

# ***OTTAWA FOREST AND NATURE SCHOOL SUMMER CAMP HANDBOOK***

*(Revised March 2022)*



*With grateful acknowledgement to Child and Nature Alliance Canada (CNAC) for their generosity, commitment and belief that all children benefit from spending time in the forest.*

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- regular and repeated access to a natural space
- child-centred, interest-led, inquiry-driven, educator-supported, learning and connecting through play on the land.

Educators at Ottawa Forest and Nature School strive to provide children with opportunities to build an ongoing relationship with the land, with each other, and with themselves.

### **What is Forest and Nature School?**

The movement to connect children and youth with nature is not new. It has been and is a fundamental way of being, knowing, and learning for many Indigenous communities and cultures since time immemorial.

Forest and Nature School (FNS) as a defined and deliberate educational approach has existed worldwide since the late 1950s, with over ten thousand Forest School programs in the UK alone. FNS is known by many different names (i.e. Nature Kindergarten, Outdoor School, Waldkindergarten, etc.) and can take many different forms. Some programs are offered to students for one half-day or full-day per week; other schools have embraced the FNS approach on a more full-time basis, resulting in students spending the majority of their days outdoors. Similarly, FNS can take place in many different climates and settings - urban or near-urban parks, natural spaces adjacent to or on school grounds, natural playgrounds or outdoor classrooms, forests, meadows, or beaches - and with varying age groups.

The experiences that emerge in FNS also vary depending on the season, climate, landscape, creatures that have visited the night before, trees that have blown down in the wind, the kinds of provocations offered by educators, the various tools and loose parts that are available for building and creating, the children who are in attendance, how long the group has been together, and, most importantly, what interests the child. Sometimes children will work independently, finding contentment in their own thoughts, imagination, and creations. Other times children will work collaboratively to create something, problem solve, support one another, and bring their group-dreams to life. Observers of the FNS-approach often describe the play as ‘magical’ because of the organic, authentic collaboration, communication, creativity, trust and joy that they see.

### **The OFNS Story**

Forest School Canada launched in the Spring of 2012 as an education initiative of the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, hosting a series of professional development workshops for educators currently working with or interested in working with the Forest and Nature School approach. In June 2014, thanks to a partnership with the Wesley Clover Foundation, construction began at the current location and the Ottawa Forest and Nature School site- the cabin, storage shed, outdoor amphitheatre and natural playscape, began to take shape. In August of that same year, the very first young students entered the site and the surrounding forest with their discoveries, exploration, adventures and artwork, and it began to feel like home.

Many communities, educators and families have contributed to making Ottawa Forest and Nature School what it is. Since 2014, OFNS has learned and benefited from partnerships with Indigenous communities, and from the generous teachings of Indigenous elders, leaders, partners, educators, parents, and children. We are grateful. We seek to honour these offerings, and to continue to learn



what our role is in supporting communities, schools, Indigenous families, and other partners who have a genuine and vested interest in children's play and connection to the land.

In July 2019, Ottawa Forest and Nature School became a program of Andrew Fleck Children Services. Today we build on the established foundation, with the intention to reach even more children, families, and communities. We offer Forest and Nature School programs to a wide range of groups- from infants and their caregivers to preschool and elementary-aged children and extending to whole families through our drop-in programs.

At Andrew Fleck Children's Services, we are dreamers and builders. We are collaborating with the Child and Nature Alliance Canada (CNAC) and the Healthy Active Living and Obesity team (HALO) from CHEO to create a Canadian Centre for Outdoor Play that will bring people together to support more children in muddy boots to play, in nature. We are building a new facility on the Wesley Clover site to house three primary functions:

- To mainstream outdoor play through a nature-based licensed childcare program for infants, toddlers and preschoolers
- To convene people, demonstrate emerging quality practices and support increased knowledge and thought leadership on outdoor play in Canada
- To increase the evidence-base and research in the field of outdoor play

We expect the Canadian Centre for Outdoor Play to be open in 2021/22.



## **Location and Directions**

Ottawa Forest and Nature School is located at the Wesley Clover Campground (formerly the Ottawa Municipal Campground/Nepean Tent and Trailer Park), approximately 10 minutes west of Ottawa. From our “home base” - a warm and inviting cabin and yurt set in a forest clearing alongside our outdoor eating areas, campfire areas, an outdoor Amphitheatre and natural playscapes; also, we can access and explore hundreds of acres of greenbelt land, including NCC trails.

**ADDRESS:** 411 Corkstown Road, Ottawa, ON, K2K 0J5

**DIRECTIONS COMING FROM WEST:** Take ON 417 E. Take exit 138 Ottawa 49/March Rd. / Eagleson Rd. Turn left onto Eagleson Road. Stay on Eagleson Road for approximately 1 km. Turn right onto Corkstown Road for approximately 2.5 km. Signs for the Wesley Clover Park’s Campground will be on your left. Enter the campground and drive past the campground office on the left. Continue on the main campground road for about 100 meters. You will see a sign for “Forest School Parking”. Park and walk down the path (across the road) to the Forest School.

**DIRECTIONS COMING FROM EAST:** Take ON 417 W. Take exit for Moodie Drive. Merge onto Moodie Drive and take first left at lights on Corkstown Road. Follow Corkstown Road past the first entrance for Wesley Clover Parks (Equestrian Park) past the train tracks until you reach the

Campground on your right. Enter the campground and drive past the campground office on the left. Continue on the main campground road for about 100 meters. You will then see a sign for “Forest School Parking”. Park and walk down the path (across the road) to the Forest School.





### Preparing for Forest School - Supply List

This is what your child needs for a great day in the Forest, to support their play in all weather conditions:

- Long sleeved shirt (required), over a t-shirt (optional)\*
- Long pants (required)\*
- Lightweight clothing (cotton/silk are ideal, synthetic fibers can be too hot)
- Running or hiking shoes (required, no sandals or open toed shoes) \*
- Long socks (required)\* - pull up over pant cuffs for bug protection
- Sun Hat (required)\*
- Rain gear (waterproof boots, pants, jacket - required)
- Bug Jacket (optional)

\*There are ticks and poison ivy at OFNS - see additional details below

Children also require:

- Small backpack Lunch and snacks (children tend to eat more over a day of Forest School play!)
- Water bottle
- 2 extra changes of clothes (including underwear and socks)



- Sunscreen
- Bug spray

It's not necessary to invest in expensive brand names. Thrift stores are great places to find children's clothing at cheaper prices. Mountain Equipment Coop (MEC) and Canadian Tire has excellent children's outdoor wear for all seasons.

Children are encouraged to wear a hat at all times, and we aim to seek shade on hot summer days. It is amazing how cool it is when towering trees shade our paths and playscapes.

Children will be encouraged to stay hydrated in both cold and warm weather, as this will assist in regulating body temperatures. Please speak with us for further recommendations on staying comfortable in the Forest in all weather conditions.

## **POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

### **Covid-19 Considerations**

We will continue as long as required to follow guidelines developed by the Ministry of Health, and Ottawa Public Health which include screening families as they arrive, potentially smaller group sizes in program, physical distancing, increased sanitization, COVID-19 specific training and a limit of the number of people on site.

We navigate risk at Ottawa Forest and Nature School each day. We develop seasonal risk-benefit assessment plans for health, safety, learning and play on the land. Beyond the guidelines, our risk-benefit assessments consider each part of the day (I.e. Opening Circle, hiking, play on the land, meals etc.) and mitigate the risk to ensure children stay safer, as much as possible, without intruding on their play and their relationships.

As we have done since reopening in summer 2020, we will continue to offer the freedom and space for our program to be child-centred, learning and connecting through play on the land, while also following COVID protocols.

### **Fees**

2022 Summer Posted Rates*	
5-day week	\$406.00
4-day week **no charge for stat day	\$355.25
2022 Summer Discounted Rates	
5-day week	\$400.00
4-day week **no charge for stat day	\$350.00

\*We are offering a 1.5% discount off these rates for payments made by Pre-Authorized Direct Debit payment.

These programs are all week from 9-3 for children aged 4-12 (mixed age groups).

### **Registration, Payment and Refund Policies**

- In order to participate, a registration must be completed in full online before the program begins.

- Payment must be made in full for the duration of the session; a financial package will be filled in and payments are made by credit or debit cards.

#### **Refund Policy:**

- Summer camp is non-refundable.
- If a child is withdrawn from programs due to illness, injury, expulsion, or any other reason a refund will not be issued for any portion of the program fees.
- Refunds will not be given if a day's program must be cancelled due to inclement weather. (Please see our Inclement Weather Policy/Closure Policy).
- Programs may be cancelled if there is insufficient registration. In this event, a full refund will be issued.

#### **Privacy Policy**

Andrew Fleck Children's Services takes the privacy of its clients and visitors seriously, and we have taken steps to protect it. Any personal data shared with us, including photographic images, will be processed strictly in accordance with privacy legislation, and will be used for the purposes that you have consented to. We will not share details with third parties without consent, except where we are legally compelled or obligated to do so. Please note that where consent is given to share images on the internet, they can be viewed worldwide including countries where Canadian data protection law does not apply.

Please contact us if you have any questions or concerns about protecting the privacy of the information you provide.



#### **Social Media Policy**

Ottawa Forest and Nature School has both a Facebook and Instagram account where photos and stories are posted. Our Facebook page is the Ottawa Forest and Nature School. On Instagram you'll find us at Ottawa\_fns. Featuring children on hikes, unique creations and sculptures, simple machines and quiet moments in the forest – it's a window into our day. Our photo consent policy is in effect on our social media platforms.

### **Illness Policy**

In the following cases, we ask that participants stay home from Forest School for at least 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided:

- Temperature over 101 degrees F or 38.3 degrees C
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea (watery, profuse stools)

Should the above-mentioned situations arise while at Forest School, the affected participants will be asked to return home.

Participants affected by communicable diseases such as measles, chicken pox, mumps, flu, strep throat, viral pneumonia, conjunctivitis (pink-eye), etc., are asked to stay home from Forest School until their health care provider has communicated that it is safe for them to attend.

### **Food Policies**

#### **Nut-Free Zone**

Due to the prevalence of life-threatening nut allergies, we ask that participants refrain from bringing nuts to Ottawa Forest and Nature School. Soy and sunflower seed substitutes for nut butters are welcome.

#### **Snack-Sharing**

In addition, we ask that participants do not share nor trade snacks - as this ensures the health, safety, and happiness of the community.

#### **Garbage-Less Lunches**

We encourage participants to try to bring a garbage-less lunch. At the same time, we ask that parents/caregivers consider the size/weight/safety of the containers in which their child's snacks are packed. At OFNS we seek to empower even our youngest participants to carry their own snacks and water bottles on our adventures, which is totally possible with small containers. Please also keep in mind that children tend to eat more over a day of play in the Forest.

#### **Handwashing and Drinking Water**

Participants will be asked to wash their hands with soap and water before eating and after using the bathroom. They will also be able to refill their water bottles on site with potable water.

### **POLICIES RELATING TO THE LAND AND THE PLAY**

#### **Poison Ivy Policy**



Poison ivy is present in the woodlands at Ottawa Forest and Nature School throughout the summer. To limit exposure, we require that all participants wear long pants, long socks, and closed toed shoes while taking part in our programs in all seasons. Washing affected skin within 15-60 minutes of exposure is likely to remove the oil that can lead to a reaction, so staff carry potable water and soap at all times. In the event of a participant coming in contact with poison ivy, we are able to wash the affected area immediately.

### **Tick Policy**

Ticks are present throughout the city's greenspaces from Spring until Fall. To limit exposure, we require that all participants wear:

- Long pants
- Socks
- Closed-toed shoes

We strongly recommend that children wear:

- Hats
- Long-sleeved shirts

We suggest that participants tuck their pant legs into their socks and shirts into their pants to also limit possible tick exposure. We recommend using insect repellent to deter ticks, either containing DEET or other natural essential oil alternatives, depending on what feels appropriate for your family. Staff carry these to be able to re-apply them throughout the day.

If a tick is noticed on a participant, it is brushed off. If a tick is attached, we will remove the tick using a tick key or tweezers and educators will inform parents/guardians. After a day at Forest School, we recommend you do an all-body check upon arriving at home.

More information about ticks in Ottawa can be found at the City of Ottawa Public Health website: <https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/index.aspx>

This site shows how to remove ticks and shares information about the risks of Lyme disease.

For more information about supporting children's play during tick season, visit a blog post written by one of our staff: <http://chldnature.ca/what-can-we-do-about-ticks/>

### **Head Lice Policy**

Head lice may affect participants at Ottawa Forest and Nature School. Head lice is not considered a communicable disease but rather an annoying condition which spreads rapidly. If head lice or nits are present, we ask that you:

- Contact staff at Ottawa Forest and Nature School immediately so that other families can be informed (the affected individuals will remain anonymous)
- Follow the treatment suggestions on the information sheet provided by Ottawa Public Health

### **Extreme Weather Policy**

Ottawa Forest and Nature School educators consult the forecast regularly, and weather-related safety is considered in all decision-making (i.e. how far to venture away from the shelters, how long to be outside).

In the case of predicted thunder and lightning or high-winds - OFNS educators/staff will ensure participants are close to shelter for quick access should thunder and lightning or high-winds occur. During thunder and lightning and high winds, participants will stay under shelter (in the cabin or under the campground pavilion, for example). Tornado or funnel cloud warnings will have staff ready to use a solid campground building should this weather occur.

In the case of extreme heat (30C+), OFNS educators will limit participants' length of exposure based on age and outerwear, and will constantly assess participants' comfort and safety, watching for signs of heat exhaustion, as well as offering ways to cool off using water and time in the shade.

### **Emergency Procedures and First Aid**

Ottawa Forest and Nature School has written emergency procedures with which all educators and volunteers are familiar. A copy of the procedures, including emergency phone numbers, is carried by an educator/volunteer at all times in the emergency/first aid backpack.

### **Accident and Emergency Procedure**

In a severe accident or emergency, Ottawa Forest and Nature School staff will follow this procedure:

1. Establish the nature and extent of the emergency. Refer to the first aid SAMPLE protocol. Lead educator, or senior OFNS educator, to take the lead responding and administering first aid.
2. In consultation with other educators, make sure the area and all other members of the group are accounted for, safe, adequately supervised by co-educators or volunteers. This means they fully understand what they must do to remain safe (e.g. gather; stop any tool use, etc.)
3. Assess the casualty and ask another adult to call 911, emergency services, while the educator(s) administer appropriate first aid. The person phoning will need to respond to the following questions:
  - Nature of emergency
  - Injured party details: age, gender, medical history (see Emergency Medical Form in first aid backpack)
  - Location: Wesley-Clover Campground, 411 Corkstown Road, Ottawa, ON, K2K0J5
  - First aid administered
4. Send another adult to meet the ambulance at the main campground entrance, to direct EMS to the Forest School site. In case there is no other adult on site, call the campground head office or CNAC/AFCS colleagues on-site to meet the ambulance at the campground entrance.
5. Inform the child's emergency contact, Wesley Clover Campground staff, AFCS Director and /or Executive Director, of the injury as soon as possible.
6. Ensure that an appropriate adult attends the receiving hospital with the casualty, taking with them any medical information available.

7. Ensure the remainder of the group(s):

- a. Are adequately supervised throughout the emergency
- b. Return to their base/facility as early as possible
- c. Receive appropriate support and reassurance

8. The Program Coordinator, or other staff designate, will continue to liaise with the emergency services until the incident is over.

9. As soon as reasonably possible after the event, the accident will be reported using an Accident Report Form.

### **Risk Management**

Risk - the experience and management of it - is an inherent and integral part of Forest School practice and play, and indeed of healthy child development. Ottawa Forest and Nature School educators and volunteers endeavor to co-assess and co-manage risk with participants. We believe this to be an essential skill for children to acquire and for adults to support. FS educators and volunteers conduct seasonal and daily site risk assessments, as well as activity risk assessments and individual risk assessments on an ongoing basis - always considering the balance between risks and benefits when doing so.

Some of the risks inherent to Forest School and outdoor play include, but are not limited to:

- Injuries from executing strenuous and demanding physical activities, possibly on uneven ground and terrain in the forest
- Injuries from failing to properly use tools, such as carving knives
- Injuries resulting from matches or fire
- Contracting poison ivy
- The presence of wild animals and ticks
- Inclement weather





### **OFNS Staff: Participant Ratios**

The Ottawa Forest and Nature School educator ratios for summer camp is 20 campers to 3 educator. All of our staff have first aid training and are experienced in children's programming.

### **Educator Responsibilities**

The responsibilities of an FNS educator are wide-ranging and include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Ensuring the physical safety of participants, by co-assessing and co-managing risk with them on an ongoing basis such that all participants feel connected to and comfortable in the natural world
- Considering the social and emotional safety of participants, and endeavoring to foster a caring and respectful community so that the risk taking and question posing necessary for deep, inquiry-based learning can occur
- Modeling care and respect for the natural world, as well as safe use of the tools and supplies at Forest School
- Playing with and closely observing students - the trajectory of their play, the evolution of their interests, their questions and struggles - in order to support children and share meaningful feedback with caregivers and families.

### **Accessibility/Equity Policy**

One of the primary goals of Ottawa Forest and Nature School is to make our programs accessible to a wide range of participants regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language, physical ability, or socioeconomic status. We seek to dismantle the barriers to participation in Forest School by making our site physically accessible for everyone and our community safe and welcoming. We welcome your feedback and suggestions in the realization of those goals.

### **Child Entry and Release Policy**

Parents/guardians must give Ottawa Forest and Nature School written authorization for the people who may have access to their children (i.e. a relative who picks up child, emergency contacts in cases where parents cannot be reached). Parents must notify OFNS before changing the usual pick-up routine. We always act in the best interests of the child if there is any confusion or uncertainty.

### **Unauthorized Pick-up Procedure:**

If someone, other than a parent/guardian or authorized alternate pick-up person, arrives to pick up a child and we haven't been notified in advance by these authorized persons we will:

- Call the parent/guardian
- If parent/guardian cannot be located, the child is not allowed to leave FS until a parent/guardian has been contacted.
- OFNS staff will remain with the child until an authorized pick-up person arrives.

### **Release of Children to a Person Who Appears Intoxicated/Impaired:**

Staff will not release a child to a person who appears intoxicated or impaired. In such cases, staff will assist in making other pick-up arrangements (i.e., a spouse or other authorized person). Staff members are legally responsible to protect the children in their care from any perceived risk.

### **Custody and Access to Children**

According to the law, all parents of a child have equal access to a child and to the information about the child's development, health and welfare. The only time a staff member can deny access of a parent to a child is when there is a written separation agreement or a legal court order. OFNS requires a copy of this document.

### **Child Protection Policy**

Ottawa Forest and Nature School is committed to taking a proactive position regarding the prevention of child abuse. In accordance with the Child and Family Services Act, it is the responsibility of every person in Ontario, including a person who performs professional or official duties with respect to children, to immediately report to a Children's Aid Society if they suspect that child abuse has occurred or if a child is at risk of abuse. Andrew Fleck Children's Services, including Ottawa Forest and Nature School staff, take this responsibility seriously. Reporting procedures and training are provided to all staff.

### **Prohibited Practices**

- Corporal punishment of the child (which may include but is not limited to, hitting, spanking, slapping, pinching)
- Physical restraint of the child, such as confining the child to a high chair, car seat, stroller or other device for the purposes of discipline or in lieu of supervision, unless the physical restraint is for the purpose of preventing a child from hurting himself, herself or someone else, and is used only as a last resort and only until the risk of injury is no longer imminent.
- Locking the exits of the premises for the purpose of confining the child or confining the child in an area or room without adult supervision, unless such confinement occurs during an emergency and is required as part of the agency's emergency management policies and procedures.

### **Behaviour Guidance**

The emotional and physical well-being of children in our care is priority of Andrew Fleck Children's Services. Positive forms of Behavior Guidance with emphasis on dialogue, encouragement and positive reinforcement comply with the agency's philosophy to promote the healthy development of the children. At Ottawa Forest and Nature School we manage behaviour proactively by engaging in developmentally appropriate activities, and by nurturing a positive physical and social/emotional space. In general, our behaviour guidance approach will:

- Consider the child's developmental level and needs
- Make expectations clear and provide scaffolding to help children participate positively
- Focus on the behaviour and choices rather than the child
- Be implemented in a positive and consistent manner
- Be designed to help the child to learn appropriate behaviour and techniques
- Involve consulting with parents/guardians to include their input of successful approaches with a child, as well as to keep them informed of issues/concerns as they arise
- Help children to develop self-regulation, self-confidence, decision making skills, the ability to communicate effectively and sensitively in their interactions with others

At Ottawa Forest and Nature School inappropriate behaviour is defined as using actions or words that make others feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Unsafe behaviour is defined as any behaviour that puts a child or Educator at risk. This includes not responding when called, running, hiding, taking risk without consulting staff, and not following guidelines so that behaviour becomes potentially dangerous to the child or others.

In the case of inappropriate/unsafe behaviour the following steps will be taken:

- Staff will remove the child from proximity of the group and the two will work together to define the inappropriate/unsafe behaviour and create a plan to modify it.
- Staff will confer with other Forest School staff to be consistent with expectations and to agree on the best approach for the student.
- Parents/guardians will be informed (by phone or at the end of the day face-to-face) of the behaviour and consulted to discover the cause.
- Staff and parents/guardians will, together, develop strategies to adjust the inappropriate behaviour. These strategies will be implemented with the child at home and at Forest School to



offer a consistent approach. Staff and guardians will stay in contact to keep each other informed of the child's progress with regard to the behaviour in question.

- Staff will follow up with the child to be consistent with expectations and approach as well as to offer feedback and positive reinforcement,
- In the extreme case that a child's behaviour is consistently inappropriate or unsafe for the child or others, and after the above process has been implemented, the child may be asked to leave the program for a short term or permanently.



## **COMMUNICATIONS**

### **General Communications**

Generally, OFNS will communicate with families, predominantly via email. To reach us in a timely manner, please send an email to [ofns@afchildrensservices.ca](mailto:ofns@afchildrensservices.ca). Please be sure to communicate the following:

- if you will be late/absent
- if your child is ill with a communicable disease or COVID symptoms
- if your child is being treated for lice

### **Emergency Communications**

In the event of an emergency at OFNS, parents/guardians will be contacted by telephone once emergency personnel (if needed) have been contacted.

### **Questions and Concerns**

Our goal is for all visitors to OFNS to feel comfortable and supported as they learn about the natural world, each other and themselves through outdoor and potentially risky play. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding your child's visit at OFNS, please do not hesitate to ask to speak with OFNS staff directly. If you or the OFNS staff member feels that you require an extended or more focused conversation than can be had in the moment, plans can be made to do so.

### **Grievance Policy**

Your concerns matter to us, and issues may arise in your dealings with OFNS staff. Please communicate your concerns with the Forest School staff in person, or via phone or email. We will make every effort to address and resolve these issues in a timely manner.

If you should have a complaint or concern that cannot be resolved directly with OFNS staff, please bring that concern to the Program Director, Lyne Tremblay, [ltremblay@afchildrensservices.ca](mailto:ltremblay@afchildrensservices.ca) or Kim Hiscott, Executive Director, [khiscott@afchildrensservices.ca](mailto:khiscott@afchildrensservices.ca).

In the unlikely event that the concern still cannot be resolved, a letter can be submitted in writing or electronically to the board of directors of Andrew Fleck Children's Services - <https://www.afchildrensservices.ca/about-us/governance/>



## **LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **A Typical Day**

An emergent approach to learning results in each Forest School day feeling unique to educators and children alike. Though each day is responsive- child-centred and interest-led- the rhythm of the day



remains consistent from day-to-day to help meet the needs of a wide range of children in supporting play, learning, challenge and comfort.

While every day at OFNS unfolds differently based on the children, their interests, the weather, and the various loose parts found or introduced at the site, participants can be sure that they will be welcomed with a smile when they arrive on site.

Some children find separation hard. If you anticipate your child might struggle to say good-bye we welcome a conversation before the first day to discuss how to best support you and your child. You will find a caring and patient team of educators to help you find your way through those first few mornings.

The first day will include a brief tour of the site, including the bathroom, so that participants can begin to settle in and feel at home. Educators will also lead a short discussion and story to ensure the safety of all participants. From there, groups will be invited to play! Educators will have chosen specific areas and set up specific learning provocations based on the group's previous experiences at Forest School.

Children will be afforded the large periods of time necessary to really settle into the kind of play from which rich, deep learning can emerge. Educators are encouraged to both play with and closely observe children during this time. Throughout the day, stories will be read and told and children will be encouraged to spin their own stories, perhaps based on their experiences at Forest School, perhaps based solely on imagination, or perhaps a mix of both! As the day ends, we will share our highlights of the day, and share one final "hoot and howl" before gathering in Closing Circle to await being picked up.

## **Play**

At OFNS we know that unstructured, free play is fundamental to healthy development, mental wellness, and learning. Play is the primary way through which children make meaning of the world around them, and this form of play is not easily accessible for all children and families. Play with OFNS can take many forms. For example, symbolic play involves the use of an object (or a sign or

symbol) to "stand in for" or represent something else - an acorn might become a person, or a fairy table, or a coin. Social play requires participants to effectively negotiate rules and procedures - this is a part of nearly all play at OFNS, and has such value as a child grows up to constantly be negotiating and collaborating. Regardless of the type, all play provides the building blocks for greater cognitive functioning and learning for children and adults alike.

## **Role of the Educator**

Understanding participants at OFNS as knowledge builders making meaning of the world through play, in its many varied ways of emerging, means that the role of an OFNS educator is also quite different than the role a teacher may play in a more conventional setting. Instead of being an "expert" or the one who has all the "right answers" (and thereby perhaps being viewed as occupying a position of power above learners) OFNS educators seek to be co-learners with participants. They aim to prompt questions and extend and deepen participants' thinking about and compassion for the world around them by themselves posing questions, or by using or introducing loose parts, and supplies that change the learning environment and therefore elicit a change in the learner.

## **From Planning to Observation and Reflection**



In order to truly follow the interests of OFNS participants - to nurture emergent learning – OFNS educators shift their emphasis from planning to observation and reflection. Instead of pre-determining the activities for the day, educators closely observe participants, intervening with open-ended invitations and “provocations”.

OFNS educators support their observations by taking photos, videos, and written notes which are themselves used to extend learning, refocus it, or redirect it. Pedagogical documentation is created, and revisited by educators on subsequent weeks so that they can support children in revisiting previous play if that feels right. Educators might ask questions such as “What were you doing last week?”, “What were you thinking about when you did that?”, What are your thoughts about continuing with that today?”



## **ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

One of the many special features of Forest School is that sessions are held in the same natural space over a period of time, allowing participants to become very comfortable in and knowledgeable about the area. We believe that it is only through a deep connection to place that children grow up to be stewards of the land. Although this is very positive for learning, it can have an adverse environmental effect due to overuse of an area. We therefore strive to meet a delicate balance whereby we promote children’s connection to nature through exposure and meaningful experience, while at the same time fostering an ethic of care and sustainable use of the land we are connecting to. We minimize our ecological impact by rotating our sites for play, staying on trails as much as possible and keeping activities with the highest impact in our main areas near our buildings.

At Ottawa Forest and Nature School, environmental sustainability is at the heart of our motivation for running programs. We therefore conduct ongoing ecological impact assessments of our presence in the forest, taking many factors into account. We have created a plan both for the monitoring, management and limitation of our potential negative impact and for the positive development and improvement of the ecology of our site.