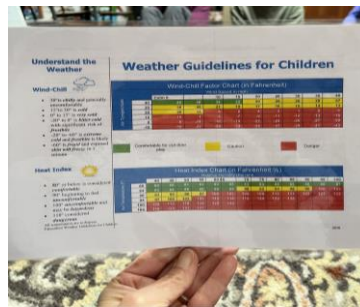




## Branching Out at Peopleplace

### Going “*Beyond the Fence*”



### Program Overview

*Branching Out* is our outdoor classroom. It is found *beyond the fence* and utilizes the yurt as the “home base” for a group of up to 12 children varying in age between 3 and 6 years old. The woods serve as the natural setting for exploration, observation, adventuring, and learning. Children may enroll for one, two, or three days depending on availability, which may change according to enrollment numbers and staffing. A group of children spend the day up until either 1pm or 3pm with two morning teachers and an afternoon teacher. If they stay beyond 1pm, they spend rest time on mats in the yurt or in a hammock, depending on the season.

### Approach/Philosophy

*Branching Out* is an outdoor, nature-based, classroom that provides children with the opportunity to learn about the natural world, while also providing daily opportunities for personal growth and development. The yurt is used as an indoor space in case of extreme weather conditions and for rest time, but most of the day is spent exploring the natural environment and various elements found in the woods. Teachers use the Reggio philosophy and allow for an emergent curriculum to evolve according to the dynamic of the group and the individual needs/interests of the children.

Children develop self-esteem by participating in activities designed to build skills like problem solving, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. Heavy physical work like climbing, dragging, swinging, etc., is encouraged, to develop core strength. The concept of age appropriate risk-taking is managed and facilitated by the teachers. Children will be encouraged to:

- Make observations and discoveries;

- Satisfy their natural curiosities;
- Hike on trails and climb on logs;
- Appreciate the beauty of nature;
- Build an understanding of themselves, as they relate to others, and to the natural world;
- Experiment;
- Construct their own knowledge through pursuing their own interests, asking questions, and expressing themselves in multiple, complex, and interrelated ways.

Through play, children make meaning out of the world around them.

## **Role of the Teacher**

The Reggio teacher serves as a facilitator and researcher. This is true whether inside or outside. The role of the teacher in a Reggio classroom is a co-creator of knowledge instead of being the “expert” or the one who has all the “right answers”. They use Socratic method by discovering alongside the children, asking questions, making observations, modeling curiosity, etc. The teacher challenges children to think deeply providing the building blocks for greater cognitive functioning. To nurture an emergent learning environment, teachers shift their emphasis from planning to observation and reflection closely watching the children and intervening with open-ended invitations or “provocations”. There is a loose schedule and/or structure, and rituals that are established by the group, but teachers have liberty to allow the group time and space to follow their interests in an intentional manner. Teachers help children make connections with the natural world, helping to inspire a love of nature, foster an environmental ethic, and encourage a caring attitude that will last into adulthood.

## **A Typical Day**

While every day unfolds differently based on the group dynamic of children and teachers present, their interests, the weather conditions, the seasons, and the various loose parts found or introduced, children will settle into the day through free play and exploration either inside or outside of the yurt. From there, a morning meeting will take place before heading out into the woods for a day of exploring the *Fallen Down Forest*, *Ice World*, making fairy houses, pulling or dragging logs to make a bigger structure, climbing, balancing, working in the mud kitchen or tinkering area, or using the zipline. Most days, the group will come back to *Base Camp* for lunch under the hutch, perhaps ending at the stump circle by the yurt sharing their *Rose and Thorn* of the day. Children will utilize the *Art Shed*, perhaps participate in some dramatic play, acting out a story, finding their *sit spot* for some reflective journaling, or spend some time building forts together. If a child stays for rest, they will have a quiet time inside on their mats or in hammocks hanging from the trees.

We ask that children be dropped off and picked up on time. If there is a plan to come late or pick up early, please check in with the teachers and/or the office ahead of time for planning purposes.

## **Enrollment**

Families can enroll in the *Branching Out* class on a first-come, first-served basis during the enrollment period at the beginning of March. Some basic criteria are used by teachers and administration to determine readiness and ensure safety for all. Children must be able to follow directions, transition and use the potty independently (or with little support), and demonstrate an ability to stay with the group. There is a 6-week trial period and if teachers or parents feel as if it is not a good fit, a reassessment about the child’s readiness for the program will

take place. If you have a question about whether your child is ready, please check in with the teachers for some guidance.

## Gear

In order to participate in the Branching Out class, the following gear will be necessary. If you need assistance procuring any of these items, please let either a teacher or administrator know, and we can help. Generally speaking, your child will need:

1. **Insulation:** Natural fabrics such as wool or silk work well as an inner layer, as well as fleece. The key for this layer is to wick moisture away from the skin and insulate the skin with a breathable layer to keep them warm
2. **Middle Layer:** This is another insulation layer that creates 'dead-air space' between your child's skin and the elements. This airspace helps in keeping your child warm. Wool sweaters (Merino wool is exceptionally warm and soft on sensitive skin) and fleece tend to work well.
3. **Outer Shell:** Waterproof and windproof, as well as breathable.

## Fall

- Rain gear (waterproof boots, pants, jacket)
- Sneakers for running (please no open toe shoes)
- Warm Jacket (fleece or other breathable fabric is ideal)
- Bug jacket (net)

## Winter

- Winter hat (must cover ears and stay on head)
- Balaclava or neck gator (no scarves)
- Two pairs of warm, waterproof mittens
- One warm, waterproof snowsuit
- One warm, waterproof boots
- Wool socks
- Three base layers: thermal shirt and pants, middle layer, wool/fleece sweater (cotton should not be used in cold weather conditions)

## Spring

- Rain gear (waterproof boots, pants, jacket), with extra insulation on colder days
- Sneakers for running (please no open toe shoes)
- Sun Hat (for warmer months)
- Warmer sweater or jacket for colder days
- Bug jacket (net)

Every day your child will also need the following items:

- Backpack
- Water Bottle
- Lunch and snack (two snacks if staying all day)
- Two extra changes of clothing (including underwear and socks)

## Food

Please pack a healthy, substantial, and not too messy lunch and snack for your child. We find that being outside for a longer period of time makes children both tired and hungry! There is no running water in the yurt or woods, so we ask that whatever food you pack is relatively easy to clean up. In the colder months teachers will prepare a hearty, warm snack such as oatmeal for the group and may ask families to donate or contribute ingredients for that.

Some food suggestions are:

- Cheese and crackers
- Sandwiches (meat, cheese, sun butter)
- Pasta salad
- Mac-n-cheese
- Thermos with *thick* soup or pasta
- Fresh fruit cut up
- Bars w/out nuts

Some foods to avoid:

- Nuts
- Fruit cups
- Pouches of yogurt or apple sauce
- Sugary foods attract bees and should be avoided, generally

## Health and Safety

- DHHS licensing has approved the *Branching Out* classroom. We will follow the same **illness policy** found in the *Family Handbook* for all of our programming (found on the website [www.peopleplacecoop.org](http://www.peopleplacecoop.org) in the *Parent Portal*). Please keep your child home if they are not ready to spend most of the day outside. If your child develops symptoms throughout the day, you will be called to pick them up.
- Airpots with warm, soapy water are provided for handwashing. Hand sanitizer is also used to cut down on germs. Sunscreen and/or bug repellent should be applied in the morning at or before drop off by parents.
- Parents are asked to help with general clean-up of the property and the school is responsible for taking care of any hazardous conditions that may arise.
- Daily tick checks are suggested at pick up.
- There is a general understanding that at Peopleplace we encourage healthy risk-taking, as we know how important that is to the learning and development of a confident child. Teachers are constantly assessing what is a risk vs hazard and will intervene and stop an activity or behavior if they feel it is unsafe for anyone. Ground rules and guidelines are established at the beginning of the year in the *Branching Out* class as a group to make expectations clear and keep everyone safe.
- Teachers will have walkie-talkies and phones and carry a first-aid kit with emergency contacts for each child with them at all times in case of an emergency. Parents and/or emergency personnel will be contacted if an incident arises. An incident report will be filled out and signed by the teacher and parent and kept in the child's file.

- The teachers may decide to introduce “having a fire in the fire pit” into the curriculum depending on the group, season, and whether they feel it is safe. There is scaffolding involved in making sure children understand the rules around doing this safely. Other activities such as whittling may also be introduced.
- We ask that families sign a waiver acknowledging the understanding that there is a risk involved in being *Beyond the Fence*.

## **Parent Communication**

Parents will have the opportunity to check in with teachers about any pertinent information but for an extended conversation, we ask that you make arrangements ahead of time. Teachers will post on Remini, send out emails with information that they feel is important to relay. During the two, more formal, parent/teacher check-in meetings in the Spring and Fall, a report or update about how the Branching Out class is going will be discussed.

## **Accessibility**

It is one of the primary goals of Peopleplace to make all of the programming 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 at Peopleplace by making our site physically accessible for everyone, and our community safe and welcoming. The yurt is wheelchair accessible, and the composting toilet is ADA approved. The trails would require some different-type equipment and/or surface to accommodate a wheelchair. This stands as a future goal we hope to achieve. The cost of the *Branching Out* program is the same as the inside-the-fence classes in order to make equity a priority. Fundraising is done throughout the year and funds are available to those who need it to attend any of our programs. In the event that a child needs more support to attend any of our programs, every effort will be made to seek out and acquire that support. The health and safety of all participants is of the utmost priority. (*see Family Handbook for more information on this*)

## **Environmental Sustainability**

Peopleplace will make it a priority to conduct ongoing ecological impact assessments of our presence in the woods, taking into account such factors such as denudation/erosion, compaction, pollution, and the corruption/introduction of species. We will establish a plan for both monitoring, management, and limitation of our potential negative impact and for the positive development and improvement of the ecology of our site.

## **General Commitment**

Peopleplace has made a commitment to ensuring that our spaces are safe, inspiring, and well-maintained. And that our teachers are qualified and trained, using best practices with young children. We ask that families do what they can to help us provide the best possible environment and experience for your child. This means staying informed, communicating with us about anything relevant, sending your child ready for their day, and helping with upkeep of our buildings, land, and structures. Peopleplace remains a leader in Early Childhood Educational practices in the state of Maine, and we work hard to stay progressive providing a cutting-edge pedagogical approach. Thank you, our families, for your continued efforts and support in partnering with us on this incredibly rewarding journey.

## **A few excerpts from *Barefoot and Balanced* by Angela Hanscom**

*The outdoors offers limitless potential to young children. It becomes a place where they can go to relax their mind, to be inspired, and to dive deep into a world of imagination. It's a place where they can design, create, and explore. The possibilities are endless. Time and time again, studies show that when children have free play outdoors, they become better problem solvers and their creativity is enhanced.* - (Hanscom, 2016, pg. 93)

*Those who play outdoors have a wider range of developmental benefits: they tend to be more creative, learn how to regulate emotions more efficiently, use imaginative play more frequently, become interested in working with friends toward a common goal, create their own rules, and start to learn how to work out problems without needing constant reassurance from adults.* - (Hanscom, 2016, pg. 170)

### *What Child-Driven Play Looks Like*

*Children are naturally curious and seek out opportunities to make sense of the world. When children are left to their own devices, they experiment with their surroundings, take risks, make mistakes, and then learn from the mistakes. They problem solve, negotiate, imagine, and investigate. Children learn an immense amount of information through free play. Our children will be well served if we offer them the freedom to play on their own, to learn through making mistakes, and to come to their own conclusions about the world around them. This process will help prepare them for life while improving their cognitive, social-emotional, and physical skills at the same time.* - (Hanscom 2016, pg. 123).

## **And from Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* – *Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder***

*A widening circle of researchers believes that the loss of natural habitat, or the disconnection from nature even when it is available, has enormous implications for human health and child development. They say the quality of exposure to nature affects our health at an almost cellular level.* - (Louv, 2006, pg. 43)

*Most of all, children need adults who understand the relationship between boredom and creativity, adults willing to spend time in nature with kids, adults willing to set the stage so that kids can create their own play and enter nature through their own imaginations.* - (Louv, 2006, pg. 169)