Early Childhood Program Parent Handbook 2025-2026

EMILY OAKS
NATURE CENTER

Growing Sprouts Calendar 2025-2026

Class runs September 2/3 - May 21/22
No Class:
Sep. 23-24 Rosh Hashana
Oct. 2 Yom Kippur
Oct. 13 Indigenous People's Day
Oct. 17 Special Event Set-up
Nov. 24-28 Fall Break
Dec. 22 - Jan. 2 Winter Break
Jan. 19 MLK Jr. Day
Feb. 13 Special Event Set-up
Feb. 16 Presidents' Day
Mar. 30-Apr. 3 Spring Break
Apr. 17 Special Event Set-up

Class Times (T/Th or M/W/F)

Full-Day Class: 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

Morning Class: 9:30 a.m.-12 p.m.

Afternoon Class: 1-3:30 p.m.

Lunch Bunch: 12-1 p.m.

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About the Growing Sprouts Program

Mission: To create magical learning adventures through first-hand experiences with nature, while building a life-long relationship with the natural world.

Educational Philosophy: Our Earth Education curriculum is designed to help people live more joyously and harmoniously with the natural world. Earth Education focuses on understanding the broad brush strokes of life: the flow of energy, cycling of materials, and interrelationships of life. Equally important, our program emphasizes developing feelings for and an emotional attachment to the earth, with a hands-on approach of doing, sharing, and exploring the wonders of the natural world. Over the course of the year, the Sprouts will explore many different inquiry themes. Children will have the ability to help shape the content by communicating their interests during class. Growing Sprouts will explore each theme by taking nature walks, conducting simple science experiments, and engaging in reinforcement activities that build physical, emotional, and basic academic skills. Growing Sprouts curriculum places an emphasis on being outdoors, where learning can happen naturally!

Goals:

- To investigate seasonal happenings, events, and changes in the plants, animals, and basic elements of the natural world.
- To stimulate intellectual and physical development, while participating in authentic outdoor learning opportunities.
- To develop feelings of respect and appreciation for the natural world, as well as wonder and curiosity through meaningful, first-hand experiences.
- To support the creative expression of one’s self.
- To develop intrapersonal and interpersonal skills in a safe and caring environment, with an emphasis on sharing and doing.

Emily Oaks Nature Center Facility

In 1929, Niles Center Park District made its first land purchase, a parcel of land that included the 13-acre site later named Emily Park. For years the park was left in a “semi-rustic” condition for recreation. A beautiful two-acre pond was built in the 1930’s as a WPA government project.

Emily Park was dedicated as a Nature Center for the Skokie Park District in 1988, resulting in a change in site management and the addition of year-round programming. A variety of native wildflowers and grasses grow on the grounds, amongst towering oak and maple trees.

All year long, Growing Sprouts students will be inspired and guided by program staff to connect with the local plants and animals through observation, interactive hikes, games, experiments and role-play. In the woodland, prairie, and pond, Growing Sprouts will frequently have the opportunity to observe native wildlife. Seeing plants and animals in their natural habitats help children become immersed in a moment of awe and observation, while inspiring them to think about how all things are interrelated.

Our classroom is located upstairs in the Visitor Facility with a back door that leads outdoors to our trails. Parents will pick-up and drop-off children at the front gate. A staff person will check students in/out and supervise children. Students will wait inside the facility during inclement weather.

Emily Oaks Nature Center
4650 Brummel Street
Skokie, Illinois 60076

SKOKIE
PARK DISTRICT

Growing Sprouts Daily Schedule

At Growing Sprouts, the instructors maintain a loosely structured schedule with consistent, predictable events throughout the day, so that the children know what to expect when they come each day. However, spontaneity is valued in our hands-on learning activities, and there is time built into each class to allow for exploration whenever children take interest outside of the lesson planned.

Responsibilities: Children are encouraged to take ownership in tasks that help the class as a whole. Everyone is encouraged to clean up after play time and snack time.

Arrival (10 mins): Guardians drop off children at the front gate. Once they are checked in by a staff member, children will play inside the gate with their class.

Care Package (15 mins): Children will sing the hello song and walk to the mailbox where they receive their daily mail, outlining the theme for the day.

Nature Hike (30 mins): Sprouts set off on a trail walk that is intended to enhance the theme unit. During their hike, children will discover the wonder and beauty of the surrounding area, while exploring, looking under logs, engaging in water play, mapping, or observing plants and animals.

Reinforcing Activities (30 mins): Sprouts study the theme more directly through hands-on activities, such as science experiments and pretending/role-playing. There is additional time built into this part of the “schedule” for unstructured play relating to the daily theme.

Snack (20 mins): Children toilet independently before eating a snack brought from home while holding a conversation and enjoying other Sprouts’ company.

Book (5 mins): The leader will read a story related to the daily theme.

Craft (15 mins): Children will strengthen their fine motor muscles by completing crafts that include cutting, painting, pasting, coloring, etc..
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Nature Discovery Play (20 mins): Children will play games, explore the elements, build with sticks, play with mud and water, and use discovery tools in an unstructured free choice time.

Goodbye (5 mins): The class will sing the goodbye song.

Departure (10 mins): The teachers will have the children ready to be picked up at the front gate.

Full-day & Lunch Bunch (1 hr): Eat lunch prepared at home and rest/play quietly.

Growing Sprouts Program Information

Tuition

For the 2025-2026 Monday/Wednesday/Friday half-day class, tuition is $2,209 for residents and $2,761 for non-residents. At the time of registration, a non-refundable $60 registration fee is due. You can either pay for the year in its entirety, or opt for our monthly installment billing plan. You will fill out a form with your payment information, and you will be charged on the first business day of each month ($238.78 Resident /$300.11 Non-resident). Full-day tuition is $4,418 for residents and $5,523 for non-residents ($484.22 monthly resident/$607 monthly non-resident).

For the 2025-2026 Tuesday/Thursday half-day class, tuition is $1,551 for residents and $1,939 for non-residents. At the time of registration, a non-refundable $60 registration fee is due. You can either pay for the year in its entirety, or opt for our monthly installment billing plan. You will fill out a form with your payment information, and you will be charged on the first business day of each month ($165.67 Resident /$208.78 Non-resident). Full-day tuition is $3,102 for resident and $3,878 for non-residents ($338 monthly resident/$424.22 monthly non-resident).

Arrival

Children will be dropped off at the front gate from 9:30-9:40 a.m. or 1:00-1:10 p.m. depending on your class start time. If in a car, please write your child's last name on an 8.5 x 11 piece of paper to expedite the drop off. A teacher will supervise all of the children that have been dropped off. The group will stay at the front gate until all children have arrived, or until the end of the drop-off time frame; whichever comes first. Please call our office at 847-677-7001 if you will arrive/ have arrived late and the group is no longer at the gate; bring your child to the front desk for a staff member to check in your child and escort them to join the group.

Please make sure that your child has used the restroom prior to the start of class to avoid delays for the group.

Please check the weather before class and dress your child appropriately so that your child has an enjoyable experience outdoors. If it rains, we will still have class and will be outside unless we experience a very hard downpour or thunderstorm. Please send your child with boots, rain jacket, and rain pants on rainy days. In the winter, please send your child with a warm jacket, snow pants, snow boots, a hat, gloves and a scarf or balaclava. Your child can always remove layers if they feel warm during class.

Departure

Pick-up is at the front gate. Parents will stay in their car. An Emily Oaks staff member will check the license plate of each car to make sure that each child is picked up only by authorized vehicles.

Growing Sprouts will only dismiss your child to an authorized person. For identification purposes and your child's safety, a photo I.D. may be required upon pick-up. A handwritten note or email from the parent or guardian is an acceptable form of communication to add authorized pick-ups.

Please be prompt in picking up your child from 12:00-12:10 p.m. or 3:30-3:40 p.m. depending on your class end time. If you are running late, please call the front desk to let us know at (847) 677-7001. If a parent is late and a call has not been received from the parent, Emily Oaks staff will begin contacting the child's emergency contacts for pick-up and a late fee will be issued.

Absences

If your child will be absent from class, please contact the Emily Oaks front desk at (847) 677-7001 or eonc@skokieparks.org. This will help us avoid any unnecessary delays.

Please note that no refunds will be issued for any missed days of class.

Growing Sprouts Program Information

Parent Communication
Parents are more than welcome to contact Alison Robbins, Growing Sprouts Supervisor, directly at (847) 929-7540 for a telephone conversation or by email at AVRobbins@SkokieParks.org. Please keep in mind that sign-in and sign-out is not the best time for lengthy conversations about your child. Parent conferences will be offered once a year in the winter for those who wish to know more about their child's progress in Growing Sprouts. Weekly photos, take-home activities, and monthly newsletters about class will be posted on the Growing Sprouts SharePoint page.

See the Growing Sprouts Communication section for more information on conferences, newsletters, and weekly postings.

Participation Information Form and Contact Information
Please fill out the Participant Information Form prior to the first day of class. If any information changes, such as an address, phone number, or living situation, please notify the Growing Spouts staff so that your emergency information can be updated.

Personal Property
Please label all of your child's items to prevent loss. No games, toys, pets, or other valuables should be brought to class. Your child's things are important to them, and because we do not want to see these items lost or damaged, they are not permitted into the classroom.

Sunscreen and Insect Repellent
It is recommended that you apply sunscreen and insect repellent to your child before class, as Growing Sprouts staff is not permitted to do so. Full-day children will reapply mid-day. Due to safety concerns, roll-on, pump, or lotion is recommended.

Snacks
Children should provide their own healthy snack (pre-packaged or in a container/ bag) for class time, and a water bottle filled with water. Please do not bring foods that contain nuts. Food and dishes will not be shared. Dishes and utensils will not be provided. At times, Emily Oaks may provide pre-packaged food; parents will be informed in advance when this occurs.

Allergy Information
While we can control the food in our classroom, students will come in contact with different allergens in the outdoor world. If your child has allergies to tree nuts, pollen, grass, bee stings, or anything else, it is your responsibility to notify Growing Sprouts before the first day of class. Although we are very attentive to your child's safety in the outdoors, we may not always be able to prevent accidental contact with such allergens.

Growing Sprouts Program Information

Illness Policy
Our goal is to keep all of the Sprouts healthy and happy by preventing the unnecessary spread of illness. Please check your child for symptoms of illness every day before class.

Please keep your child home from class if your child exhibits any of these illnesses/symptoms:

* Fever over 100° F or chills
* Vomiting or nausea
* Diarrhea
* Persistent cough
* Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
* Loss of taste or smell
* Sore throat
* Fatigue from unknown cause
* Congestion or runny nose with thick or discolored (not clear) discharge
* Muscle/body aches from unknown cause
* New onset of moderate or severe headache
* New cough
* Rash
* Head lice
* Pinkeye

If any of the above symptoms are observed while in class, your child will be removed from the group and will wait with a staff member for immediate pick-up.

Children may not return to class until they are free of fever and/or diarrhea (without medication) for 24 hours. Dependent upon illness, a doctor's note may be required, stating that the child may safely return to class.

If your child is diagnosed with a contagious or communicable illness, such as COVID-19, strep throat, head lice, or pinkeye, please contact Emily Oaks. The Growing Sprouts Supervisor will then send out a notice to all other Growing Sprouts parents to be on watch for symptoms. The identity of the ill child will always remain confidential in notices.

Stay Home When Sick

◊ People with symptoms of infectious diseases should stay home. Staying home when sick can lower the risk of spreading infectious diseases to other people.

◊ Parents are required to self-screen participants daily for illness.

◊ Staff are required to self-screen daily for illness.

Growing Sprouts Program Information

Restroom Time
Your child must be toilet-trained to attend the Growing Sprouts program, and able to manage all toileting tasks independently. If several serious bathroom accidents occur over a short period of time, the staff will evaluate the child's toileting skills and their possible withdrawal from the program. A guardian must sign a form stating that their child is toilet trained before the start of class.

Please make sure that your child has recently used the restroom prior to drop-off. Our day begins outside, and nearly two-thirds of class is taught outside. It is essential for the learning process that we are not interrupted with bathroom breaks that could have been avoided. Please also make sure that your child's clothing is conducive for them to use easily in the restroom. If your child has pants with zippers or buttons, for example, make sure that they are able to manage these on their own.

Medication Administration
Please fill out the Medication Waiver Form which is part of the Participant Information Form if your child needs to take any kind of medication during Growing Sprouts hours. Please note, medications will not be dispensed without the completed and signed forms. All medications must be kept in the original containers and specific directions for their use described on the forms. All medication should be given directly to the Growing Sprouts staff. Medication will be stored in the classroom in a locked medications box (emergency medication like an epi-pen or inhaler can be carried in the teacher's backpack when outdoors, if needed). Please take note of expiration dates and plan accordingly in order to replace expiring medicine as needed during the year.

General Safety
- ◊ All teachers have undergone a thorough background check through the State of Illinois.
- ◊ The Sprouts will remain in a group and within the instructor's sight during all outdoor adventures.
- ◊ The instructor will have instant access to the office and additional staff via walkie-talkie.
- ◊ The instructors constantly gauge the children's abilities and comfort level with potentially risky behavior before encouraging their participation (e.g. climbing on logs, standing near a campfire, riding in row boat, etc...).
- ◊ A weather radio is located at the Nature Center front desk and is continuously on, receiving weather updates for the area.

Growing Sprouts Program Information

Class Cancellations and Weather Conditions

Growing Sprouts will take into consideration Skokie School Districts 65, 68, 69, 72, 73, and 73.5 for weather-related school closings, but this does not necessarily mean that Growing Sprouts will be closed on days that schools are closed. The Growing Sprouts Supervisor will send you an email within one hour prior to the start of class if Growing Sprouts is going to be closed based on the surrounding schools. However, if the Skokie Park District is closed, then Growing Sprouts will be closed. No refunds will be issued for weather-related closings, nor will any additional days be added to the Growing Sprouts calendar for a make-up.

If you change your email address, please notify the staff so that we can make the change for our emergency email system. If email is not easily accessible to you, please let our staff know and we will work out another way to get you the information.

Growing Sprouts will not explore the outdoors during a thunderstorm, on bitterly cold days, or on extremely windy days. Instead, we will play and learn inside our classroom. In keeping with our educational goal to develop feelings and appreciation for the outdoors, children will not be forced to go outside in disagreeable weather. We want to inspire children to go outside not because they are forced to, but because they enjoy it. Growing Sprouts instructors encourage you to support your child's desires to explore the outdoors.

The instructors at Growing Sprouts will make judgment calls before class as to whether or not the children will be engaging in outdoor activities that day. Several important factors such as wind chill, temperature, and sunlight go into the decision-making process. The great thing about weather is that it is always changing, and although the weather may not be favorable for the start of class, a change in weather may occur that would allow us to play outside later in the day. Therefore, please dress your child for the weather every day, as specified in the handbook.

Growing Sprouts Expectations

Clothing

Growing Sprouts supports active discovery learning and playing freely in the outdoors. Therefore, we encourage you to send your child in clothes that you don't mind getting messy. Please avoid tight clothing, fancy outfits, and expensive items. Clothing should be kept simple, comfortable, and washable. Play clothes should be worn to class every day, because when children are allowed to wear play clothes, they don't worry about getting messy or dirty and will full-heartedly engage in play. Children will be permitted to splash in puddles, dig in the soil, explore the pond, make mud pies, play with paint, and other things of a messy nature.

Footwear should be comfortable, closed shoes with gripping soles for climbing, running, and jumping. Gym shoes or hiking shoes are recommended, even during the warmer months. Flip-flops and slip-on shoes are not acceptable forms of footwear for the outdoors.

On rainy days, we will still go outside. It is required that your child has the appropriate gear, which includes rain boots, a rain jacket, and rain pants! Please do not send your child with an umbrella, as these are very cumbersome for outdoor play and discovery.

A spare set of clothing should be sent to class in a large Ziploc bag with your child's name on it. These will be kept at Emily Oaks for the duration of the year and returned on the last day of class. All winter clothing such as snow pants, mittens, coats, and hats should be labeled with your child's initials. Growing Sprouts staff members will do their best to keep track of your child's clothing but are not responsible for lost articles of clothing.

Leadership and Behavior Guidelines

Growing Sprouts staff are consistent, kind, and firm. We believe in maintaining a calm atmosphere with clear expectations, while allowing the freedom to engage in exploration. With most of the class spent outdoors engaging in active play, energy is expended so that children are ready for more sedentary activities and more cognitively prepared to learn.

Instructors will explain the "Do's" to your child rather than the "Do not's." For instance, rather than saying, "Don't spill your water," or "Stop running," instructors phrase requests positively, such as "Please try to keep your water in your cup," or "Let's use walking feet." Expectations and routines are set so that the children can anticipate what will happen during their time in class. Choices are provided whenever possible, and children are not forced against their will. Adults will intervene in an educational manner, rather than punitive. It is our goal to teach children the language and skills necessary to handle situations such as sharing or hurt feelings.

We want children to see the connection between their behavior and the consequence. Methods of discipline include: rewarding for the behavior we want to see, having simple and clear rules, redirection, encouragement, and the use of logical and appropriate consequences when necessary. When necessary, we may have your child take a cool-down break with a staff member away from the group until they are ready to participate in the activities in a productive manner. Techniques that are NOT used at Growing Sprouts include: threats, bribery, belittling, humiliating, or any other method that would hurt a child's self-esteem or feelings.

Growing Sprouts Communication

Photo Policy
Participants in Skokie Park District programs consent to the taking of photos and videos of themselves and their children for use in all Park District marketing materials. All photos and videos taken on Park District property are for Park District use only and become its sole property. If you have any questions or reservations about this, please let us know.

Class Communication
There is limited time for conversation during sign-in and sign-out, but feel free to contact us anytime with questions, concerns and comments. Growing Sprouts Supervisor, Alison Robbins, can be reached directly via email at AVRobbins@SkokieParks.org or by calling (847) 929-7540. We will send emails and post important upcoming information on the SharePoint site.

SharePoint
We will use SharePoint to share photos from class, communicate important upcoming happenings in class, post monthly Newsletters, and provide optional materials for you to work on at home. Our class SharePoint page can only be viewed by staff and participants in the program; it is not open to the public. *If you do not have a computer or do not wish to participate in SharePoint, please let us know and we will send home paper copies with your child so you can stay informed.

Parent-Teacher Check-ins
Throughout the year, the instructor will be evaluating your child's progress. In the fall, the instructor will send home a report letting you know how your child is progressing in class.

Conferences will be offered in the winter. Sign-up will be available one to two weeks prior to the date. This is optional. To make the most of your time with the teacher, we ask that children not participate.

Important Contact Information
Emily Oaks Front Desk: (847) 677-7001
Growing Sprouts Supervisor, Alison Robbins: (847) 929-7540; AVRobbins@skokieparks.org
Growing Sprouts Teachers: (847) 677-7001; EONCGS@Skokieparks.org
Emily Oaks Facility Manager, Lee Hansen: (847) 929-7520; LAHansen@skokieparks.org
Superintendent of Recreation, Breanne Labus: (847) 674-1500, ext. 3520; BLabus@skokieparks.org

Growing Sprouts Supply List

All supplies should be labeled with the child's name.

SUPPLIES THAT STAY IN CUBBY AT EMILY OAKS

- 1 SMALL stuffed animal
- 1 pair of indoor shoes that can be worn with socks and easily slip on and off (a different pair then the shoes worn to camp)

ZIPLOC BAG SUPPLIES

Bring the following supplies in a one-gallon plastic **Ziploc bag**, labelled with your child's name. These items will stay at Emily Oaks, unless they are worn.

- Short-sleeved shirt
- Long-sleeved shirt
- Pants
- Socks
- Underwear
- Extra pair of gloves/mittens

BACKPACK SUPPLIES

Bring the following supplies daily in a **backpack** that will be brought home at the end of each day.

- Healthy snack in a store-bought package or reusable container (avoid nuts, please; refrigeration not provided)
- Small reusable water bottle, filled with water
- Folder for craft projects (backpack must be large enough to fit folder inside)

FULL-DAY SUPPLIES

Backpack

- Lunch (avoid nuts, please; refrigeration not provided)
- **Labeled** (so that your child does not eat all their food during the morning snack) afternoon snack in a store-bought package or reusable container (avoid nuts, please; refrigeration not provided)

Cubby

- Sunscreen and bug repellent (roll-on, pump, or lotion preferred)

WHAT TO WEAR…

- Older, washable clothing
- Sturdy gym/hiking shoes or boots AND socks (no sandals or Crocs)
- Outdoor clothing for the weather: rain jacket and pants, rain boots, hat, snow boots, mittens, winter coat, snow pants, etc.

Please do not allow your child to bring any electronic devices, cell phones, pets, knives, toys, gum, or expensive jewelry.