



Pathways to Nature Preschool Teaching Philosophy

At Pathways to Nature Preschool (PTN), our teaching philosophy is rooted in the belief that every child is capable of learning, and that growth can best be supported through a relationship driven, developmentally appropriate, play-based curriculum. We believe that all children deserve equitable access to high quality early childhood education, and that learning happens best through hands-on, outdoor experiences led by a knowledgeable and supportive staff. Our highly qualified teaching team is committed to staying up to date on the latest research in early childhood development, as well as best practices in early childhood education and care. Our learning goals are informed by the [MA Department of Education's Guidelines for Preschool Learning](#), the [MA State Science and Technology/Engineering Learning Standards, Common Core](#), and the [NAEE Guidelines for Excellence in Early Childhood Environmental Education](#). Our curriculum is driven by several core beliefs:

We recognize and uphold the critical value of play in early childhood. Play is essential to a child's healthy development; young children learn through play. A wide body of scientific literature supports this conclusion, and it forms the basis for every lesson and learning activity that is part of our curriculum. Here at Pathways, we make time in the day for both free play and guided play. During free play, the children are given ample time to explore and discover on their own in nature. During guided play, teachers may design a learning activity or lesson to explore a concept that the children have expressed interest in. Though still play-based and child-driven, guided play gives teachers an opportunity to scaffold children's learning with the intent of fostering a student's progress towards a desired learning outcome.

We believe strongly in the importance of building positive relationships with our families, students and community. We know that student-teacher relationships have a big impact on how a child feels about school. We strive to create strong, positive relationships with our families and our students. We see each child as an individual, and we seek to create a learning environment in which all our students feel safe, respected, and loved.

We believe in the value of allowing children to experience, explore and play freely in nature. We build upon a wide body of research that has shown the extensive benefits of allowing children access to unstructured time in nature. We understand that allowing children to take safe risks leads to many positive developmental outcomes, including pride in one's own accomplishments. We believe that these experiences in nature foster resiliency, strengthen creativity, increase opportunities for problem solving, reduce stress

and mental fatigue, enhance social learning, and build a foundation for a lifelong love of the environment in our youngest learners.

We believe that teaching social and emotional skills is a critical part of an effective early childhood curriculum. At Pathways, social and emotional learning is built into our daily routine and provides the foundation upon which all other learning occurs. We understand that for some of our students, this is their first school experience. Carefully and intentionally designed learning experiences help to guide children in acquiring crucial life skills, from managing those big feelings, to sharing with friends, to putting on a jacket.

We believe in equity in early education and are committed to creating an inclusive and anti-bias learning environment. Our staff are dedicated to a process of continuous reflection and recurring professional development to foster a learning community at Pathways to Nature Preschool that fosters equity for all. We encourage you to read our Antibias Curriculum Statement for more information.



Pathways to Nature Preschool Curriculum Statement

The Role of Theme Based Learning

Learning is a process of integration. When children play and explore, they connect new information and ideas with established knowledge, and use these connections to develop a better understanding about how the world works. Theme-based learning nests curriculum outcomes within a specific overarching topic, which allows students to connect ideas across subjects and construct their own meaning. Themes are also valuable student engagement tools, as they are often driven by the children's own interests. At Pathways, we are inspired by emergent curriculum practices and inquiry-based learning, therefore we often allow class interest to influence the sequence and length of our thematic units. As each year's class has a unique set of interests, no two school years in a class will look exactly the same. However, each class covers several core themes each school year:

Identity and Community: Every class begins the year with an "All About Me, My Family and My School" unit, which focuses on self-identity, family identity, and building classroom community. This unit allows teachers, students and families to get to know one another. It fosters awareness of self and others, reinforces pride in one's family and culture, and develops friendships within the classroom. This unit also sets the foundation for all subsequent inclusion and anti-bias education during the school year.

Animals and their Habitats: Our location at the Boston Nature Center provides the perfect backdrop for learning how living things interact with their environment. In meeting our state's early education science standards, we engage students in generating questions about the natural world, cultivating a sense of wonder for the plants and animals that share our space, and developing a greater understanding of how the natural world provides for our own needs. Recurring topics in this unit include animal homes, hibernation, soil and worms, insects, plant and animal identification, animal tracking, animal "superpowers", and animal engineers.

Birds: As part of Mass Audubon, birds are an incredibly important part of our organizational mission. They are also a wonderful student engagement tool; children are endlessly fascinated with the diversity, behavior, and sounds of the birds around them. Our location offers an amazing opportunity for us to use birds as a way to cultivate student learning in a myriad of different developmental areas. Activities in our bird unit may include nest building, bird identification, bird call identification, investigations in flight, bird anatomy, bird beaks as tools, how birds grow from eggs, and migration.

Nature's Cycles: Young children are born scientists and fantastic observers of the natural world. Being outdoors allows us to observe first-hand the earth's natural rhythms and cycles. In this unit, children use their five senses to investigate the world around them. They observe patterns in the world around them, collect data, and develop an understanding of how things grow and change. Some common recurring topics in this unit include five senses, seasons, weather, freezing and melting, plant and animal life cycles, seeds, the moon, light and shadows, and the water cycle.

Objects in Motion: Children enjoy repetition and exploring cause and effect. This theme presents developmentally appropriate investigations in physical science related to forces and motion. Children investigate the motion of objects and explore the effects of push and pull. Topics in this unit might include ramps and balls, magnets, push/pull, rolling vs. sliding, levers, and how we move our own bodies through space.

Art and Nature: Investigations in the arts plays a fundamental role in early childhood learning. Painting, drawing, exploring music, creating with clay, and storytelling are all ways in which children can enjoy the arts. Here at Pathways, we use our beautiful environment at the Boston Nature Center to create unique opportunities for children to explore their inner artist. We value the process of creating, not necessarily the artistic product. Natural objects give children the freedom to manipulate materials and loose parts in an unstructured way, allowing for exploration. Common activities in this unit include making musical instruments out of natural materials, painting with sticks, going on a "color walk", observing patterns and symmetry in nature, and dramatizing our favorite stories on our outdoor stage.



Pathways to Nature Preschool

Our Classrooms

Pathways to Nature Preschool currently offers four classrooms, grouped by age. In addition to our thematic units above, read our other documents to find out what developmental skills you can expect each classroom to be scaffolding.

Busy Bees (ages 3-4yrs)

The Busy Bees are our youngest learners. During this year, there is an instrumental focus on teaching foundational social and emotional skills. These skills include (but are certainly not limited to) separating from a caregiver, turn taking, raising a hand to speak, managing big feelings, putting on a jacket, dressing themselves, following multi-step directions, and advocating for one's own needs. Our youngest learners are exploring the sounds in language through nursery songs, fingerplays, and rhymes. They are learning how to ask questions and use their five senses to explore the world around them. They are building an emergent understanding of counting and cardinality, and are working towards developing one to one correspondence. They are developing an awareness of print and a love of books through a print rich environment and interactive read alouds. They delight in filling a bird feeder, wielding a stick, and splashing in puddles. They are insatiable in their curiosity and will not hesitate to ask the one question that is always on their minds: "why?".

Curious Crickets (ages 4-5yrs)

The Curious Crickets continue to reinforce and build upon those critical social and emotional skills. Their perspective taking skills continue to grow and increasingly complex prosocial behavior is encouraged (sharing, helping, cooperating, empathizing). Four-year olds are becoming increasingly logical in their thinking, and their play reflects this. They may assign multiple roles and create fairly complex rules that govern their play scenarios. They are working on writing their name, holding a pair of scissors correctly, and identifying/generating their own rhymes. They may speak in more complex sentences and will start to recognize common words in environmental print (i.e. the word "stop" on a stop sign). They may be working towards counting more than ten objects, recalling the main characters and events in their favorite stories, and taking care of their personal needs with little to no help from teachers. They are becoming increasingly curious about the natural world, and are starting to notice patterns of changes in the environment. They can voice their own opinions with confidence, and work together to answer their questions about the natural world.

Magnificent Monarch's (ages 4-5yrs)

The Magnificent Monarch's class is a one-year program created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the needs of our enrolled families to ensure we did not need to turn anyone away. The Monarchs will continue to reinforce and build upon those critical social and emotional skills. Their perspective-taking skills continue to grow and increasingly complex prosocial behavior is encouraged (sharing, helping, cooperating, empathizing). Four-year olds are becoming increasingly logical in their thinking, and their play reflects this. They may assign multiple roles and create fairly complex rules that govern their play scenarios. They will continue working on writing their name, holding a pair of scissors correctly, and identifying/generating their own rhymes. They may speak in more complex sentences and will start to recognize common words in environmental print (i.e. the word "stop" on a stop sign). They may be working towards counting more than ten objects, recalling the main characters and events in their favorite stories, and taking care of their personal needs with little to no help from teachers. They are becoming increasingly curious about the natural world, and are starting to notice patterns of changes in the environment. They can voice their own opinions with confidence, and work together to answer their questions about the natural world.

Daring Dragonflies (ages 5-6yrs)

The Dragonflies are our oldest group, and comprise our Forest Kindergarten class. At this age, the Dragonflies are typically able to play cooperatively, take turns, and can offer help when they see a friend in distress. They are beginning to understand that their actions have consequences, and are starting to be able to recognize and label unfairness in the world around them. Five-year olds have a greater command of language, can recognize rhyming words, use descriptive vocabulary, and voice their opinions soundly. They are working on developing/strengthening their phonemic awareness skills (awareness of the smallest units of sounds). They may start to recognize letters and words more frequently in the environmental print around them. They can write their name, and will experiment with letter strings and inventive spelling. They participate in weekly writing workshops, guided literacy groups, and math workshops in addition to outdoor exploration. They are excited to collect and organize data, and can draw basic conclusions based on their findings. As the progress through the school year, they are starting to understand how their own actions, and the actions of all people, can affect the environment around them.



Pathways to Nature Preschool: Anti-bias Curriculum Statement

At Pathways to Nature Preschool, creating an inclusive learning environment where each child and family feels safe, respected and loved is a core component of our teaching philosophy. We believe that all children have the right to equitable learning opportunities, and that we as educators play a critical role in making this happen. Our team is committed to recognizing and appreciating the unique contributions of each child and family in our school community within the context of their culture, language, gender identity, racial identity, ability level, religious beliefs, economic class, and family structure. To do this, we rely on the four core goals of anti-bias education for young children, as stated in [Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves](#), by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards:

- **Goal 1:** Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
- **Goal 2:** Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity
- **Goal 3:** Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- **Goal 4:** Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Our curriculum explores and reinforces these goals using developmentally appropriate practices, including books and social scripts, art, puppets, role playing, storytelling and guided play. Our curriculum is both responsive and intentional. Although many of our lessons are planned in response to the children's own inquiries on various topics, we know that our anti-bias curriculum goals are too important to always wait for them to arise organically in the classroom. Therefore, at times teachers may introduce thoughtfully planned activities, books and discussions that help children explore critical ideas around identity, diversity and fairness. Our educators also understand that being an early education professional means having a commitment to self-reflection and continuous personal growth in this area, including an awareness of our own personal biases and their potential impact on our teaching. Our team receives regular training and professional development in best practices for anti-bias education. Together, we strive to create a caring and equitable community for our children and families.

Lauryn Cannon, Kindergarten Teacher and Curriculum Coordinator, PTN Preschool