



Discovery Southeast

*Education and Exploration
Deepening our Relationship with Nature*



Haadaa Héeni Forest Preschool **Family Handbook**

Updated March 2025

Table of Contents

Click the section title to jump to that part of the handbook.

Welcome.....	3
Organizational Background.....	3
Program Name.....	3
Our Preschool Educational Philosophy.....	3
What is Forest Kindergarten?.....	4
Our Locations.....	4
What We Do: Daily Routine and Schedule.....	5
Group Rules and Risk Management.....	6
What to Wear.....	7
What to Pack.....	9
Drop-Offs.....	10
Toileting and Clothing Changes.....	10
“No Such Thing as Bad Weather”	11
Program Cancellations Due to Weather or Instructor Absence.....	11
Illness.....	12

Welcome

We are delighted that you have chosen to have your family join Discovery Southeast's Haadaa Héeni forest preschool program! We hope that this handbook will be informative and fill you with excitement about what's to come.

Organizational Background

For over 35 years, Discovery Southeast has facilitated education and exploration programs in Juneau, AK, the traditional lands of the Áak'w and T'aak'ú K̓wáan. Founded by outdoor leaders (many of whom are still involved with the organization), we are a regional nonprofit dedicated to ensuring local residents — especially children — have the opportunity to experience the remarkable natural areas that attract visitors from around the world. Our field-based, hands-on programs teach kids how to experience, explore, and feel comfortable in the natural world. We focus on reaching all youth in Juneau, particularly those who might not otherwise be introduced to the outdoors at a young age. Ultimately, we hope to promote a better understanding of ourselves, the natural world, and our place in it.

Program Name

Haadaa Héeni means “water around us” in Lingít. We sought help from Tlingit language teacher Hans Chester in finding an appropriate name for our new venture. We wanted a title that talks about how water, in so many different forms, is the heartbeat of this place. We were honored when he brought this name to us. It was also found suitable when reviewed by an elder. *We are deeply grateful to Hans for his contribution.*

Our Educational Philosophy

We hope to instill in our students the ability to be gentle with themselves, other people, all living things, and the land. Approaching each day with wonder is an important aspect of Haadaa Héeni. We start every session with an openness to what surprises the forest has to share with us. The children are encouraged to use their senses, slow down, and follow curiosity. The extended time outside is designed for exploration, discoveries, and connection.

Some of our program goals are listed below.

Primary Goals:

- Child-led, open-ended learning with a focus on flow (not rushed)
- Inquiry-based, sparking curiosity
- Place-based, connected to the local environment
- Reflect seasonal and phenological (cyclical) changes in nature
- Hands-on, interactive experiences, using mainly natural materials
- Focus on the learning process, not the final product
- Provide opportunities for safely practicing self-agency

Secondary Goals:

- Promote fine motor development
- Encourage gross motor movement
- Foster imaginative play
- Support social-emotional skills, including patience, taking turns, sharing, teamwork, and conflict resolution
- Build self-confidence
- Ensure children feel safe, valued, supported, and cared for
- Cultivate an exploration mindset

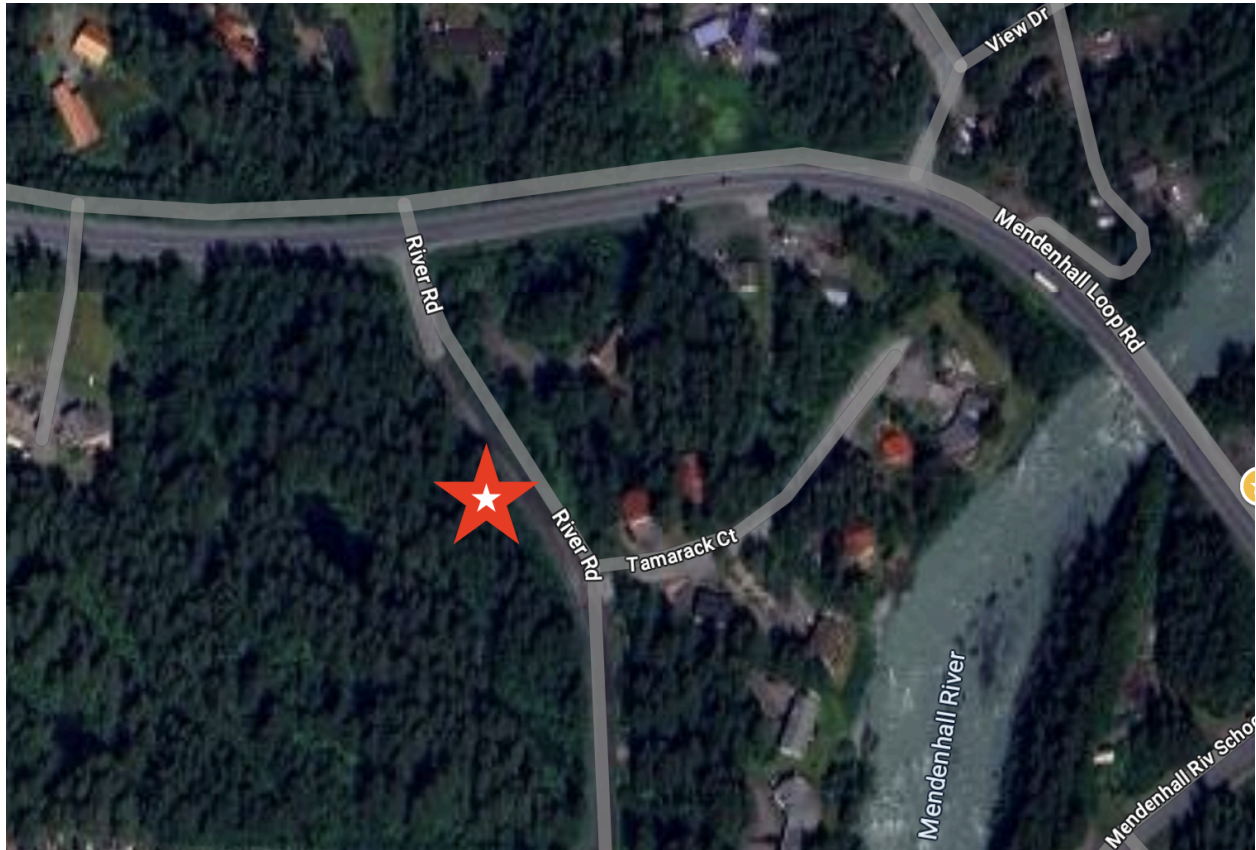
What is Forest Kindergarten?

Haadaa Héeni follows the model of a “forest kindergarten.” Forest kindergartens in Europe have a long history of educating preschool-aged children outdoors. Our design is further inspired by the work at Cedarsong Nature School in Washington and by the standards set up by the American Forest Kindergarten Association.

Our Locations

We, at Haadaa Héeni and Discovery Southeast, thank and honor Áak’w and T’aakú K̓wáans, on whose land we listen and teach. Our program takes place at different locations, depending on the season. Our home for **fall (September-November)** and **spring (April-May)** is Discovery Southeast’s property, nestled at **the corner of River and Mendenhall Loop Roads**. The wood has numerous glacial moraines, berry bushes galore, ponds and creeks, and a truly special ancient glacial erratic. For drop-offs and pick-ups, proceed a short distance down River Road and look for

the Discovery Southeast sign and naturalists waiting at the entrance to our site on the right. *We are so grateful to Judy Maier, who donated the amazing property where Haadaa Héeni meets.*



In the **winter months (January-March)**, the snow often makes the property's trails impassable, so instead we meet at **Auke Village Recreation Area ("Auke Rec")**, at the large Yéil/Raven shelter. We enjoy exploring the beach, creeks, and forest.

What We Do: Daily Routine and Schedule

Haadaa Héeni encourages wonder in the natural world and invites children to enter the forest using all of their senses. Though each day is different (depending on what's happening in nature), our routine generally includes:

- Welcome song
- Search for the tea bottle
- Walk/hike

- Singing and drumming
- Playtime at “mud kitchen,” planned activity, or craft (focus on fine-motor skills)
- Snack
- Storytime
- Free play (focus on gross motor movement)
- Walk back to the “Guardian Stones” (our entryway)
- Goodbye and thank-you song

Sessions are seasonal during the school year. *We also offer separate summer camp programming for children aged 4-14.*

Children can arrive up to 5 minutes before the program starts. Prior to that, our naturalists will be preparing for the day. 5 minutes past the hour, we begin our walk to our central meeting space, so please ensure your child arrives before this time. **If you are running late, contact a naturalist to find out where to meet the group.** We will have students promptly back at the pick-up location by the end of the session.

Students leave each day knowing something that they would like to share with their loved ones at home. Please check in with our staff members to learn more about the group’s day. We also send families a monthly e-newsletter, which highlights activities and memories from our time together.

Children will only be released at pick-up to individuals listed as guardians and emergency contacts on their Participant Agreement, unless a guardian has given us prior verbal authorization for another person to do so.

Group Rules and Risk Management

We review the following rules with the children on a regular basis and welcome you to familiarize yourself with them:

- **Above all, be kind** – Show kindness to all living things.
- **Ask before you pick** – Wild food can only be picked after it has been checked by an adult. There are many things in the woods that are not safe to eat.

- **Listen and answer, please** – You need to follow the directions of the adults leading the group. Also, when your name is called, even if you are hiding, you need to answer.
- **Stay together** – When moving down the trail, adults go first. When exploring an area, stay with the group and inside the boundaries.
- **Sticks and stones** – Sticks and rocks are used as tools. Sticks can only be carried while walking, pointed down. Children may climb to the height of their own shoulders.

All Discovery Southeast staff have passed a background check and are certified in CPR/First Aid. They receive ongoing training in child development, social-emotional learning, and the natural and cultural histories of Southeast Alaska. All programs operate under a Risk Management Plan. If you have any questions, please email info@discoverysoutheast.org.

What to Wear

Have you ever gone outside for an outdoor adventure in wet or cold weather, had a great time, but had to head inside earlier than you'd hoped because you weren't dressed properly? Yep, us too. We want to avoid this experience for your little one as they join us at Haadaa Héeni for three hours of outside adventures in the forest. Young children are even more susceptible than adults to getting cold, due to their smaller body mass.

We firmly believe that there is no such thing as “bad” weather. Every day offers something wonderful to discover when we engage nature using all our senses. As a parent or guardian, you play a key role in shaping your child’s attitude toward the weather. If you wake up excited about the day, no matter the weather, and talk with enthusiasm about the fun things they can explore outside, your child will absorb and reflect that positivity.

While the following list may seem long or overly detailed, we want to emphasize how important proper clothing is to your child’s success in our program. The right gear can make all the difference in keeping your child comfortable and happy during their nature experience. So, let’s talk about how to keep kids cozy! Layering is key.

Below are our time-tested *requirements* for clothing to be worn at Haadaa Héeni:

Base Layer

This is composed of a **long-sleeved top and a full-legged bottom**, made of wool or a synthetic material (polyester or polypropylene). No snaps are best. Some good brands are: Patagonia, REI, Molehill, or Hot Chillis.

Fleece or Wool Layer

Fleece or wool clothing are great for middle and top layers, for both top and bottom. Fleece pajamas work great!

Puff Layer

On extra cold days it is really nice to have a **puff layer (down or synthetic)** to help maintain the core body temperature. Puff vests are fairly easy to locate and work well.

Outer Layer

For all but the driest winter days, **rain pants and a raincoat** are key components in keeping kids dry. Excellent brand choices are: Gage, Molehill, Lands End, Helly Hansen, Grundens, Oakiewear, Polarn, and REI. A **winter jacket and snow pants** are also necessary for all of the snow play and cold weather explorations that we hope to do.

Insulated Boots

Insulated boots like Bogs or Sorels are our absolute favorite for helping kids keep their feet warm and dry. You can find them with temperature ratings as low as -20 degrees. We have found that while Xtratuffs are OK for summer, they tend to suck the warmth from kids' feet and hence their whole bodies.

Head, Hands & Feet

An **insulated beanie or hat** feels so good on many of our Juneau days. If kids get too hot, it can always be placed in a backpack. Wool or fleece are both great materials for this. It is sometimes nice to have a well-fitting baseball cap to keep rain off the face.

Little hands having big adventures need to stay warm. **Insulated gloves or mitts** (mittens keep fingers extra toasty) are so important to give children the confidence to play and learn hard using all of their senses, including their sense of touch. The very best pairing would be waterproof (really more water resistant) gloves or mitts (often found at Costco Head is a good brand), or an insulated inner pair along with a truly waterproof outer set (such as Kura Unlined Rain Mittens).

Wool socks are essential! Cotton socks leave feet chilly on all but the hottest days. Warm feet help our whole bodies stay warmer. Wool is such an amazing fiber, in that it keeps us warm, even when wet.

A **face covering** like a buff or a balaclava is helpful to keep the wind off cold cheeks.

*We ask that your child come in one set of clothes following the guidelines above **and** bring another equal set of gear in a waterproof backpack (or plastic bag inside a backpack) that they can carry themselves. More details on what to pack are provided in the next section.*

Additional Reminders & Recommendations

- Avoid cotton at *any* layer, including sweatshirts. Cotton retains moisture, which can leave kids damp and cold.
- Expect your child to come home muddy and dirty – it’s part of the hands-on learning and fun!
- Great places to find great second-hand gear include Second Wind Sports and Mommy and Me here in Juneau, or Sierra Trading Post online.
- **If any of these items are hard to come by, please let us know. We have gear available to loan or give!**

What to Pack

Please pack the following items in a backpack that comfortably fits your child:

- **A sturdy, easy-to-drink-from water bottle**
- **A nutrient-dense snack** (examples: cheese, hummus, veggies, fruit, nuts, oatmeal, crackers, or yogurt)
- **A small, non-breakable cup** for drinking “forest tea”
 - We enjoy making forest tea from foods we forage during our time together. It’s a lovely warm treat, especially once temperatures drop!

- An extra, full set of gear packed in a sealed, waterproof bag (a gallon-sized Ziploc bag works well)

Backpack Responsibility

Participants are responsible for carrying their own backpacks during the program. Please keep this in mind while packing.

Comfort Items

Please leave toys and lovies at home, as they are likely to get lost or muddy. If your child needs a comfort item, it must remain in their backpack during the program.

Snacks and Dietary Restrictions

While children will generally eat their own snacks, we occasionally provide a seasonal treat or something harvested from the wild, cooked over the fire, or for a special occasion. **Be sure to note any dietary restrictions in your child's [Participant Agreement](#), so that the naturalists are aware of foods to avoid.**

Drop-Offs

We understand that goodbyes, even for a brief time, can be hard. Here are some tips to help make your child's drop-off a smoother experience for both of you:

- **Kids thrive when they know what to expect.** If possible, join us for a little while on the first day to explore our beautiful location, meet our caring staff, and get a feel for our daily routine. This can help ease "first-day jitters."
- **Keep goodbyes short and positive.** If you stay calm and smile, your child will feel more confident. Sometimes extended goodbyes can increase stress and lead to power struggles.
- **Consider creating a special farewell ritual, like a handshake, hug, or dance.** This routine, followed by fun in the forest and your return, sets your child up for success.
- **Remember most kids change gears quickly,** and any tears usually subside within minutes. Our staff is ready to support your child and help them transition. If, in the rare case, your child remains upset for more than a few minutes, we will contact you promptly.

- **If you feel your child may need extra time to adjust, please just let us know.** We will work together to make a plan that helps your child gradually and confidently transition to mornings at Haadaa Héeni.

Toileting and Clothing Changes

Per Discovery Southeast's policy, adults are never alone with a child. Therefore, **the ability to independently use the bathroom is a critical one for our program.** We highly encourage families to make sure their child uses the bathroom before coming to the program, as our set-up is workable in emergencies, but not the most comfortable. We have a port-a-potty on site for dire emergencies, but as port-a-potties can sometimes seem scary for littles, using the bathroom before and after our session would be best. "Nature peeing" is often the favored choice and is something we ask you to familiarize your child with ahead of time.

The same policy applies to clothing changes when needed. Since we are only in the forest for three hours, usually full changes are not needed. In the case of a toileting accident or a child being completely soaked, a screened area is provided for privacy, but a child needs to be able to independently change with coaching.

Program Cancellations Due to Weather or Instructor Absence

While we believe "no such thing as bad weather" is an important attitude to uphold, certain weather conditions can veer into a safety concern. Here are some guidelines about when we may cancel, or potentially shorten a program due to weather:

- **Rain** - Heavy persistent rain with strong wind we may shorten or cancel
- **Wind** - Consistent 20 mph with gusts to 30-40 mph
- **Cold** - Less than 5 degrees Fahrenheit (if it is between 5-15 degrees we will often shorten the program)
- **Ice** - If it is covering all walking surfaces, or poses an identified threat of falling trees or branches
- **Snow** - If the roads have not been cleared to enable travel for families to the site, or if the amount of snow makes it difficult for children to walk through

If Juneau schools are closed due to a weather emergency, we often cancel programming for the day.

In the rare occurrence that one of our instructors is absent, we will, to the very best of our abilities, try to have other naturalists available to substitute. *Only as a last-case resort will we cancel programming for a day in this situation.*

Illness

If a child is not feeling good, it is best for them to stay home and rest until they are well, and have been symptom-free for 24 hours.

If a child becomes ill during our program, we will contact the primary contact listed on the Participant Agreement to come and pick up the child.

**If you have additional questions, you're always welcome
to contact us at info@discoverysoutheast.org.**

Phone numbers for staff leaders will be shared prior to program start.