. We strive to be sensitive to family values, culture, identity, and home language in all areas of our assessment.

CONFERENCES will be held in November and May. Please take advantage of these special times to meet with teachers and talk about your child's progress. If you wish to conference at other times during the year, feel free to let your child's teacher know.

DEVELOPMENTAL SNAPSHOTS are provided before spring conferences to communicate your child's developmental highlights and milestones.

FORMAL ASSESSMENTS or standardized tests can be used to provide better services for your child (EX. developmental screening or diagnostic assessment referral). Staff works with families to achieve consensus about assessments that may be necessary to determine the best learning path for your child.

HEARING AND VISION SCREENING

We offer free hearing and vision screening for students ages four and up through the Baltimore County Health Department. Parents must give written consent to participate. If results determine that a child's hearing or vision require further attention, you will be notified and directed to your pediatrician or specialist. More information about these screenings will follow.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Main Line to Irvine Nature Center	443-738-9200
Upper Classroom	Ext. 264
Lower Classroom	Ext. 265

To call a classroom directly, dial the main line 443-738-9200 and then the classroom extension (264 for upstairs, 265 for downstairs).

For teacher contact information, please see your class information sheet provided in your welcome packet.

IRVINE STAFF CONTACTS

Katie Rooney Director of Early Childhood Education Programs	RooneyK@ExploreNature.org 443-738-9223
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Meghan deKozlowski Preschool Teacher & Administrative Assistant	deKozlowskiM@ExploreNature.org 443-738-9218
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Tara Lilley Environmental Education Programs Coordinator	LilleyT@ExploreNature.org 443-738-9211
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Brooks Paternotte Executive Director	PaternotteB@ExploreNature.org 443-738-9229
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Robert Mardiney Director of Education	MardineyR@ExploreNature.org 443-738-9212
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Courtney Sagal Director of Operations	SagalC@ExploreNature.org 443-738-9224
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Nature Preschool

at Irvine Nature Center

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