**The Willow Tree Children’s Centre**

**Outdoor Play Policy**

***Rationale and Policy Considerations***

*‘…regular contact with nature is part of a balanced diet of childhood experiences’.*

*Tim Gill, Writer, Researcher and Consultant on Childhood*

*The importance of play in contributing to the general health and wellbeing of children, extending through childhood and beyond, is universally acknowledged. The National Guidelines on Physical Activity for Ireland state that children and young people (aged 2 –18) should be active, at a moderate to vigorous level, for at least 60 minutes every day and that muscle-strengthening, flexibility and bone-strengthening exercises should be included at least three times a week. A report from the U.K. Department of Health (2011) argues that the levels of physical activity required in childhood to help achieve healthy weight, bone and cardio-metabolic health, and psychological well-being are higher than previously estimated. Unstructured play is considered to be vital to achieving this, as young children ‘need the freedom to create their own opportunities for active play, lead their own activities, direct their own play and engage in imaginary play’. Outdoor play provides best for this type of play. At The Willow Tree Children’s Centre and Afterschool, we balance adult-led structured, child-led and unstructured activities.*

*Playing provides opportunities for independent learning and for building confidence, resilience, self-esteem and self-efficacy, all of which contribute to children’s well-being. (Cole-Hamilton & Gleave, 2011)*

*Evidence has been emerging that there are widespread low levels of vitamin D in the general population in Ireland leading in some instances to rickets (a severe form of vitamin D deficiency causing deformity of the bones) amongst young children. Vitamin D is mainly produced in the body by exposure of the skin to sunlight therefore spending more time playing outdoors will help to combat this.*

*Numerous studies of outdoor experiences have shown that natural outdoor environments have an impact on humans. They reduce stress and create a feeling of wellbeing. Small children, in general, consistently prefer the natural landscape over built environments. Some argue that the natural world is essential to the emotional health of children.*

*Playing and learning in an outdoor environment has huge benefits for young children’s learning and development. We know that playing outdoors is great for young children’s physical development. Studies also show that early experiences with the natural world are linked with the development of imagination and the sense of wonder, and wonder is an important motivator for life-long learning. Playing outdoors is also particularly good for learning how to get on with others and to manage feelings. Children are usually more active, absorbed and involved and they see a purpose in what they are doing. Research also shows that movement and thinking skills are powerfully connected. Movement and activity encourages brain growth and improves children’s attention and their memory.*

*There is little that happens indoors that cannot happen outdoors, but the outdoors can provide opportunities for experiences that cannot be replicated indoors. Playing outside gives children unique opportunities such as:*

*• Experiences that involve all their senses*

*• Physical activities that involve their whole bodies*

*• Making observations and exploration*

*• Engaging naturally in art, and understanding early science and early mathematics concepts*

*• Developing their language and social skills*

*• Building and constructing with sand, water and mud*

*• Engaging in large scale dramatic play*

*• Engaging in risky or challenging play*

*Children need to experience safe, regular, engaging opportunities for a wide variety of play outdoors to ensure that their wellbeing, learning and development needs are fully met.*

***Policy Statement***

*In The Willow Tree Children’s Centre a strong emphasis is placed on the importance of children's play, for its own sake and as a critical factor in children’s wellbeing, learning and development. We place a strong emphasis on outdoor play and connection to nature in this curriculum which is also linked to spiritual development, natural places instil a sense of timelessness in humans and feelings of connectedness to community. We utilise place-based education as a large part of our everyday rhythm where the local environment is utilised as a rich resource for learning and intellectual development - engaging children’s interests, planning and teaching core subjects such as languages, mathematics, social studies, science and appreciation of nature. There is an emphasis on hands-on, real-life experience, stewardship and engaging as active, contributing citizens. This is evident through the nature art, festivals and expeditions to the village, canal and beach. In terms of the child's affective learning, place-based education captures the richness of human experience and connection to place. This is intricately woven into their identity, their understanding of their heritage and their sense of belonging to their community, again echoing the principles of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.*

*Outdoor play activities are a vital part of childhood experience and an important complement to our indoor activities. We consider that outdoor play is just as important as the indoor programme.*

*We aim to provide a safe, stimulating outdoor environment where space is used effectively to enable children to explore a broad and balanced curriculum using a range of interesting and engaging resources suitable to both their individual and group needs.*

*The outdoor environment is an invaluable place of learning and engagement and has a positive impact on children’s physical and mental wellbeing. It provides opportunities for children to explore, discover and develop an understanding of the natural environment around them with unique opportunities for: sensory experiences; physical activities; observations; constructive play with sand, water and mud; socio-dramatic play; art; early science, mathematics, environmental learning and many others. Therefore the outdoor play environment at The Willow Tree Children’s Centre is planned with the same care and attention as the indoor environment.*

*The outdoor space is designed to provide:*

*• Varied, multisensory, challenging, creative and enriching experiences.*

*• Opportunities for noisy, boisterous, vigorous, physically active play.*

*• Opportunities for appropriate physical challenge and risk-taking that are inherent in the value of play.*

*• Different surfaces and opportunities for the development of physical strength, balance and coordination.*

*• Natural elements and loose materials that children can combine, manipulate, use and adapt in their own way, for their own purposes (open-ended materials).*

*• Opportunities to develop language and social skills*

*• Opportunities for exploration, observation and experimentation.*

***Safety***

*Safety is a primary consideration in planning all activities. Appropriate supervision of children while playing outside is paramount.*

*We aim to ensure that the risk of injury is minimised while allowing children appropriate challenges. This is important for their learning and development. Children are given the chance to stretch themselves, and to test and develop their abilities, without exposing them to unacceptable hazards. We conduct risk assessments regularly on the outdoor areas but we also encourage children to identify risks, hazards, take care of each other and themselves.*

***Procedures & Practices***

*Outdoor play is a natural enhancement and extension of indoor environments and children should ideally be able to choose to play outside at any time. If this is not possible due to spaces already in use, the children also have the option of using the P.E. hall.*

*There are many ways to provide enriching outdoor experiences as an extension and enhancement of indoor play. All areas of the curriculum can be provided for successfully outdoors. The outdoor play area is included in all planning for learning.*

*It is important to ensure that:*

*• Children are enabled to access the outdoors on a daily basis taking appropriate measures to deal with the weather conditions for example wellies, warm clothing and hats or long sleeves and sun protection, are provided.*

*• The outdoor play area is used as a context and a natural resource for learning and development.*

*• Children are consulted about their interests, needs and wishes for outdoor play and the outdoor environment.*

*• Children are given the opportunity to plan and have ownership of their learning in the outdoors.*

*• The particular strengths and needs of each child is considered.*

*• A wide variety of challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences are planned for to ensure that children’s learning and development needs are met under all four themes of Aistear:*

*o Wellbeing*

*o Communicating*

*o Exploring and Thinking*

*o Identity and Belonging*

*• The opportunities for appropriate challenge and risk-taking in play are considered in planning.*

*• The learning that happens in the outdoor play area is observed, assessed and recorded in the same way as learning indoors.*

***Play opportunities***

*• The outdoor play area offers children the opportunity to investigate and explore, problem solve, use their imagination and creativity.*

*• Children experience social interactions – being able to choose whether and when to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, compete and resolve conflicts.*

*• Long, uninterrupted periods of time are provided for spontaneous free play.*

*• A variety of materials is provided to stimulate different kinds of play including:*

*o sand, mud, water, clay, paint, and other open-ended materials for sensory and exploratory play*

*o a large supply of blocks and construction toys and materials for cognitive and physical development*

*o dress-up clothes and props for pretend play*

*o balls, hoops, balancing and climbing places*

*o materials for building dens, making concoctions, using tools*

*o small world play*

*o art, writing, modelling and other creative activities*

*o natural materials for matching, sequencing, measuring, weighing, pouring for learning maths concepts.*

*• Open space is available for running, cycling and general free movement.*

*• Children are encouraged to manipulate the environment and the materials in their own way, to support their play.*

*• Activities which test the limits of capabilities such as lifting, balancing and climbing and chase games are included.*

*• All children, including those with physical impairments/disabilities, have access to play opportunities and are included in play – for children with limited motor abilities and/or health impairments this means that activities may need to be positioned to allow children to relax, to focus attention on the activity and have sufficient controlled movement for independent play.*

*• The value of messy play, rough-and-tumble play, and nonsense play is recognised.*

*• Children can enjoy energetic activity and have opportunities to run, jump, scoot, crawl, climb, swing and ride on wheeled toys.*

*• The outdoors offers the children opportunities for manipulative play and to develop their fine motor skills.*

*• Children are helped to care for the outdoor environment through the context of their outdoor play area.*

*• Children are given opportunities to care for living things (animals and gardening with non-toxic plants).*

*• Children learn how to use tools safely and effectively and to follow safety rules.*

***Play values***

*• Play is valued both for its own sake and as a critical factor in children’s wellbeing, learning and development.*

*• All children have the right to engage in play experiences.*

*• Children are capable and active learners.*

*• Children learn through active hands-on experience – playing, exploring, experimenting and discovering.*

*• Children are enabled to develop an appreciation of natural beauty and a sense of wonder about the world.*

*• Children can play for their own purposes.*

*• Children are played with on their terms.*

*• Children are allowed to manage and use the space and freedom afforded by the outdoor play area.*

*• Children are given the opportunity to relax, enjoy and have fun outdoors.*

*• Both boys and girls can be competent in all areas.*

***Supervision***

*• All staff members must be vigilant in their supervision of the children.*

*• Appropriate staff ratios must be maintained in the play area at all times.*

*• It must be ensured that an adult directly supervises the use of each large play structure.*

*• Staff members should place themselves strategically around the play area so that all children can be observed and heard and reached quickly, especially when engaging in activities that have a level of challenge/risk, for example:*

*o In all areas with access to water in tubs, buckets, water tables*

*o When children are building and/or climbing high structures*

*o When children are using sharp items such as sticks or tools.*

***Safety***

*• All staff members must be diligent in the inspection of the play areas.*

*• Each child is assigned to a key person who is responsible for their safety while they are outdoors.*

*• All equipment must be maintained to ensure the children’s safety.*

*• New equipment must be installed to the most up to date Safety Standards. Where equipment is installed that has a recommendation for a shock absorbing surface this must be rated and installed as recommended by the manufacturer.*

*• Visual inspections of the playground and equipment must be carried out on a daily basis before the children go outside to ensure safety is maintained.*

*• The use of wheeled toys must be carefully monitored.*

*• Emergency/first aid kits must be easily accessible.*

*• It must be ensured that all of the children are clear about the safety rules.*

***Playground and equipment maintenance***

*• Ensure that the route the children take from the indoor to the outdoor area is free of hazards – this must be checked daily.*

*• Ensure that the play area boundary (fence and gate/s) is secure, that no adult can access the area without the knowledge of the staff members in charge and no child can leave the area without supervision. Staff are responsible for locking front gates when children are outside so that no child can gain access to car park or road, please see our Safety Statement for further information.*

*• Ensure that children cannot access the bins, oil tank/gas supply, boiler or pest control bait boxes.*

*• Check the area for hazards such as catch points, sharp points, protruding hardware or possible entrapment (bars on equipment must be no less than 6cm apart (round) /7.5cm apart (flat)).*

*• Check daily for broken glass, plastic, animal droppings.*

*• Check for choking hazards where children under three are present.*

*• Sweep hard play surfaces clean of stones, sand and gravel.*

*• Check sand for contamination. Ensure the sand is cleaned and disinfected regularly.*

*• Always remove cords, string or skipping ropes tied to slides, or other playground equipment.*

*• Ensure climbing equipment is not placed near clothes lines or overhead wire.*

*• Restrict the use of climbing structures if they cannot be kept dry.*

*• Check structures for frost and/or ice build-up.*

*• Though the presence of ice provides a learning opportunity, ice poses an extreme fall risk. Ice underfoot must be broken, sanded or salted where appropriate before children are allowed to play in the area.*

*• Conduct daily checks on equipment. Watch for signs of decay, rust, splinters, sharp protrusions, protruding nuts, rivets or nails.*

*• Take whatever action is necessary to ensure children’s safety such as removing broken equipment or erecting temporary barriers. Record any problems that require specific maintenance or repair skills that staff members cannot provide and/or removal of equipment and bring them to the attention of the manager.*

*• Check for any toxic plants [these can sometimes be present through self-seeding from neighbouring property].*

***Outdoor play where the outdoor play area is not located on the premises***

*Where the outdoor play area is not on the service’s premises, staff members will ensure that the outdoor space being accessed has been risk assessed prior to its use on each occasion. This risk assessment will identify any hazards and how any potential risk of injury/incident from these hazards can be safely managed or eliminated.*

*Staff will ensure that children are not at risk from members of the public and are protected from unwanted attention while in an outdoor play area not located on the premises.*

*The service advises the insurance company about the outdoor play area and frequency of access to this area off the premises.*

*Staff will implement the Outings Policy, if required.*

**Communication Plan [For staff & families]**

All parents/guardians are to be informed of the policy and procedures regarding Outdoor Play on enrolment. Staff members will check with parents/guardians that they have read and understood the policy and provide any assistance needed.

A summary of this policy will be included in the Parent/Guardian Handbook and the full policy is available on the website www.blennerville.playschool.com

This policy will also be reviewed with staff at induction and annual staff training. When a complaint is received, the person making the complaint will be given a copy of this Policy and Procedures.

A copy of all policies will be available during all hours of operation to staff members and parents/guardians upon request.

Parents/guardians may receive a copy of the policy at any time upon request.

Parents/guardians and the staff team will receive written notification of any updates.

This policy must be observed by management and all staff members.

This policy is underwritten by the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Registration of Pre-school and school-age Services) Regulations 2018.

This policy was reviewed and adopted by The Willow Tree Children’s Centre on 1st January 2024.

Signed by: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

On behalf of Management

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