**Prairie Nature Children’s Centre Inc.**

# Connecting Children with Nature Policy

**Purpose**

This policy will provide:

* Guidelines for teaching teams, senior management, children and parents of Prairie Nature Children’s Centre Inc. to ensure that there is a commitment to intentionally including nature and environmental learning in the Centre and its programs.
* Information regarding the expectations of the teaching teams, families, and senior management in delivering practice that reflects the policy and educates all involved in the importance of connecting children with nature.
* Procedures to ensure the teaching team are confident and competent in developing the programs that support this policy.
* A framework for the teaching teams and senior management to ensure the continuation of the Connecting Children with Nature philosophy.

**Policy Statement**

# Values:

Prairie Nature Children’s Centre Inc. recognizes and values and importance of children actively exploring, engaging and experiencing natural environments and wild spaces. We understand the importance of providing opportunities to play, explore and learn in the outdoors and with nature. Being outside provides children with the opportunity to be more active and physical as well as develop a deep appreciation for the natural world. Giving the children extended time to connect with natural materials is critical to their personal growth both physically and emotionally. Connecting Children with Nature fosters an appreciation and respect for the environment, a platform for healthy living, enhanced wellbeing and the grounding for creative independent and resilient children. This commitment includes recognizing the importance of supporting sustainability.

# Vision and Aims of the Connecting Children with Nature program for children and families:

PNCC aims to provide a program that seeks to demonstrate and encourage children to learn with nature: respecting their environment through careful and purposeful use of teaching strategies and materials, the minimization of waste, raising environmental awareness and the promotion of healthy eating and living.

The Centre aims to use our outdoor space at least 35% of the time (averaged over a 12-month time period) to enhance the learning that takes place in their indoor classrooms.

The Centre is committed to applying this philosophy across all groups (on a developmentally appropriate basis) within the Centre and promoting it beyond the Centre as well.

The Centre will develop programs guided by the following aims and visions:

* + To connect children with the natural environment developing an awareness of and appreciation for what is above, below and around them.
  + To encourage our children to connect with, and enjoy the natural environment around them.
  + To develop, maintain and improve children’s physical health, mental health and wellbeing.
  + To develop children’s curiosity, sense of wonder, resilience, observation skills and attention to detail.
  + To understand that the world of nature was created for humans and to design programs in such a way that reflect that the outdoors is not only of key importance in the development of young children but is in most cases far superior in its “play affordance” and value for children than our indoor environments.
  + To develop programs that bring balance to young children’s lives, recognizing that Canadian children already spend about 50 hours/week in front of screens and that free play outdoors has all but been taken away from childhood in North America, to the detriment of children.
  + To develop children’s ability to assess, manage and take risks.
  + To support families in understanding the importance and value of children taking risks.
  + To develop knowledge about the natural environment (flora and fauna) identifying plants/creatures/animals and learning how to care for them.
  + To provide opportunities for the children to develop strong respectful relationships with each other, the teaching teams, the parents, members of the community and the environment.
  + To recognize changes in seasons and weather conditions according to what happens in the outdoor spaces.
  + For children to discover how to play in natural settings, respectfully using what nature provides with thoughtfulness and minimal impact.
  + For the children to engage in unhurried periods of time where they can enjoy being in the moment and getting deeply involved in their play and learning.
  + For the children to become the ‘experts’ and protectors of their local natural environments.
  + To develop sustainable practices recognizing the impact humans have on the environment (positive and negative).
  + For children to participate in active physical play on a daily basis.

**Scope**

All teachers and educators employed at PNCC will be required to familiarize themselves with this policy and use it to guide program development.

Senior management is committed to providing the support and funds to support this philosophy. Details of the program and policy are communicated to the families via the website, visits to the Centre and in general conversations. Families are then expected to support the outdoor programs while their children are enrolled at the Centre.

All who participate in our program commit to supporting the policy and practices such as but not limited to: work experience; visitors; extended family members.

Canadian and international research indicates that children today are spending much more time indoors, in front of screens (an average of 50 hours/week for Canadian children) and participating in structured teacher directed learning activities. These activities often restrict children from participating regularly in outdoor unstructured activities. It has been documented that this shift is contributing to health problems such as increased anxiety and obesity, while children are suffering from a lack of connection with nature and the outside world. We aim to turn this trend around and give the children and families of Prairie Nature Children’s Centre a chance to spend quality time in nature with passionate teachers to encourage them to explore and learn within those environments.

**Background and Legislation**

# Teaching and learning in a natural environment

We believe and research is now informing us, that connecting with our natural environment develops children’s senses and this is vital to support their ability to be curious, ask questions, problem solve, take responsibility, become resilient and to learn to self-regulate their behaviour. Being in nature allows children to see, feel, taste, hear and smell through direct hands on experiences.

Each day brings wonder because we never know what we will find. In the outdoor learning environment children are trusted to make safe choices and decisions about their engagement with nature. It presents endless possibilities as children realize their capabilities and competencies. In the outdoor learning environment children are both active and interactive participants in the learning process. Teaching teams will encourage children to pay attention and assess risks to themselves and their impact on others and the environment. Being in our natural environment supports children to: gain knowledge of the prairies, forests, waterways and wetland areas; heighten their observation skills; develop empathy; create awareness and develop higher order thinking.

Research is indicating if our children don’t connect with nature and fall in love with it at an early age, they will not be interested in caring for it in the future. It then falls on us to provide young children with frequent and high-quality interactions with nature in the outdoors to develop this deep passionate love for nature.

Author Richard Louv in his book “Last Child in the Woods” makes a strong case to support that today’s children with their use of screen time and a corresponding need to be indoors and stay clean are at a high risk of developing what he has coined as “nature-deficit disorder”.

In 2015 “The ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth” which was called “The Biggest Risk is KEEPING KIDS INDOORS” gave Canada a “D-“ rating for sedentary behaviours and a “D-“ for overall physical activities”. It goes on to mention that it appears “we overprotect kids to keep them safe, but keeping them close and keeping them indoors may set them up to be less resilient and more likely to develop chronic diseases in the long run.”

The position statement that is included in the 2015 report states that “we need to recognize the difference between danger and risk. And we need to value long-term health and fun as much as we value safety.” We need to consider the possibility that rules and regulations designed to prevent injuries and reduce perceived liability consequences have become excessive, to the extent that they actually limit rather than promote children’s physical activity and health. “Adults need to get out of the way and let kids play.”

PNCC supports this position statement and thus we have imbedded the statement that “We aim to be a Centre that is as safe as necessary not as safe as possible”, into our parent policy manuals.

In his book “Oh Boy – Strategies for Teaching Boys in Early Childhood” Francis Wardle writes “Nature is an ideal environment in which young boys can develop and learn”. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in exposing young children to nature. Nature is soothing and accepting; it provides a blank slate upon which the child can interpret their own reality; and it inspires creativity by challenging the child to use all of their senses and full imagination.

**Definitions**

* Prairies: lands from the Rockies of Alberta east to the Lake of the Woods area of Manitoba/Ontario.
* Risk-Benefit assessment: The thought process a staff goes through when there is an identified danger.
* The risk is always weighed against the benefit or opportunity for learning that comes with the event, activity or situation.
* Team Leader: The lead teacher in the room or their designate.
* Teacher: Includes both ECE’s (trained staff) and CCA’s (staff without their ECE II or ECE III classification) as established by the Province of Manitoba.
* Senior Management: The Executive Director and the Assistant Director.

Sources

**Source and Related Policies**

Living and Learning Policy from Balnarring Pre-school, Australia.

**The senior management team is responsible for:**

**Procedures**

* Contributing to and providing details of the program and policy to the families via the website, visits to the Centre and in general conversations.
* Contributing to the sharing of the Centre’s knowledge and experiences with this philosophy into the ECE community beyond Westview Daycare when opportunity arises.
* Whenever possible allocate funds towards this philosophy (e.g. water proof clothing, incursions/excursions costs)
* Support teaching team to develop their skills in developing Connecting Children with Nature programs through in-house training, local workshops and conferences and when possible travel to destinations beyond Manitoba to learn from other jurisdictions in relation to this work.

**The Team Leader is responsible for:**

* Leading the Connecting Children with Nature philosophy within the teaching team and to the families of the Centre.
* To participate actively in the Centre’s: Two Week Outdoor Challenge; 10% Gardening Challenge; and in the case of Preschool and School-age programs- Nature based Field Trips.
* Monitoring their programming ensuring Connecting Children with Nature practices and experiences are occurring on a regular basis.
* Sharing learning opportunities, providing coaching and recommending training to further develop the teaching team’s knowledge, confidence and practice.
* Assisting teachers in developing programs that take the children beyond the gate into natural environments.
* Assisting teachers to recognize high quality outdoor learning spaces and how to do risk/benefit assessments.
* Including natural elements in the indoor programming and environments (i.e. having and caring for plants in the room, using natural loose parts, etc.)
* Sourcing incursions and excursions that reflect this policy.

**ECE’s and CCA’s are responsible for:**

* Being familiar with this policy and the related policies
* Supporting and promoting the Connecting Children with Nature philosophy to families in a positive enthusiastic manner.
* Come to work each day dressed and prepared for the weather conditions.
* Modeling safe outdoor behaviour (i.e. wearing hats that provide good sun protection, using sunscreen during appropriate seasons, consuming healthy appropriate food and drink in the presence of the children) for the children at the Centre.
* Maximizing the opportunity to help children develop good eating/drinking habits by baking and cooking foods that maximize nutrition and healthy eating guidelines (Canada Food Guide) and minimizing the use of unhealthy ingredients in food preparations (i.e. white flour and sugar)
* Providing written and verbal information to families about the nature programs as part of the orientation process.
* Committing to using the outdoor space at the Centre at least 35% of the time (when averaged out over a year).
* Including natural elements in the indoor programming.
* Encouraging children to play with nature, demonstrating possibilities that nature offers.
* Demonstrate enthusiasm and exploring nature with the children: being curious, noticing intricate details.
* Teaching children how to properly sort recycling, and minimize rubbish.
* Encourage and support children to take calculated risks.
* Committing to developing their knowledge of the local natural environments
* Modelling appropriate ways of being in nature. For example, taking only photos, leaving only footprints.
* To conduct risk/benefit assessments prior to taking children into riskier or dangerous environments or when planning and implementing dangerous activities.

**The parents/families/guardians are responsible for:**

* Being committed and supportive of their child’s learning in the outdoors all year round.
* Bringing their child to the Centre with the weather appropriate clothing for each day.
* When possible participating in the outdoors programs.
* Providing children with healthy lunches that follow the Canada Food Guide suggestions (i.e. lots of fruits, vegetables, seeds, whole grain breads) while minimizing or eliminating pre-packaged heavily processed food items.
* Supporting all sustainable practices such as reducing rubbish and using reusable containers whenever possible.

**Volunteers and students are responsible for:**

* Following the directions of the teaching team and supporting this policy.

**Authorization**

This policy was adopted by PNCC senior management and the BOD at a meeting on 2020-08-07