

A graphic of a sunburst or spark with several yellow lines radiating from a central point, with small white stars at the ends of some lines.

Preschool

GREATER STARTS WITH A SPARK



2026 - 2027

FAMILY HANDBOOK

BRACE FAMILY YMCA

YMCACharlotte.org

**GREATER
HAPPENS**

AT



YMCA OF GREATER CHARLOTTE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE PRESCHOOL

Our Philosophy

At the YMCA of Greater Charlotte, we believe children learn best when they are immersed in the natural world. Our Outdoor Experience Preschool places nature at the center of learning, giving children daily opportunities to explore, discover, create, and grow outdoors. Through hands-on experiences, child-led play, and meaningful connections with the environment, we nurture curiosity, creativity, confidence, and independence. We believe that muddy boots, open spaces, and outdoor adventures spark wonder, inspire a joy of learning, and help children build the skills they need to thrive.

Meaningful Connections with Nature

Each day, children engage in purposeful exploration across thoughtfully designed outdoor environments, including water flow areas, gardens, mud kitchens, creation and construction areas, and academic exploration. These environments spark curiosity, imagination, and discovery while supporting child-led play and exploration.

Academic learning emerges naturally as children observe, question, create, and experiment within their environment. Our educators thoughtfully facilitate learning by extending children's thinking, honoring their interests, and supporting deeper engagement with the natural world. Children spend a minimum of 90 minutes outdoors daily for children ages 3 and older, and 60 minutes daily for 2-year-olds, ensuring consistent immersion in meaningful outdoor learning experiences.

Play-Based Learning

Our learning environments extend beyond the classroom walls, inviting children to explore, discover, and grow through meaningful experiences in nature. Through child-led play, hands-on exploration, and daily outdoor adventures, children are encouraged to ask questions, take healthy risks, solve problems, and build new skills with confidence.

We support the whole child by building the foundational skills that prepare children for lifelong learning through meaningful, hands-on experiences. Rather than separating academics from play, children develop early literacy, math, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills naturally as they explore, investigate, and engage with the world around them. Alongside social-emotional growth, we nurture curiosity, creativity, confidence, independence, and a lifelong love of learning through meaningful connections with the natural world.

Family and Community

At the YMCA of Greater Charlotte, we believe strong families and connected communities help children flourish. We are committed to building authentic partnerships with parents and caregivers through open communication, family engagement, and shared outdoor experiences. Together, we create a supportive village where children feel safe to explore; families feel welcomed and valued, and a love of nature, learning, and community grows for generations to come.

YMCA PROGRAM POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

This handbook is specific to the Outdoor Experience Preschools at Brace Family YMCA and the Lake Norman YMCA Preschool program. To access general YMCA of Greater Charlotte youth program policies please refer to the YMCA of Greater Charlotte's [Preschool Resource Hub](#). It is strongly encouraged that you bookmark this page.

This page includes program cancellation policies, financial policies, childcare time limit guidelines, medical forms, and much more.

		
Our Purpose	Our Vision	Our Mission
To love, serve, and transform lives.	Thriving, inclusive, and connected communities.	To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind, and body for all.

DAILY EXPERIENCE

Calendar

Our preschool program follows the calendar of the partner school district associated with your child's preschool location, including holidays, teacher workdays, and weather-related closures.

Click here for [ISS Schedule](#)

Click here for [CMS Schedule](#)

A Day in the Outdoor Experience

Each day is filled with **hands-on, engaging experiences** designed to support your child's development across all areas—social, emotional, physical, and cognitive.

Outdoor learning is an important part of our daily routine. Children ages **3 and older spend a minimum of 90 minutes outdoors each day**, while **2-year-olds spend a minimum of 60**

minutes outdoors each day. This consistent time outside gives children meaningful opportunities to explore, move, discover, and learn through nature and play.

Daily experiences may include:

1. **Circle Time** – Songs, stories, conversations, and sharing
2. **Nature Walks and Outdoor Exploration** – Discovering plants, animals, weather, and the natural world around us
3. **Learning Centers and Small-Group Activities** – Hands-on opportunities to explore concepts, build skills, and follow individual interests
4. **Creative Play, Music, and Movement** – Opportunities to express themselves through imagination, rhythm, dance, and play
5. **Art and Open-Ended Projects** – Creating and experimenting with natural and traditional materials
6. **Social-Emotional Learning and Community Building** – Developing relationships, communication skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging
7. **Physical Play** – Climbing, running, balancing, digging, building, and other activities that support strength, coordination, and physical development

Each classroom will follow a **consistent daily rhythm and routine** while allowing flexibility for children's interests, the weather, and spontaneous learning opportunities. Your child's teacher will share a more detailed daily schedule with families at the beginning of the school year.

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN OUR NATURE-BASED PROGRAM

In Outdoor Experience Preschool, children learn through **meaningful engagement, exploration, play, and authentic experiences** rather than relying solely on traditional classroom activities. We observe how children develop the foundational skills they need for future learning as they interact with nature, solve problems, build relationships, and follow their curiosity.

Curiosity and Exploration

Children demonstrate growth by asking questions, making observations, testing ideas, and exploring the natural world. Whether identifying plants and insects, experimenting with water flow, or investigating seasonal changes, children develop confidence, curiosity, and critical-thinking skills.

Foundational Learning Through Play

Academic skills emerge naturally through child-led play and hands-on experiences.

- **Early literacy** develops through storytelling, conversations, environmental print, songs, and nature journaling.

- **Mathematical thinking** develops as children count, sort, compare, measure, recognize patterns, and build with natural materials.
- **Scientific inquiry** develops as children observe, predict, experiment, investigate, and ask questions about the world around them.

Social-Emotional Growth and Independence

Outdoor exploration provides daily opportunities for children to build communication, collaboration, resilience, confidence, and problem-solving skills. As children navigate challenges, take appropriate risks, make choices, and work alongside their peers, they develop independence and self-confidence that support lifelong learning.

Meaningful Engagement with Nature

Children demonstrate their understanding by creating, constructing, investigating, and documenting their discoveries. Whether building habitats, caring for a garden, creating nature-inspired artwork, or recording observations in a journal, children apply their learning in authentic and meaningful ways.

Our educators thoughtfully observe and document each child's growth, celebrate strengths, recognize emerging skills, and plan experiences that build on children's interests and developmental progress.

We value our partnership with families and believe that open communication helps support every child's unique learning journey. **Family conferences are held twice each year** to discuss your child's growth and development. Throughout the year, we will also share observations, documentation, and ideas for extending learning at home.

Families are always welcome to request a conference with the Preschool Supervisor or Manager at any time during the school year.

PREPARING FOR SCHOOL

What to Wear

Nature is our classroom in every season! With weather-appropriate clothing, your child can comfortably explore, play, and learn outdoors year-round.

Please make sure your child wears:

1. **Comfortable, weather-appropriate clothing** that allows them to move, play, climb, and explore freely.
2. **Rubber-soled, closed-toe shoes** such as sneakers or hiking shoes. For safety, please do not send your child in sandals, flip-flops, Crocs, or shoes with slick soles.

3. **Clothes you don't mind getting messy!** Painting, digging, climbing, splashing, and exploring are all part of the Outdoor Experience. Expect dirt, mud, grass stains, and plenty of opportunities for hands-on learning!

As the seasons change, we will provide additional guidance on appropriate gear for rain, cold, and hot weather. Our goal is to make sure every child is **safe, comfortable, and ready for adventure** each day.

WHAT TO BRING

Outdoor learning means plenty of movement, exploration, and adventure! Please send the following items with your child to help them stay comfortable, prepared, and ready to learn each day.

Extra Change of Clothes

Please send a **full extra set of clothes** at the beginning of the school year that we can keep at the Y. This should include:

- Shirt and pants/shorts
- Underwear
- Socks
- An extra pair of shoes

Outdoor play means children may get wet, muddy, or otherwise messy! Please replace clothing as the weather changes, when items are used, or as your child grows. Staff will let families know when replacement or additional clothing is needed.

Water Bottle

Please send a **labeled, reusable water bottle** with your child every day. Outdoor play keeps us busy—and thirsty! Children should have access to water throughout the day.

Lunch and Snack

Please pack a **nutritious snack and a healthy, well-balanced, nut-free lunch** each day. We eat outdoors whenever possible, so we recommend:

- Easy-to-open containers
- Minimal packaging
- Foods your child can manage independently
- A labeled lunchbox or container

Standard-Size Backpack

Please send your child with a **standard-size backpack** that is large enough to comfortably carry their daily essentials, including their water bottle, lunch, and items they may need to bring home.

LABEL EVERYTHING!

Seriously—we can't say it enough! Please label everything your child wears or brings to school with their first and last name.

Be sure to label:

- Clothing, including extra clothes
- Jackets, hats, and gloves
- Water bottles, lunch boxes, and food containers
- Shoes, boots, rain gear, and other outdoor gear

With so many little explorers sharing a space, labeled items are much more likely to find their way home!

If something does go missing, please check with your child's teacher or look in our **Lost and Found**.

What Not to Bring

Our Outdoor Experience is designed to encourage children to **explore, imagine, create, and connect with nature**. To help keep the environment safe and focused, please leave the following items at home.

Toys from Home

Please leave toys and personal items at home to help prevent lost belongings and disagreements between children. **Special Show and Tell days will be announced in advance** when children may bring a designated item from home.

Electronics

Please leave **iPads, phones, handheld gaming devices, smartwatches, and other personal electronics** at home. Personal technology is not permitted during the preschool program.

LUNCH AND SNACK

Our daily schedule includes dedicated time for both **snack and lunch**. Mealtimes are an important part of the day, giving children opportunities to refuel, practice independence, and enjoy time together.

Teachers supervise children during meals to support a safe and positive mealtime experience and provide help when needed. Children will be encouraged to make their own choices about **what and how much they eat**. Teachers will not determine the amount or order in which your child eats their food.

Please note that **we are unable to refrigerate or heat lunches**. We recommend sending lunches and snacks in an insulated lunchbox or container with an ice pack to help keep food at a safe temperature.

Important Guidelines

- **No candy or soft drinks.**
- **No nut products** due to allergy and safety concerns.
- Pack foods and containers your child can **open, manage, and eat independently** whenever possible.
- Label all lunch boxes, containers, and water bottles with your child's **first and last name**.

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

Modifications and Accommodations

We believe every child should have the opportunity to **participate, explore, learn, and thrive** in Outdoor Experience. Participation by children with diverse abilities is encouraged, and we are committed to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all children.

Reasonable accommodations and modifications will be considered in partnership with the child and family and implemented on a **case-by-case basis** to support a safe, meaningful, and enriching experience.

If your child may need an accommodation or additional support to be successful in our program, please reach out to us **before the start of the school year**. We will schedule a time to meet with you, learn more about your child's strengths and needs, and work together to develop a plan that supports their participation and helps them have the **best experience possible**.

BEHAVIOR GUIDELINES

Our Philosophy

At the YMCA, we believe that youth development is built on a foundation of **safety, relationships, and character**. We respect each child's unique needs and recognize that behavior is a form of communication.

Our approach is designed to support individual development. We understand that children develop social-emotional skills at different rates, and we strive to create a positive, nurturing environment where every child can learn, grow, and thrive.

Behavior Expectations

We help children learn and practice behaviors that reflect our YMCA values:

1. **Caring:** Show a sincere concern for others.
2. **Respect:** Treat others the way you would like to be treated.
3. **Responsibility:** Be accountable for your actions.
4. **Honesty:** Be truthful in your words and actions.
5. **Faith:** Center yourself around your own spiritual well-being.

How We Support Children

To help children succeed, we:

- Build intentional relationships with each child.
- Create consistent routines that provide security and predictability.
- Encourage children to express their emotions in healthy ways.
- Use positive reinforcement, encouragement, and specific feedback.
- Set age-appropriate expectations while considering each child's maturity, ability, culture, and learning style.
- Use co-regulation and supportive guidance during challenging moments.
- Partner with families to support consistency between home and school.
- Remain calm, patient, and supportive during heightened situations.

Challenging Behaviors

Behaviors that threaten safety or significantly disrupt the program experience may require additional support. These may include:

- Behaviors that physically harm themselves, other children, or staff
- Behaviors that threaten the emotional safety of others
- Behaviors that damage property
- Behaviors that prevent participation in program activities
- Behaviors that violate personal boundaries or involve sexual conduct

When challenging behavior occurs, we view it as an opportunity for teaching and learning. Depending on the situation, staff may:

1. Redirect the child to a different activity or choice.
2. Help the child identify and communicate their feelings and needs.
3. Review expectations and provide clear, age-appropriate guidance.
4. Use logical and developmentally appropriate consequences when needed.
5. Use **time-in and co-regulation** rather than time-out, helping the child calm their body and process what happened.
6. Communicate with the parent or guardian.
7. Partner with the family to develop an individualized support plan when additional support is needed.

Our goal is always to help children develop the skills they need to **regulate emotions, solve problems, build relationships, and make positive choices.**

Biting, Pushing, and Rough Play

Preschoolers are still learning how to express emotions, communicate their needs, and interact with others. Behaviors such as biting, pushing, hitting, and rough play can occur during early childhood, particularly when children do not yet have the words or skills to communicate how they are feeling.

When these behaviors occur, staff will respond calmly and safely. We will help children understand why the behavior is unsafe or inappropriate while teaching more appropriate ways to communicate and interact with others.

We will partner with families when these behaviors occur and work together to support the child's social-emotional development. If behaviors become frequent or pose an ongoing safety concern, we may collaborate with the family to develop an individualized support plan.

Our goal is to help every child learn and grow in a **safe, supportive, and caring environment.**

TOILET TRAINING

We know that toilet training is an important milestone for children and families, and we are here to support you through the process.

For children in our younger toddler class, we work closely with families during toilet training. If your child is working on toilet training, please let their teachers know so we can support the techniques being used at home and create a consistent approach between home and school.

Every child develops at their own pace, and we are committed to meeting each child where they are developmentally. As children approach age three, we generally expect them to be either fully toilet trained or actively working toward greater independence by the start of the school year.

We understand that children develop differently. If your child needs additional support, such as pull-ups, extra reminders, or a transition plan, please connect with the Preschool Supervisor or Manager before the school year begins so we can work together to create a plan that supports your child.

Accidents happen! If your child has an accident, teachers will help them change into clean clothes. Please make sure your child's extra clothing is kept up to date and available at school.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Pick-Up and Drop-Off

The safety of our children, families, and staff is our top priority. Please follow all carline procedures and staff directions to help keep traffic moving safely and efficiently.

Carline Safety

- **Please do not use handheld electronics while in the carline.** The carline can be busy, with children, families, and staff moving in and around vehicles.
- Pull **all the way forward to the marked line** when directed by a staff member.
- **Caregivers should remain in their vehicles** during drop-off and pick-up.
- Do not allow your child to exit the vehicle until a staff member opens the door and gives you direction.
- Staff will assist children in entering and exiting vehicles. **Staff members cannot buckle children into their car seats.**
- After your child is placed in the vehicle, please **pull forward to the designated area before stopping to buckle your child.**
- Children must be properly buckled into an appropriate car seat or booster seat before leaving YMCA property.

Arrival | 9:00–9:15 a.m.

Please pull forward to the marked line and remain in your vehicle. A staff member will greet you at your car and check your child into preschool.

Please do not allow your child to exit the vehicle until a staff member opens the door. A staff member will escort your child to their designated outdoor space or classroom.

The carline closes at **9:15 a.m.** If you arrive after 9:15 a.m., please park and walk your child to the front entrance. A staff member will assist you with checking your child in.

Departure | 1:00–1:15 p.m.

Families will receive a **carline sign with their child's name** to display in the vehicle window during pick-up. Please have the sign visible as you approach the preschool entrance.

Pull forward to the marked line and remain in your vehicle. Staff will bring your child to you and assist them into the vehicle.

YMCA staff cannot buckle your child into their car seat. Once your child is safely in the vehicle, please pull forward to the designated area before stopping to buckle your child.

Car Seats and Booster Seats

North Carolina law requires appropriate child passenger restraint systems for young children.

Staff will not release a child into a vehicle if an appropriate car seat or booster seat is not present.

Families are responsible for ensuring their child is properly restrained before leaving YMCA property.

Late Pick-Up

Pick-up ends at **1:15 p.m.** A late pick-up fee of **\$10 for every five minutes past 1:15 p.m.** will be charged automatically to the credit/debit card on file.

If you arrive after 1:15 p.m., please park and pick up your child from the **front lobby**.

If a child has not been picked up within **10 minutes of the scheduled pick-up time**, we will begin contacting the emergency contacts listed in your child's account.

If you know you will be running late, please notify us **as soon as possible through Brightwheel**.

Authorized Pick-Ups

For safety, children may only be released to a legal guardian or an authorized adult listed on their account.

Every adult picking up a child must present a **government-issued photo ID**, unless their photo is already available in our childcare software.

To update your child's authorized pick-up list:

1. Go to **ymcacharlotte.org** and sign into your account using the icon in the top right corner.
2. Select **My Account** and then **Manage My Family** from the left-side menu.
3. Select the child whose information you would like to update and choose **View Emergency Contacts**.
4. Add, edit, or delete emergency contacts. Make sure the **Can Pick Up** field is marked **Yes** for anyone authorized to pick up your child.
5. Select **Save**.

Please note that updates must be made for each child individually.

INCLEMENT WEATHER AND OUTDOOR PLAY

Outdoor learning is central to our program, and we make every effort to provide meaningful outdoor experiences each day. When weather creates an unsafe or unsuitable environment, we will move activities indoors.

Examples of conditions that may require indoor activities include:

- **Extreme temperatures**
- **Heavy rain or thunderstorms**
- **Lightning**
- **High winds or unsafe wind gusts**
- **Severe weather events**
- **Poor air quality, smoke, or other environmental hazards**

When these conditions arise, we will prioritize the safety and comfort of the children and adjust the daily schedule as needed.

Families will be notified through **Brightwheel** when significant weather conditions result in changes to the outdoor schedule or program operations.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

For the health and well-being of all children and staff, please do not send your child to preschool when they are sick.

If a child develops symptoms of illness while in our care, their family will be notified, and the child may need to be picked up.

Children experiencing the following symptoms should remain home until they have been **symptom-free for a full 24 hours without the use of medication**, unless a written note from the child's physician states that the symptoms are not contagious and the child may attend:

1. Fever of **100.4°F or higher**
2. Vomiting
3. Diarrhea
4. Sore throat
5. Undiagnosed rash, sore, or other skin condition
6. Head lice
7. Continuous and/or colored drainage from the nose or eyes
8. Persistent cough
9. Any other contagious disease or significant symptoms of illness

Staff will contact a parent or guardian for pick-up when:

- The child displays symptoms listed above.
- The illness prevents the child from comfortably participating in program activities.
- The child's needs exceed what YMCA staff can safely provide while maintaining the health and safety of the other children in the program.

We appreciate your partnership in helping us maintain a **healthy and safe outdoor preschool community**.

Medications

If your child requires medication during their time at the Y, families are responsible for updating the child's health profile in their YMCA account, notifying the Program Director, and completing the required **Medication Authorization Form**.

Our team will administer medications prescribed by a physician when the medication must be administered during program hours and cannot reasonably be provided at home.

Medication must be provided in its **original container with the prescription label attached** and include the child's name, date of birth, medication name, dosage, and expiration date.

Over-the-counter medications must also be in their original container and require appropriate physician authorization.

Emergency Medications

Emergency medications, such as EpiPens, inhalers, or other life-saving treatments, must be provided to the program and clearly labeled. Emergency medications may be kept at the YMCA once all required forms have been completed.

Please contact the Program Director with questions about emergency medications.

New Medications

With the exception of emergency medications, the first dose of a new medication should be given at home with sufficient time to observe your child's response before attending the program.

Storage and Expiration

We cannot accept, store, or administer expired medications.

Medication must be picked up within **one week of the program end date**, or it will be disposed of according to YMCA procedures.

Families are responsible for ensuring all necessary medications remain current and available for their child, including during outdoor activities.

CHILDCARE TIME LIMIT

Outdoor Experience Preschool at the YMCA of Greater Charlotte is not licensed or regulated by NCDHHS. Based on applicable state guidelines regarding unlicensed childcare, children may not participate in additional YMCA childcare programs that cause them to exceed the applicable daily childcare time limit.

This may include Preschool, Y Kids, Afterschool, Y Scholars, Out of School Days, Day Camp, or other YMCA childcare programs.

Please be aware that our registration and check-in system may prevent a child from being checked into another YMCA childcare program when the daily time limit has been reached or is close to being reached.

FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

Communication

We encourage open communication between families, teachers, and program leadership so we can best support your child.

Children's behaviors and experiences may be affected by changes or challenges at home, such as a new sibling, a family transition, or another significant change. If there is something happening that may affect your child's experience at school, please let us know. This information can help our team provide appropriate support and understanding.

Email

Program leadership will use email to share school-wide activities, important announcements, and program information.

Brightwheel

Each class uses **Brightwheel** to share important updates, pictures, activities, and upcoming themes. Families can also message their child's teacher through the app.

Teachers are expected to check Brightwheel during their working hours. Please allow **up to one school day** for a response.

For urgent questions, concerns, or requests, please contact the **Program Manager or Supervisor** directly.

Feedback

We value your feedback! Families are encouraged to email, call, or schedule a meeting with program leadership to share questions, suggestions, or concerns.

We will also periodically send surveys and other opportunities for families to provide feedback so we can continue improving the Outdoor Experience.

Family Involvement

We believe family involvement enriches the learning experience and helps build a strong preschool community. Families are invited to participate in a variety of ways throughout the school year.

Volunteer Opportunities

If you are interested in volunteering in the preschool program, please contact the Preschool Supervisor or Manager.

All YMCA preschool volunteers must complete the required **background check and child abuse prevention training** before volunteering.

Family Events

We offer several opportunities for families to connect, celebrate, and participate in the preschool community throughout the year.

Annual events may include:

- **Fall Festival**
- **Holiday Parties**
- **Spring Fling**
- **End-of-Year Celebrations**
- **And more!**

Watch Brightwheel for event announcements, details, and sign-up opportunities.

We look forward to partnering with your family to make your child's Outdoor Experience a **safe, joyful, meaningful, and memorable part of their early learning journey.**