



Thickets
Family Handbook
2022-23

Revised August 4, 2022

Welcome to *Thickets*, a learning community for ages 5 - 8 in Montpelier. Centrally located, we are able to take advantage of all that the forests and parks and city of Montpelier have to offer. Although we begin each morning in Hubbard Park, each day evolves differently and is created collectively as the children decide where to go and how to spend their time.

Thickets is a 1, 2 or 3-day mostly outdoor program that can complement your homeschooling or other part-time schooling efforts.

Please read through this handbook as you get ready to enroll your child. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for choosing Thickets! I look forward to sharing adventures and learning with your child.

Sincerely,

Mia

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Table of Contents

Organizational Information

About Me
Philosophy
Curriculum
Daily Rhythm
Child Safety in the Field
Guidance
Communication & Family Partnership

Enrollment and Financial Information

Enrollment Checklist
Tuition

Logistical Information

Calendar
Weather Cancellation Policy
Attendance
Health and Safety
Gear List
Rest Time

Organizational Information

About Me

It was a mid-life return to school that inspired me to become a teacher. The self-designed curriculum at Goddard College allowed me to ask and find the answers to my own questions: a rare gift in the world of academia, and it is this gift that I now strive to share with young children. Whether 4 years old or 40, there is tremendous power and joy in being allowed to learn what we *need* to learn.

My teaching journey so far has taken me into public, Waldorf, progressive and most significantly, nature-based schools. After 20 or so years of working outdoors as a farmer and gardener, teaching outdoors is a natural fit for me and where I believe I am most successful as an educator.

I earned my ECE license in 2019.

I am a registered family childcare home provider.

Philosophy

At the heart of Thickets, is the belief that learning is natural (it's happening all the time) and that people learn best when they can make their own choices. Children are people! Within our democratically run, ever evolving little community, grounded in both forest and city, children are trusted to direct their own learning. An organic collaboration between a group of humans and a place, in many ways, Thickets is its own being, an organism that, like its individual members, keeps growing and changing.

Through our daily play and interactions with the woods, in all kinds of weather, the children develop and nurture an awareness and connection to nature. *Knowing* (not just knowing about) the soil and trees, water and animals, weather and seasons, being in a relationship with a place, inspires love and caring...and ultimately,

promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility. Seeing, recognizing, feeling and knowing are all integrated. Thickets children are out in the world.

The medium is the message

Within the work (and play!) of building relationships with our physical community, is the crucial and ongoing work of building relationships with each other. In a non-coercive, self-directed environment, the children experience the challenge of developing agency or self-responsibility *within* collective responsibility, within the natural constraints of community. Each day is filled with debate, negotiation, critical thinking, evaluation and compromise as they navigate and enjoy individual and group pursuits. At Thickets, learning is relevant and embedded in the process of school life, rather than delivered discretely as “content”. Our tiny 6-person community serves as an ideal microcosm of society, a venue for practicing real life skills.

As an educator, I am committed to meeting children *where they are*. As natural learners, children are already intuitively working on what they need for their own growth and wellbeing. My role is to facilitate this learning by providing a rich, stimulating environment – whether woods, city or workshop; carefully timed questions and challenges to deepen inquiry; tools and materials, and above all, the love and friendship that is the basis of all learning.



Curriculum

Our forest classroom is a 5-minute walk up the street in Hubbard Park. This is where we spend the majority of our time. East facing, a mix of hardwood and softwood, flat and steep terrain, with water and open spaces as well, it is an ideal base for our play and explorations. As the year progresses and the children become more confident and cohesive as a group, we venture out into Montpelier and explore other local spaces like the statehouse, Blanchard Park and Sabin's Pasture. As we follow our interests and our curiosity, the children's understanding of place widens to encompass both sides of the North Branch River, and the other hills that define the valley that is Montpelier.

Afternoons generally bring us back to the house for inside or outside work and play and opportunity for quite time. Afternoon pursuits can include, among other things, woodworking, clay, painting and drawing, baking and cooking over an outdoor fire, bookmaking and storytelling/acting, dramatic play, reading...

When children are free and trusted to direct their own learning, critical thinking, creativity, curiosity, and problem-solving skills flourish and they begin the life-long

process of knowing themselves, as learners, as people. This will support them during their school years and all the way through adulthood.

Below are some examples of long-term explorations and projects from 2020-22. Please check out the blog <https://thickets.weebly.com/> for a photo journey of our year.

- Pond life study: creating and taking care of our own aquarium
- Natural clay: finding local sources and exploring and enjoying its properties
- Baba Yaga: stories and play
- Boat building: using wood and corks and dowels as well as natural objects
- Robots: making them, being them, reading about them
- Buying, selling and trading: making handcrafted items to sell to neighbors, exploring value, barter, donation
- Bookmaking
- Democracy: from debate and activism to voting and lawmaking; practicing our own as well as observing at the statehouse

As mentioned above, so much of the learning is integrated into the flow of the day, arising in rich conversation or between the lines, invisible, unremarked. When children are happy and busy, they are learning and growing.



Daily Rhythm

8:30 - 9:00am Arrival and into the woods (circle and snack mid-morning)

12:00 - 1:00pm Lunch and quiet time at the house (outside on porch weather permitting) with a story or book.

1:15 - 3:00pm Play/projects

3:30pm Pick up

Child Safety in the Field

Safety practices are necessarily embedded in an outdoor curriculum. Children learn how to assess risk in all new situations and evaluate their choices for safety on an ongoing basis as they move through the woods. Understanding that there is usually some level of risk in active play, the children practice discerning between healthy risk-taking that can be thoughtfully and strategically managed versus true hazards which are either unknown (and thus can't be managed) or just inherently unsafe. Cultivating this self-responsibility and awareness in children is the most powerful (and transferable) way to truly keep them safe.

Rough and Tumble Play

The same principle of self-responsibility applies to rough and tumble play, which can range from wrestling to chase games to snowball fights. Big body play is intrinsic to early childhood and we embrace it at Thickets. The skillful interpersonal work it requires to be successful (meaning, everybody is having fun), the sensitivity to another person's body language, the negotiation and listening are all vital early practice for developing healthy relationships and thriving in a community.

Guidance/Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning, the development of self-awareness and the ability to understand and manage emotions, is the foundation for all other learning. Like safety, social-emotional development is embedded in everything that we do. After all, our explorations and projects spin out of our relationships with each other, out of the little community we create together. Learning is primarily a social endeavor!

Specifically, I support children with conflict resolution by offering the language (if needed) to help them articulate their concerns and feelings to a friend, by holding a space and allowing everybody to be heard, and often by honoring a child's need for a little time and reflection before a conflict can be resolved. Asking for resolution in the moment, when feelings are high, is an unreasonable expectation as learning can only happen when we feel calm and safe.

Council, when we sit down together and work through a conflict with the help of the whole group, can be initiated at anytime. The children are empowered, with my support to use this forum as a restorative, not punitive process.

Communication & Family Partnership

Thickets is a partnership with you, the families. Building respectful, reciprocal relationships and committing to open, ongoing dialogue is the best way for us to support your child through the year. I encourage you to reach out with questions or concerns at any time. You, the families, are the experts on your children and I hope to support you in any way that I can. Your child's home life has a profound influence on her/his experience at Thickets. Not acknowledging this would be like trying to understand life in a tide pool without considering the ocean!

As another adult in your child's life, my work (and my great pleasure) is to offer my friendship, respect, curiosity and most importantly, my attention. Let's work together to support your child's growth and development!

Regular ways to be involved in Thickets include:

- Join us! You are welcome anytime to spend a day, or part of a day with your child.
- Share skills or interests or holiday traditions
- Parent-teacher conferences (November and April, and as needed)
- Welcome potluck
- Special celebrations
- End of year celebration

Ongoing communication channels:

- Daily verbal check-ins at drop-off and pick-up
- Phone calls and email communication, including weekly update sharing activities and events from the week (blog).

Enrollment & Financial Information

Enrollment Checklist

Before leaving your child at Thickets, I must have the following:

- Enrollment form
- Deposit
- Immunization/exemption forms
- Documentation of a current well-child checkup
- General permission form
- Handbook acknowledgement

Tuition

Thickets tuition for 2022-23 is as follows:

- 1 day/week: \$175 per month
- 2 days/week: \$351 per month
- 3 days/week: \$526 per month

The flat monthly rate is based on a 39-week school year (e.g. \$45 per day x 3 days per week = \$135 per week x 39 weeks = \$5265 per year/10 billing months = \$526).

Holidays, snow days and months with fewer school days have been figured into the monthly tuition charge and do not change the tuition rate (e.g. September and June). No credit will be given for student absences.

The school year runs from September 12, 2022 to June 14, 2023.

Tuition is billed on the 1st and due by the 7th of each month (September – June). There is a \$15 late fee for each week overdue.

A \$250 enrollment deposit will be applied toward the first month (or first and second month's) tuition.

Sick Days

I may take up to 5 paid sick/personal days per year. If additional days are needed then payment will not be expected from families.

Withdrawal

If, for any reason, you need to withdraw your child from the program, I will do my best to promptly fill your child's spot. You will be responsible for one month's tuition past the withdrawal date unless I am able to fill the space sooner.

Logistical Information

Calendar

Thickets runs from 8:30am – 3:30pm, Monday – Wednesday.

9/12 First day

11/17 – 11/18 Parent conferences

11/21 - 11/23 Thanksgiving break

12/27 – 12/29 Winter break

2/26 – 2/28 Winter break

4/20 – 4/21 Parent conferences

4/24 – 4/26 Spring break

5/29 Memorial Day

6/14 Last day

Weather Cancellation Policy

I will notify you by email if we need to close or delay because of bad weather. You can also text or call me at 249-6652 (cell) or 229-4134.

Attendance

If your child will be absent from school for any reason, please text, email or call me by 8:00am.

Drop Off and Pick Up

In Hubbard Park: Please park at the pond at the east entrance to the park (Parkway or Winter St). Walk with your child to the outdoor classroom (there is a small path from the pond into the spruce woods).

At the house: Pick up is always at the house. You may park parallel to the house if there is a spot, otherwise please park on Spring St so we don't block the neighbors.

Health and Safety

Illness

Parents/guardians will be asked to pick up their children from school or keep them home with any of the following symptoms:

- Temperature over 100.4 F (must be fever-free for 24 hours before returning to school)
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhea
- Shortness of breath
- Cough or sore throat
- Chills, fatigue or body aches
- Runny nose/cold symptoms not explained by seasonal allergies (health care provider can help make this determination)
- Loss of taste or smell
- Pink-eye

Also, if your child or *anyone in your family* has come into close contact in the last 14 days with a person who has COVID-19 (a close contact is someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for at least 15 minutes over a 24 hour period), please notify me immediately and *do not come to school*.

In the event that a student or immediate family member has been exposed and/or is showing symptoms, Thickets will immediately close for 48 hours while test results come back. If anyone tests positive, I will work with the VT Department of Health to make a temporary closure plan. Closure due in any way to COVID will be paid.

We will follow current Covid guidance on mask-wearing, which at this time means masks are required indoors and optional outdoors. Stay tuned.

Emergency Plan

In the event of an accident or injury requiring emergency services, 911 will be called prior to calling a parent/guardian. Please read the Emergency Response Plan attached to this Handbook.

Gear List – What to Bring

We will spend the larger portion of each day outside, fall, winter and spring (only extreme weather will keep us in). Having the right gear for the weather and time of year is the key to a happy child and a successful school day! Below are recommendations. Generally, fabrics that dry out quickly are preferable (synthetic, wool) but cotton t-shirts and socks are ok at either end of the season. Insulated snow boots are a must for winter. Bogs are generally not warm enough for real winter weather.

Please check in with me if you have any questions.

Always check the weather forecast in the morning and help your child dress appropriately for the day. This often means layers, as temperatures can rise dramatically between 8:30 and 12.

The fall/spring backpack:

Complete change of clothes packed in plastic bag

Rain pants

Rain coat if forecast signifies

Second set of shoes (sneakers and close-toed water shoes recommended – or rain boots, depending on weather)

Sun hat

Water bottle
Snack and lunch (no glass, please)

The winter backpack:

Complete change of clothes packed in plastic bag (including long underwear)
Rain pants and jacket (as needed for layering in wet snow conditions - winter gear is often not sufficiently water repellent)
Insulated snow pants (with bibs) and jacket
Hat (wool or fleece)
2 pairs of mittens (waterproof!)
Neck warmer
Water bottle
Snack and lunch

If sunscreen or insect repellent is necessary, please apply them to your child in the morning. If your child is old enough to handle these on their own, they may keep them in their backpack. Otherwise they can be kept at Thickets (in a bag with their name on it).

Pooping in the Woods

We have two options for handling this inevitable event:

1. Use the outhouse at the old shelter (10 minute walk). This would mean that we all go, and it could give us an excuse to play in a different area for the rest of the morning if we wanted to.
2. Poop in the woods and bag it for proper disposal.

Rest Time

Quiet time after lunch is encouraged and can involve resting, reading, drawing, legos or any activity that is quiet and doesn't disrupt others.

Food

Active bodies need lots of fuel! Please pack healthy, protein-rich food for morning and afternoon snacks and lunch.



For any concerns or questions, you can call the CDD licensor on duty at: VT Child Care Consumer Line 1-800-649-2642

Acknowledgement:

I have read the Handbook and the Emergency Response Plan.

Parent/guardian printed name: _____

Parent/guardian
signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent/guardian printed name: _____

Parent/guardian
signature: _____ Date: _____