



# AT LAST FOREST SCHOOLS



2023-2024 Parent Handbook

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## PHILOSOPHY / VISION / TEACHERS

**Our mission** is to use the Forest School model to bring children closer to nature in the early, primary, and secondary years. By cultivating rich learning experiences, children will make a connection with the diverse natural environment our locations have to offer.

**Our vision** is for your child to play and learn within our local forests with a knowledgeable and experienced educator who understands the importance of play and inquiry-based learning and how this can lead to a healthy child and more sustainable world.

### Our teachers

Certified Ontario Teachers and Early Childhood Educators, with Outdoor Specialists, guide children to self learning and discovery in a ratio of one teacher to six students!

### What Is Forest School?

Forest School (FS) is an educational approach that has existed worldwide since the late 1950s. There are now over ten thousand Forest School programs in the UK alone and a growing number in Canada. These schools have many different names (i.e. Nature Kindergarten, Outdoor School, Waldkindergarten, etc.), and take different forms.

FS can take place in many different climates and settings. These can include but are not limited to, urban or near-urban parks, natural spaces adjacent to or on school grounds, natural playgrounds or outdoor classrooms, forests, meadows, or beaches. There could also be varying age groups.

The activities that happen in FS also vary, depending on the season, climate, landscape, animals that have visited the night before, trees that have blown down in the wind, the information presented by the educator, various tools and loose parts for building and creating, how long the group has been together and, most importantly, what interests the child.

Sometimes children will work independently, finding peace within themselves and creations and thoughts. Other times children will work collaboratively to create

something, problem solve, support one another or dream of a bigger and better world. FS can often be described as a 'magical' thing to witness and be a part of, as it is often a world where children collaborate, communicate and build trust.

Even with the variation, all FS programs follow two guiding principles that distinguishes them from other outdoor and environmental education programs: regular and repeated access to a natural space, as well as childdirected, emergent and inquiry-based learning. The defining feature is that children are provided with opportunities to build a connection with nature that they may not have already, to a dedicated educator, to their classmates and to themselves through this educational opportunity.



## AT LAST FOREST SCHOOLS

Nature based programming is growing in popularity, and families around the world are starting to understand the benefits of children spending more time in nature. Our original Forest School showed us firsthand these benefits and we are seeing our students flourish. It is our goal to continue to provide this program for our community and now others. Each year that passes we grow to reach more communities and with the help from amazing staff we can bring our Forest School programs to a community near you.

## POLICIES & PROCEDURES

### Terms and Conditions

To participate in pre-registered programs, registration must be completed in full online before the program begins.

- For pre-registered programs, parents are strongly encouraged to add their credit card information to their account in order for our secure processing to bill the credit card directly.
- Parents credit cards are charge on the 1<sup>st</sup> of every month, except for September which is processed at time of registration.
- Refunds will not be given if we must close early due to inclement weather. However, we will fully refund you if we cancel the program entirely. Programs might also be cancelled if there are insufficient registrants.
- Any child who is absent or leaves during the middle of a program due to illness, injury, expulsion, or any other reason will not be refunded any portion of the program fees for that day.
- We understand that situations change, and families may not be able to enroll for the entire school year. To ensure the program meets our families needs, we have divided the school year into three semesters, with 3 opportunities through out the year to withdraw your child. Please see the deadlines to withdraw below. If you need to withdraw your child(ren) from the forest school program please email [info@atlastforestschools.com](mailto:info@atlastforestschools.com) and include your child's name and the location of the forest school they are attending by the following deadlines.

**Fall Semester = September – November 30**

*Deadline to withdraw from fall semester = August 15*

**Winter Semester = December 1 – March Break**

*Deadline to withdraw for winter semester = November 15*

**Spring Semester = March Break – June 23**

*Deadline to withdraw spring semester = February 28*



## HEALTH & SAFETY

### Privacy Policy

In registering your child for a program, you are providing ALFS with sensitive information about your child.

ALFS collects this information in order to communicate with you (parents/guardians) and to protect your child's health and safety during our programs. Any personal data you give to us will be processed following the privacy legislation and will only be used for the purposes for which you have given consent. We will not share your details with third parties without your consent, except where we are legally compelled or obligated to do so.

Select pieces of information (allergies/medical conditions, emergency contacts) will be printed and kept in a binder marked "Authorized Personnel Only". The binder and/or an electronic document will be kept in the emergency backpack, which is always carried by a Forest School educator, so that pertinent information will be quickly accessible in the event of an emergency.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you should have any questions or concerns about protecting the privacy of the information you provide us.

Please note that, with your consent, images may appear on our website, Facebook page and marketing material (including in the local newspaper).

### Covid Policy

Due to our private school standing we are held to the same rules, obligations that all private/public schools are

held to by the Ministry of Health. Luckily 99% of the time we are outside and (depending on the state of Covid) don't have to wear masks. If your child or anyone in the direct family are experiencing covid systems, please contact your Forest School Principal and ask about the current guidelines. These guidelines change periodically.

## Illness Policy

In the following cases, we ask that parents/ guardians keep their participant at home and only allow for return to Forest School 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided:

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

Should a situation arise while at Forest School, parents/guardians will be asked to pick up their participant and to allow them to come back to Forest School 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided.

A health care provider (i.e. doctor, nurse, naturopath, etc.) must provide documentation that it is safe for the child to return to FS in the case of a communicable disease such as measles, chicken pox, mumps, flu, strep throat, viral pneumonia, etc.

Please Note: Any outbreak of communicable disease will be communicated to parents/ guardians via email. If a child is being treated for lice please let us know so that we can pass on any relevant information to other families, and the child will be able to return once lice is cleared.

## Risk Management

The experience and management of risk is an ingrained and fundamental part of Forest School. It is an important part of healthy child development. ALFS educators facilitate co-assessing and co-managing risk with the children, believing this is an essential skill for children to acquire. ALFS educators conduct seasonal site risk assessments as well as activity-based assessments.

## Bathroom Policy

The majority of our programming happens in the woods, and because bathroom facilities may not be readily accessible to students. ALFS Teaching staff are equipped with a bathroom kit should nature call while in nature.

Students are directed to find a private place out of sight from the group to go to the bathroom. For urination participants pee on the forest floor. For pooping, students are shown how to dig a whole 3-6 inches deep, given some toilet paper and are instructed to bury it (this follows Leave no trace principal).

## Food Policies

Nut-Free Zone: Due to the potential for lifethreatening nut allergies, we ask that parents/ guardians refrain from packing nuts in their child's lunches. Soy and sunflower seed substitutes for nut butters are welcome. Given ALFS will take place in a public environment, we cannot guarantee a nut-free environment. Children with severe allergies should have an EpiPen on them, and an additional EpiPen with staff.

## Litter-Less Lunches

We encourage parents/guardians to try and pack a litter-less lunch. At the same time, we ask that parents/guardians to consider the size/ weight/safety of the containers in which their child's snacks are packed. At ALFS, even our youngest children pride themselves in carrying their own snacks and water bottles on our adventures, which is made easier with small containers.

Children will be asked to wash their hands with soap and water before eating, and after using "the facilities". They will also be able to refill their water bottles on site.



## Emergency Procedures and First Aid

ALFS has written emergency procedures that have been made familiar to all educators and volunteers. A copy of the procedures, including emergency phone numbers, is always carried by an educator/volunteer in the

emergency/first aid backpack. ALFS has collaborated with Wilderness First Aid. Educators have or will be trained by the Wilderness Medical Associates in a first aid program focused on learning with children in nature.

### FS Staff: Participant Ratios

The ratios between ALFS educators and children vary depending on the age of the children and the adults accompanying them. We currently run our programs with a 1:6 ratio for all groups. However, at our discretion we may increase to 1:8 for school aged children.

### FS Staff Responsibilities

The responsibilities of an ALFS educator are of wide range and include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ensuring the physical safety of the children by co-assessing and co-managing risk with them on an ongoing basis so that they feel connected to and comfortable in the natural environment around them
- considering the social and emotional safety of the children and creating a caring and respectful learning community so that the risk taking and question posing necessary for deep, inquiry-based learning can take place
- modelling care and respect for the natural environment as well as the tools and supplies of the Forest School

### Parent/Guardian Responsibilities

Parents/guardians are responsible for:

- ensuring all forms and fees are submitted electronically prior to your child's attendance.
- ensuring your child is equipped with the proper clothing, outerwear and other supplies for the season and length of the program \*If a student arrives with less than adequate clothing, they will be sent home.
- providing ALFS staff with information that would assist us in meeting the needs of your child.



### Preparing for Forest School

Children will need rain-suits, boots, extra warm clothing, waterproof/warm snowsuits, extra hats and waterproof mitts, hiking shoes, sneakers, thermal wear, etc.

#### For Cold Weather

1. Insulation: The key to this layer is to wick moisture away from the skin and insulate. Natural fabrics such as wool or silk work well as an inner layer, as well as fleece. Please avoid cotton.
2. Middle Layer: This is another insulation layer to keep your child warm. Wool sweaters (merino wool is exceptionally warm and soft on sensitive skin) and fleece tend to work well. These could be multiple layers that your child could remove should they get too hot.
3. Outer Shell: Waterproof and windproof, as well as breathable. Should reflect the day's weather.

### What to Pack List

All Seasons:

- Small backpack
- Lunch and two snacks (children typically need more food at FS than during a regular day)
- Water bottle
- Two extra FULL changes of clothes (including underwear and socks)
- A Rubbermaid container to store extras with a label of your child's name.



### Fall/Spring:

- Rain gear (waterproof boots, pants, jacket)
- Sneakers for running (no open toe shoes even in summer)
- Sun Hat (for warmer months)
- Warmer sweater, hat, outer layer pants AND jacket for colder days
- Bug Jacket
- Lightweight clothing (silk/cotton ideal, synthetic fibres do not breathe well)
- Even on warmer days children must wear full length pants and shirts (to reduce risk of poison ivy and tick bites).

### Winter:

- Two winter hats (must cover ears and stay on the head, one as extra)
- Balaclava or neck warmer (no scarves please due to risk of strangulation)
- Two pairs of warm, waterproof mitts
- One/two warm, waterproof snowsuit
- One set of warm, waterproof boots (with extra liners!)
- \*Three base layers: see suggestions above on how to dress your child appropriately for the winter season

You don't have to invest in expensive brand names to keep your child warm. Thrift stores are great places to look for the appropriate clothing at cheaper prices.

When it comes to boots you should get a boot that is one size larger than your child's foot. This helps with insulation. Socks help to wick moisture away from the skin, (please note: cotton tends to sweat and doesn't do a great job at wicking away moisture). To keep your children's feet warm, the best option would be to have

two pairs of wool socks with waterproof boots that have some room around the toes.

For warmer weather, we ask that your child has a light cotton/silk/hemp long sleeve shirt on for the day for protection from the sun. Children are required to always wear a hat. Our day will follow the shade as it is amazing how much cooler it can be.

### Child Drop off and Pick up Policy

Parents must give ALFS written authorization for the people who may pick up their child or be contacted in the case of an emergency. If written authorization is not possible, the parent must tell their teacher at the beginning of the day before changing the usual pick-up routine. We always act in the best interest of the child if there is any confusion or uncertainty.

### Sign-In & Sign-Out Requirements:

Children must be always signed in and out by a person who is at least 16 years old.

### Unauthorized Pick-up Procedure:

If someone other than a parent/authorized alternate pick-up person arrives to pick up a child and we haven't been notified in advance, the following will take place;

1. Parent will be called for verbal permission.
2. If a parent cannot be reached, the child is not allowed to leave ALFS until a parent has been contacted.
3. ALFS staff will remain with the child until an authorized pick-up person arrives. Late pick-up fees may apply.

### Custody and Access to Children

According to the law, both parents of a child have equal rights 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. ALFS requires a copy of this document.

### Incident Weather/Closure

If the weather makes it unsafe for travel and we need to cancel programs for that day, we will notify you by the shared teacher/parent text, email and telephone (if need be) at least one hour prior to the time the program would

have started. If the weather makes it necessary for ALFS to close earlier than normal, every effort will be made to contact each parent/guardian by telephone. In the event parents/guardians cannot be contacted, emergency contact people will be called. Staff will always remain with children until they are picked up.

## Extreme Weather

Educators/volunteers at ALFS consult the forecast throughout the day, and weather-related safety is considered in all decisions (i.e. how far to venture away from the Community Hall, how long to be outside). In the case of potential thunder and lightning, ALFS educators/volunteers will move groups close enough to shelter so that it may be reached quickly if a storm occurs. During thunder and lightning, participants will stay in the shelter until after 20 mins after the last thunder. In the case of extreme cold (-30C or below) or extreme heat (30C), ALFS educators/volunteers will limit the time outside based on age/ outerwear, and will constantly ask regarding to a child's comfort and safety watching for signs of frostbite, hypothermia, heat exhaustion, etc. If the temperature is colder than -30C then we will cancel school that day.

## LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

### A "Typical" Day

Everyday at ALFS is different. Based on the children present, their interests, the season/weather and the loose parts set up by educators, children can be sure that they will have the day to explore through free play. That might mean building snow structures or looking for bugs and creatures under rocks and logs or creating something with craft supplies set up on a picnic table. Once the children have all arrived, they will be called for an opening meeting. From here, we get to know how each child is feeling on this day and they get to know each other as well. We collaboratively plan for the day. Some days that might look like a hike through the woods or meadow to discover new places that the children can explore. It can bring new fort building areas, new trees to climb or new places to play games. Other times we may stay closer to our base, making crafts, putting on a play or discovering how new tools work. Before the end of the day, we may share our own stories of the day, read a favourite book, or practice a new skill. While no two days will look the same for your child, play, exploration, and

connection to each other and the natural environment around us our top priority each day at ALFS.



### Emergent Learning

How your child will learn at ALFS, can and will often look different than the way they would learn at their regular school. At ALFS, we want your child to learn through emergent, inquiry and play-based learning. We want them to tell us what they want to learn. We believe that all children, including the youngest ones, are capable of learning through pursuing their own interests, asking questions, and expressing themselves in many ways.

### Play Based Learning

At ALFS we believe that healthy development and learning can come from free play. Play is one of the ways that children make connections to the environment around them. This helps them figure out what the space around them means. This form of play seems to be seen less and less in our current society. Play at ALFS takes many forms. For example, constructive play involves your child building something - this might be building a bridge or a snow fort. Social play requires the children to effectively negotiate rules and procedures - this is a part of nearly all play at ALFS. All different play provides the starting step for improved cognitive functioning and learning for both children and adults.

### Role of the Educator

The role of a ALFS educator is different than your child's regular classroom teacher. Our educators wish to be co-learners with your child. Our educators will prompt you child with questions, extend their deep thing about the world around. They wish to grow the compassion inside your child for the natural environment in our locations by



introducing them to tools, loose parts and supplies that constantly change their learning environment, therefore leading to a change within your child.

## From Planning to Observation and Reflection

To really following the interests of the children, the educators' focus is more observation and reflection rather than planning which is what usually happens in a regular classroom setting. Instead of having lessons prepared and ready to present, ALFS educators observe the children while they are playing, intervening with open-ended options such as presenting a new loose part, etc. The educators take photos, videos, and written notes to support their observations. These are used to extend the children's learning, refocus it or redirect it if needed. Educators may use these materials to ask the child or group of children what they were doing, what they were thinking or what were they trying to accomplish during this activity. The educator may offer support by suggesting a solution to a potential problem or showing them an alternative activity with the same idea.

## From Assessment and Reporting to Documentation

Documents gathered by educators, parents/guardians, community members and the children themselves work together to answer questions "what is happening here?", "what is being learned, mastered or struggled with?", "what did the child or children learn about their natural environment from this?". This is how we "assess" the learning and development of the children at ALFS. This theorizing way of assessing allows for further and deeper learning for both the educators and children.

## Behaviour Management

At ALFS, we manage behaviour proactively by creating a safe space for all children and have them engaging in activities that are developmentally appropriate.

In general, behaviour management needs to:

- Provide the child with the space, tools, and opportunity to manage their own behaviour.
- Focus on the behaviour rather than the child.
- Consider the child's developmental level and needs.
- Be implemented in a positive and consistent manner.

- Be designed to help the child to learn appropriate behaviour and techniques.
- Help children to develop self-control, self-confidence, decision making skills, the ability to communicate effectively and sensitivity in their interactions with others.



## Behaviour Management Practices

Students will sometimes demonstrate poor judgement in behaviour choices. If students fail to meet our expectations regarding respect for them selves, each other, and/or the environment, then ALFS staff will take the following actions.

- Reach out to parents and determine if there are any strategies that work at home that the ALFS staff can use.
- Create a 3-strike program that when the student gets three strikes (on a minor behaviour) they get sent home early.
- Create a simple contract that the student and parents sign, listing the exhibited behaviors that they are not to do, and list the consequences should the student decide to behave like that.

At ALFS we strive to make the program as inclusive as possible. While striving for this we must make sure that we are creating a safe and enjoyable environment for all our students.

## EQUALITY

### Accessibility Policy

One of the primary goals of ALFS is to make our programs accessible to a wide range of participants regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language, physical/emotional/mental ability, or socioeconomic

status. We seek to dismantle the barriers to participation in ALFS by making our site physically accessible for everyone and our community safe and welcoming. In the future, we hope to receive funding for children who need 1:1 support, to set registration fees on a sliding scale based on need and to establish a “gear bank” or “lending library” of outerwear (snow pants, hats, mitts, etc.) so that the supplies needed to safely enjoy ALFS are not themselves a barrier to participation. We welcome your feedback and suggestions in the realization of those goals.



## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

One of the many special features of ALFS is that our days are held in the same area throughout the whole school year, allowing the students to become very comfortable in and knowledgeable about the area. We believe that through making deep connections to the lands we expose the children to, they will grow to love and be stewards of the land. We like to maintain a balance between promoting free play but as well teaching and demonstrating the care and ethics that is required to respect the lands around us. This balance can sometimes have an adverse affect on the environment where overuse can be a problem. We minimize these impacts by rotating our sites for play, staying on trails as much as possible and keeping activities with the highest impact in multi-use areas. We also like to leave areas cleaner than when arrived by making sure that all of our exploration materials are return to the base or thrown out in their respective trash bins. We routinely collect garbage around the areas that we frequently mostly to pick up litter to better the natural environment around us.

At ALFS, environmental sustainability is a priority and something that we are very passionate about. We continually monitor our play areas for any ecological impact that may have been caused by our program. We have plans to monitor, manage and limit our potential negative impacts. We also encourage the children to think about possible positive impacts and activities that we can preform to the help the natural environment around us.

## COMMUNICATION

### General Communication

Generally, ALFS will communicate with parents/caregivers via email. Your child’s teacher will also be sending weekly e-mails with pictures to share your child’s day with you. Please be sure to communicate via email or text message for the following:

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

ALFS educators are also available for brief “check-ins” during pick-up/drop-off times and are happy to share the day’s highlights with you, though their priority will always be on participants during that time. If you would like to have a longer or more focused conversation with ALFS staff, please do not hesitate to communicate via email or to set up an in-person meeting time via email. Keep an eye out for weekly email updates.

### Emergency Communication

- In the event of an emergency at ALFS involving your child, parents/emergency contact people will be contacted by telephone once emergency personnel (if needed) and the executive director have been contacted.
- If weather/road conditions make travel to/from ALFS dangerous for staff/ participants and ALFS needs to cancel programs or close early for the day, participants/their caregivers will be notified by telephone.

## Questions and Concern

- Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask to speak with ALFS staff during drop-off/pick-up times or to email. As mentioned above, if you require an extended or more focused conversation, please communicate this request via email.
- Similarly, should ALFS staff have a question or concern requiring an extended or more focused conversation, this will be communicated via email.
- If a parent, student, or teacher should have a complaint or concern that cannot be resolved directly with an in-person conversation or via email, please bring that concern the School Principal and the Owners of At Last Forest School Deb Val at 519-379-6383, or Carlin Val at 519-373-6951.