Our Mission

The Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center, established in 1946, is a non-profit organization dedicated to fulfilling its mission:

To inspire an understanding of the natural world and ourselves as part of it – past, present and future.

We are a combination wildlife sanctuary, natural history museum and educational facility. The Center features exhibits highlighting the habitats and wildlife of southeastern Connecticut, as well as over eight miles of trails that wind through a beautiful 400-acre wooded preserve, including the recently acquired Coogan Farm property.

Through exhibits of Eastern Connecticut wildlife habitats, educational classes and outreach programs, we seek to educate visitors of all ages about the unique interrelationships of animals, plants and natural resources. The DPNC Preschool was established in January 2006 to expand our popular early childhood programs using the European “nature-based” model which understands that children learn best through play and direct exploration in nature.

Our Philosophy

The DPNC Preschool’s early childhood education through nature-based program closely aligns with our mission and offers a unique opportunity for children to grow in nature.

Nature plays a vital role in the emotional, social and cognitive development of young children. Childhood experiences in nature help stimulate curiosity and interest in the world around us, and help us grow intellectually in our desire to better understand the world and our place in it. DPNC’s 400-acre sanctuary serves as a living classroom for our preschool. It is an ideal place for children to learn through direct experience and play. Our children spend time outdoors everyday, where they can fully engage all their senses in a safe and nurturing environment.

Children’s free expression in the natural environment allows for the development of a lifetime of skills. By building nature forts and fairy houses children learn creative expression, problem solving and spatial awareness. By hiking on trails, climbing over logs and hopping off rocks, children develop balance, strength and coordination. By handling and observing plants and animals, children learn empathy and respect for others.

Curriculum

Our curriculum is a comprehensive blend of environmental education and play-based standards and is deeply rooted in the principles of the Montessori method. We use nature as our guide to inspire curiosity and learning in science, art, music, math, literacy, and dramatic play. We address each child’s individual development with an interesting hands-on program that also fosters a love of the natural world. Each nature-based theme follows the seasons and is paired with academic concepts. Children have time each day for unstructured play in nature balanced with academic activities that prepare them for kindergarten.
Our Goals

Our preschool aims to foster the growth of whole, well-rounded, happy children, and to inspire an appreciation for the natural world and a lifetime environmental ethic. To accomplish this, we will provide children with daily opportunities to develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically. We also continually strive to achieve the following goals that align with the Connecticut Framework for Preschool Curricular benchmarks:

- To allow each child the ability to establish a sense of confidence, responsibility, self-discipline and social grace through experiences in the natural world, the classroom and with other children.
- To instill a deep sense of wonder and a desire for self-directed learning through thought-provoking, interesting and meaningful outdoor experiences.
- To cultivate the physical and mental health of the child by providing opportunities to develop motor skills, healthy eating habits and self-help skills in a safe, secure, developmentally appropriate and challenging atmosphere.
- To create an environment where children are given experiences that will inspire their curiosity and naturally improve their ability to question, reason and recall new things.

The Program

The Nature Center Preschool provides an integrated environmental education curriculum for mixed age groups of children from 3 to 5 years old.

Normal Preschool hours 8:30am to 12:30pm

Children may attend a two-day program on Tuesday and Thursday, a three-day program on Monday, Wednesday and Friday or a full, five-day program.

Our Daily Schedule

8:30 Welcome to School: Teachers greet children outside (weather permitting). Children have free choice time exploring academic materials, games and themed activities while teachers present new concepts and work with individual children. Children greet friends and observe animals while making a gentle transition from home to school.

9:30 Circle Time: Each morning music and song call children to circle time. We gather to discuss our nature theme of the week and learn through songs, finger plays, stories, puppetry and exploration of related natural materials.

10:00 Snack Time: (Outside whenever possible) Children are provided with a healthy and hearty snack. Children bring their own water bottle each day.

10:45 Hiking Time: We make time for a hike and unstructured free play outside every day. We run, play, explore, observe, and engage our senses in nature utilizing our miles of trails!

12:00-12:30pm Pick-Up Time: Parents may pick their children up between these times. Children will return to the playground area for pick up time, unless the weather drives us inside.
Applications are accepted at any time. Applications are maintained on a waitlist for the year of projected entry. Enrollment in the preschool program is a benefit of family membership. Upon acceptance, a non-refundable deposit will become due. $300 for current members, $365 for non members. Applicants should be aware that spaces at the preschool are limited and are filled on a first-come, first-serve basis. Applying to the program does not guarantee your child a spot in the program.

Enrollment

Children must turn 3 years of age on or before December 31st in order to be admitted to the program in September. For admission at any other time the child must have passed their 3rd birthday. Children must be toilet trained and self-sufficient. Every child is required to have a physical (within one year) and a corresponding health record, signed and dated by his/her pediatrician. In addition to tuition, each family must maintain a current Nature Center membership at the family level.

Enrollment for returning students and their siblings begins in February. Returning children have first priority for enrollment each year, followed by siblings of DPNC preschool students. New student enrollment begins in March and is processed on a first come first served basis, starting with children on our wait list, with an effort made to create a balance of genders and ages in each class. In order to maintain continuity in the classroom new student enrollment for the current year will end in March.
**Tuition**

**Program Choices (please check one)**

*Tuesday-Thursday*
 Regular Program 8:30-12:30  
Annual Tuition: $2925

*Monday-Wednesday-Friday*
 Regular Program 8:30-12:30  
Annual Tuition: $4320

*Monday through Friday*
 Regular Program 8:30-12:30  
Annual Tuition: $7200

1. Upon notification of placement in the program a **$300 non-refundable enrollment fee** for current members and **$365 non-refundable enrollment fee** for non members is required. Preschool is a benefit of family membership.

2. Tuition is divided by nine. Invoices are distributed on the first of each month and payments will be due on the fifteenth of each month. The first installment is due on August 15th. The remaining eight payments will be due on the 15th of each month from September through March.

3. Payment in full is also accepted at any time. If a student’s tuition installment has not been paid by the end of the month in which it is due, that student may not attend school, and another child may be admitted to fill the vacancy.

4. Both the parents of enrolled children and the Nature Center reserve the right to remove a child from the program if the arrangements are not satisfactory. If withdrawal or dismissal is necessary, a one-month notice is required and tuition will be due during this time. If one-month notification is not given then one ninth of the annual tuition will be due for each month in which your child has attended school and for the following month. Any partial month counts as a whole month. The **$300 enrollment fee is not refundable in the event of withdrawal from the program.**

5. There are no discounts, refunds, or other allowances for absence, illness, vacation, holidays, snow day or any other reason.

**Withdrawal**

Both the parents of enrolled children and the Nature Center reserve the right to remove a child from the program if the arrangements are not satisfactory. If withdrawal or dismissal is necessary, a one-month notice will be required/provided and tuition will be due during this time. If one-month notification is not given, then one ninth of the annual tuition will be due for each month in which your child has attended school and for the following month. Any partial month counts as a whole month. If you have prepaid more than is due, the balance will be refunded.
**Arrivals and Departures**

**Drop-Off:** Arrival time is between 8:30-9:00am  
**Pick-up:** Pick up is between 12:00 and 12:30pm

We have provided drop-off and pick-up time “windows” to allow flexibility for your schedule and to allow your child time to acclimate to the classroom. *Please respect the drop off period.* Arrivals before 8:30am prevent teachers from preparing properly for the day and arrivals after 9:00am may prevent the group from moving into the next activity.

An adult must accompany your child to and from the classroom every day and wait until their temperature has been checked and they are signed in.

**Do not idle your car during pick up or drop off.** In accordance with CT State Law and for the health and safety of our children and environment, idling of cars is prohibited.

Your child looks forward to your return; therefore, children should be picked up promptly by or before the 12:30 pm closing time. We usually arrive back from our hike at 12:00pm. Please let us know if you will need to pick your child up early.

If a child has not been picked up within 15 minutes of the designated closing time, a staff person will:

1. Call the child’s parents or legal guardian at the work and home phone numbers.
2. If they cannot be reached the staff will call the emergency and/or alternate contacts listed on the emergency cards.
3. If every effort to reach caregivers has been made and the child has not been picked up, the Stonington Police may be called to assist.

*Under no circumstances will a child be released to anyone other than those adults listed on the “permission to release” form without prior approval from the child’s guardian.*

**School Closing**

If the weather is questionable, please check your email for special announcements. The Nature Center Preschool will loosely follow the Stonington Public School for emergency delays and cancellations for the 20-21 season. In the event of inclement weather, we will close if the Stonington Public Schools close. We do not follow the Stonington Public school schedule for early closings or for teacher professional development days. The Nature Center Preschool will make independent decisions regarding these conditions. Keep in mind that school closings may arise for Covid-19 reasons. Parents will be contacted by phone as soon as possible in the event of an early dismissal. *School days cancelled due to inclement weather will not be made up at the end of the year due to inclement weather and Covid-19.*

- **1 hour delay:** The preschool will open at 9:30
- **90 min delay:** The preschool will open at 10:00
Due to our Covid 19 protocols, we have temporarily suspended our typical family and volunteer traditions. We are eager to return to these when it is deemed safe. For now, only teachers and children are allowed in the program.

**First Day of School:** The beginning of the school year can be challenging for children separating from their parents for the first time. We have found that short and quick goodbyes work the best for most children. Prolonged departures and unexpected returns escalate the child’s anxiety about the impending separation and confuse and upset other children who are not with their parents. Additional adults in the classroom can also be intimidating to the children as they work to become familiar with their surroundings.

We recommend starting a drop-off and pick-up routine. Once the morning routine is complete a prompt departure is often the easiest on the child. Most children recover within a few minutes of the parent's departure. Please know that we will be working our hardest to find the appropriate response to your child if they are sad about separating. We find some children like to be held, some like to sit and watch the class, and some like to be distracted by observing an animal. We expect this as a natural part of the preschool experience for many children and find this can be an evolving process throughout the day or first few weeks of the year.

Please know that consistency, routine, and a positive attitude are incredibly important. If you are worried about saying goodbye, then your child will be too. We encourage parents who are worried about their children to call us throughout the day to check on their child's progress. We want all of our children to be happy at school and we will contact you if your child can not be consoled.

**Communication**

Good communication between parents and the school will ensure that our program meets your expectations and the needs of your child. Weekly themes and activities are posted on the nature easel by the playground entrance. Many updates, summaries and reminders will be sent via email. Please let us know if there is an additional caregiver you would like included in our emails.

**Contacting us during the school day:** If for some reason you need to contact us during the school day you may call the preschool at 860-980-3704 and speak to us directly or leave a message. If you have a need to contact us immediately and we are not in the building, you can contact the main desk at DPNC at 860-536-1216 and the staff will contact us on the trail

**Attendance:** Please call the Nature Center Preschool at 860-980-3704 to let us know if your child will be absent or late for any reason or email us at preschool@dpnc.org

**Photographs:** We share photographs of the children in our program via our email updates with parents and in our shared google photo album. Because some parents have chosen not to allow use of the photos beyond this, we request that parents do not post photos from our email updates to social media or web-based sites. We also use photos of children in our classroom who have signed photo releases on file for school and Nature Center based publications and web-based advertising, including the DPNC blog. Preferences can be indicated on your child’s enrollment form.
Conferences: We encourage you to discuss any immediate questions or concerns you have with the teachers and director. In particular, we are always available for a quick ‘check-in’ at drop off or pick up to help us understand how your child may be feeling and adjusting that day. In order to ensure the safety of the children and allow us to offer our full attention to their needs, appointments for detailed discussions should be scheduled. We are happy to schedule time to talk with you at the end of the school day, or any other time that proves convenient for you.

In addition to our daily interactions, we schedule school-wide conferences in the winter. Our teachers prepare the classroom to meet each child’s needs and we continually assess this as the school year progresses. During our conferences we will review your child’s assessment and progress with you. Many parents also find this a good opportunity to discuss their child’s readiness for Kindergarten.

The Cycle of our Year

The Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center is non-denominational. Our yearly calendar and curriculum will focus on seasonal changes that occur in nature. Through crafts, games, our outdoor classroom and other activities we will highlight the Earth’s cycles as they occur throughout the year.

Birthdays

Birthdays are a wonderful and special time for children. We celebrate each child’s birthday by providing a special snack in our class and acknowledging the child with a “Walk Around the Sun”. As your child’s birthday approaches we will distribute a form which you can fill out to help us honor your child’s life during their celebration. Unfortunately because of Covid-19 protocols, birthday celebrations will be shared in our photo album rather than in person.

What to wear

Our program encourages children to develop a comfortable and healthy relationship with nature. We spend most of our time outside, every day, year round. We expect the children to get dirty as a natural part of their explorations, therefore your child should wear seasonally appropriate, washable, play clothes at all times. In winter your child should have a hat, waterproof mittens, warm jacket, boots and snow pants. A waterproof raincoat with a hood and boots should be provided for rainy days. Please do not bring umbrellas. In the warmer months, bug spray/sunscreen should be applied outside before entering the building or at home before arriving at school. Sandals, flip-flops and other slip on shoes are not appropriate for outdoor exploration. Closed shoes should be worn at all times. We have extra clothing to lend.

Please bring an extra change of clothes to leave in your child’s cubby and a pair of slippers to wear indoors.
What to bring

Your child may bring special treasures, books, found objects and any other nature oriented materials to share with the class. Please do not allow your child to bring toys or other objects except on specified days.

Snacks

The Nature Center will provide a snack and can refill water bottles as needed. Children will have access to water at all times. We will provide wholesome, healthy snacks, which are low in sugar and organically produced whenever possible. Candy and soda will not be permitted. Snack schedules will be posted regularly. Please inform the Director of any suspected or known food allergy your child may have.

Due to life threatening food allergies in our student population, we ask that you do not bring food into the preschool at any time.

Health Policies

In order to provide for the health and comfort of all children and staff involved in the program, parents will be contacted to pick their child up from school if he/she exhibits any of the following conditions:

* Fever, vomiting or diarrhea
* Suspicious rashes
* Lesions or wounds with bleeding or oozing
* Conjunctivitis
* Lice or other infestation
* Constant coughing or runny nose
* Conditions requiring one-on-one care
* Any contagious illnesses reportable to D.P.H.

The child may return to school after illness if they meet the following conditions:

* No fever, vomiting or diarrhea for 24 hours.
* Taking of antibiotic medication for contagious infection for 24 hours prior to return.
* Free of open, oozing skin conditions.
* Appropriate treatment of infestations.
* In the event of a reportable contagious disease, we will require a note from a healthcare provider stating that the child is no longer contagious.

Most importantly, your child should feel well enough to participate in all activities, including outdoor time.
Covid-19 Addendum

Please see the latest information


Health Forms:
The State of Connecticut requires every child attending preschool, to have an up to date health form on file at all times. Your child's physical expires one year from the date of the physical. If this is during the school year we will need an updated form at that time.

You should request a health form from your doctor every time your child has a physical. Most physicians will have them on file but they can also be found online at the CT Department of Public Health. Search for “Early Childhood Health Assessment Record”. An Early Childhood Health Record must have the following:

Page #1: This is for the parent to fill out and sign at the bottom.

Page #2: This is the physical portion which must be filled out completely and signed by your physician.

Page #3: Immunization records. Your doctor may give you a print out which can be attached.

You will need the physical for any drop-off styles programs your child attends. Please do not give us your only copy! We recommend making several copies and keeping them in a file at home.

FLU SHOTS: The State of CT requires all children to have a flu shot by December 31st of each year. We are required by law to exclude children after this date who do not have flu shots. If your child does not have a physical scheduled for a time when flu shots are being given you will need to make a separate appointment and get documentation from your doctor indicating that they have had their shot.

Medication

The Nature Center will provide medical care as permitted by Basic First Aid Certification. Emergency medications, Benadryl, “Epi-Pens”, and inhalers, will be administered as needed. Emergency medications must be given to the teacher in advance, with a completed medical authorization form and an individual action plan that is signed by the child's parent and physician. Please inform the Head Teacher of any known or suspected food allergy your child may have.

Accidents & Emergencies

Due to the active nature of our program minor accidents, bumps and bruises will occur. All staff members are trained in Basic First Aid and CPR. In the event of a minor injury your child will be treated with first aid and the incident will be documented and reported to the parent at the end of the day.

All staff members are trained and prepared to deal with first aid concerns. The staff will carry a first aid kit and cell phone and/or walkie-talkies to aid in communication in the event of an emergency while on the trails.

In the event of a medical emergency staff members will call an ambulance and then contact the child’s parents and doctor. Transportation to a hospital will not be delayed pending notification of guardians. If it is necessary to transport your child to the hospital, a staff member will remain with your child at all times.
Mandated Reporting

As a licensed preschool provider, the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center is obligated by law to report any suspected cases of child abuse and/or neglect to the State Department of Child and Families.

Discipline Policy

The Nature Center is committed to the health, safety and enjoyment of all of our students. Times will arise when discipline is necessary; when they do we always discipline in a logical and gentle manner with a focus on positive behavior. Approved methods for resolving conflicts include:

- Using positive guidance
- Setting clear limits
- Redirection to another activity
- Using natural and logical consequences in response to negative behavior

The teachers focus on preventing discipline problems and will continually model proper behavior for the children. The children will be given clear expectations as to how to behave within the classroom, with other children and with materials.

Occasionally, the need will arise to correct undesirable behavior in order to maintain a peaceful classroom. A child, who is having trouble focusing, is disruptive or otherwise interfering with the normal flow of the classroom will be encouraged to talk about their feelings. The teacher will make an attempt to have the child come up with solutions for resolving the issue causing the problem. If a child is continually disruptive or aggressive, attempts will be made to redirect the child to another suitable activity. They will be asked to choose an activity in another area and may be offered limited choices to refocus their attention if talking does not result in better self-control.

Children are sometimes asked to ‘take a break’ as a logical consequence for continually disruptive behavior. Break times are intended to allow the child to regain self-control. Children are asked to sit in a quiet area of the classroom. If necessary a teacher will remove the child from the group calmly and quietly. The child will be told why they have been removed from the group and allowed to sit quietly. Children are typically asked to take a break until they feel calm and told they may rejoin the group when they feel in control. If children are removed from the group by the teacher and asked to remain in a certain location they will be asked to sit for no longer than one (1) minute per age of the child. A timer may be provided to allow the child to self-regulate their break. The staff will continually supervise children during any disciplinary action. After the break the child will be reminded of the proper behavior and welcomed back into the group.

*Under no circumstances will teachers use physical contact, abusive or humiliating words to discipline a child. No child will be physically restrained unless it is necessary to protect the health and safety of the child or another child or adult.*
**Pauline Gaucher**  
Director/Preschool teacher  
Pauline has worked in the field as an early childhood professional since 1993, with an AS degree in Early Childhood Education and Special Education from Three Rivers Community College. Her past experiences include The Connecticut College Child Development Lab School, Bright Horizons Family Solutions/Pfizer Kids, and the Groton Public Schools. “As a native Mystic resident, I had the good fortune of growing up in these woods. As a preschool teacher most of my adult life, all roads on my journey have led me to the Nature Center and the opportunity to bring my two passions together; children and nature!”

**Marianne Goddard**  
Preschool teacher - Head Teacher  
Marianne has worked in the early childhood field for almost twenty years. She has an AS degree in Early Childhood Education from Tunxis Community College. Prior to joining the preschool she was a teacher at The Montessori Discovery School, St. Andrew’s Preschool and Happy Time Nursery School. Marianne started working at the nature center in 2006 as a summer camp counselor. She has also taught the Nature Center’s Chickadee and Eager Explorers programs. In 2015 Marianne joined the preschool staff and has recently moved into the role of Head Teacher. A few of her favorite activities are hiking and camping with her husband and two sons. Marianne resides in Stonington CT.

**Jerelyn Abicca-Smestad**  
Preschool teacher  
Jerelyn has her BFA from The Fashion Institute of Technology, NYC in Textile Design, and Elementary Education K-6 Certification from Keystone College. She has worked many years in the textile and design industry before becoming unsettled with the impact textiles had on the environment. Today she enjoys sharing her love for the natural world through art and teaching at the Preschool and various other programs at the Nature Center.

**Genevieve Kueter**  
Preschool teacher  
Genevieve has worked in early childhood education for over 20 years. She has a B.S. in elementary education and special education from Rhode Island College. She grew up in Westerly, RI and has been in Mystic for over 10 years. She has enjoyed working in Westerly Public Schools, Groton Public Schools, Noank Baptist Nursery School, and Bright Horizons Family Solutions/Pfizer Kids. Genevieve loves nature and was excited to join DPNC for summer camp in 2018 and was invited to stay on during the school year. She taught the Eager Explorers program, and joined the preschool team in 2019. She enjoys spending time outside with her husband and two boys.

**Lori Edwards**  
Preschool teacher – Head Teacher/Currently; Substitute Teacher  
Lori is a Mystic native and has been an employee at DPNC since 2011, teaching in early childhood programs for over 12 years. She holds an AS degree in Early Childhood Education from Three Rivers and has her Montessori Early Childhood Teaching Credential from AMS. Lori currently fills the role of Animal Curator at the Nature Center, taking great pride in helping injured wildlife as well as caring for our resident animals. She is also a CT certified wildlife rehabilitator and takes immense delight in sharing her love of animals with her students and anyone willing to listen. Lori lives in Gales Ferry with her new husband, has two grown daughters and two beloved granddaughters. She has a deep love of nature, enjoys hiking with her dogs, reading and spending time with her family.