

# Portland Family Freeschool Philosophy, Strategies and Logistics

This document expresses the values of PFF, and practices we hope will contribute to the well being of all. The written word often fails to clearly express what is in our hearts; if your need for clarity is not fully met by any part of this document, please speak directly with a BOD or staff member.

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## **Philosophy:**

### *What Is This Freeschool Place Anyway?*

“By nature people are learning animals. Birds fly; fish swim; humans think and learn. Therefore, we do not need to motivate children into learning by wheedling, bribing, or bullying. We do not need to keep picking away at their minds to make sure they are learning.

What we need to do - and all we need to do - is to give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for, listen respectfully when they feel like talking, and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest.”

-John Holt

*Author and educator*

There are many different definitions of a Freeschool. PFF’s version is based on meeting and balancing needs for choice, respect, partnership, safety and contribution to one another’s well being as we learn and grow together.

We focus on nourishing a child’s natural connection with themselves, their learning, and the world around them through:

- Respectful, compassionate communication
- Process rather than product- oriented learning
- Partnership between teacher and student
- A focus on how we teach before what we teach
- Meaningful connection to self, to others, to learning, to life

### *Life-Enriching Education*

- Teaching is mutual as all classroom members are active experts on their own lives and interests. The adult shares out of a desire to contribute, not to control.
- The quality of the connection between teacher and student is primary; therefore, we focus first on how we teach, not what we teach.
- We believe children make meaningful, lifelong connections with topics of their own choosing; when children feel ownership of their learning, it happens on a profound, personal level.
- Rather than our goal being a particular academic outcome, we attend to meeting a child's need for connection: to self, to others, to learning, to life.

*"This resembles an indigenous model for education, which encourages teachers to suspend judgment, not to impose their will, and to trust that meaning will emerge out of the students' experience of solving their own problems, or even doing nothing. A child sitting on a hay bale might be having a meaningful experience.*

*The goal of teachers should be to find out what the kids want to know, and then to facilitate a process in which they can learn it."*

*-Zenobia Barlow*

*Executive director of the Center for Eco-literacy*

### *Freeschool*

The Freeschool classroom climate is one of invitation, not force...an organic flowing of offering and receiving from adults to children, children to adults; each community member actively choosing their own learning, and contributing to the learning of others.

The materials necessary for children to explore writing, reading, math, science, art, drama and music- - whether independently or with adult support- are always available.

Adult and child inspired activities are woven together to create a rich, diverse tapestry of opportunity. Always present is an eagerness to connect with what is alive for each child.

### ***Compassionate Communication***

When a child's needs are being met, they are naturally compassionate, resourceful, and curious about the world. Unmet needs often result in feelings of frustration, fear or worry. To reestablish their balance and ease in the world, children need empathy, practical help, and the opportunity to express themselves without judgment. Staff offer children understanding, a chance to truly hear one another, and support in finding strategies for learning and being that meet everyone's needs.

### ***We believe in freedom, not license.***

Staff facilitates communication in ways that meet community needs for respect and safety. Children feel respected even when they do not get what they want.

- We assure the safety of everyone
- We listen for the underlying feelings and needs behind the behavior; and we help children do the same for themselves and each other
- We trust each child's process and ability to work things out
- We give practical help through a language of observations, feelings, needs, and requests

### ***We avoid rewards and punishments***

## **Classroom Strategies:**

We hope to create a classroom in which children are seen and heard, and can play and explore in ways that bring them and others joy. As adults, we can contribute to this by:

- *Avoiding praise, judgment or evaluations of children and their work and, instead offering them our silent attention or a description of what we see*
- *Getting down to their level and listening to what they have to tell us*
- *Being a loving witness to children's feelings; while limiting actions that may compromise other's safety*
- *Creating opportunities that meet their needs for autonomy and choice whenever possible.*
- *Offering tools/strategies that reinforce the notion that partnership relations are not only possible, but also deeply satisfying and life serving*

### ***Teacher***

The role of the teacher is to support children in their growth, both emotionally and intellectually, paying close attention to children's cues as about their feelings and needs. Children come to school each day bringing their full selves: curiosities, worries, joys, and pains...therefore, one child might need emotional support during a conflict while another child is wanting to learn how to make letters, and another child is wanting help practicing cartwheels. The teacher stays attuned and strives to respond supportively to these messages. For example:

- *A child asks about a bird landing on the deck railing. The teacher might bring out a bird identification book to look through*
- *A child pretends to read a book, and being at an age that they might begin reading, the teacher offers an activity related to creating your own books and stories*
- *A child drifting aimlessly in the classroom, the teacher might invite them to join a game or activity*

## ***Compassionate Communication: Connection and Conflict Resolution***

PFF curriculum has at its core a commitment to non-violent communication, which is designed to create safety, connection, and joyful resolution to the inevitable conflicts that arise.

### ***NVC Practice***

The standard practice you will see being used is as follows, and you will find this posted throughout the classroom as well.

- ***Observe:*** Staff will describe, without judgment, what they are seeing, ask if children need help, or want to work it out themselves.  
    *"When you (see, hear)..."*
- ***Feelings and Needs:*** Staff will listen and reflect back the feelings and needs they are hearing from the children.  
    *"Do you feel...and are you (needing)..."*
- ***Requests:*** Staff will help the children articulate to one another what they are wanting, and will check in with both children about whether something works for them.  
    *"...And would you like me/them to...?"*  
    *Before we jump to "fixing" a situation, remember that understanding for what is happening inside a child often IS the solution.*

Staff will stay with the conflict until it is resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Every day children experience hundreds of little hurts and confusions that go un-addressed, creating layers of stress. We see conflicts as a wonderful opportunity to connect, practice staying with things even when they get hard, and coming out the other side with restored trust, hope and flexibility!

NVC is a tool that promotes connection to oneself and others. Other tools in use are play and laughter oriented connection, intuition and silent NVC.

Learn more about NVC at: [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)

### ***Feeling Words***

Feelings we may experience when our needs are being met:

<b>Affectionate</b>	Sympathetic	Compassionate	Warm	Loving
<b>Confident</b>	Empowered	Open	Safe	Secure

<b>Engaged</b>	Entranced	Intrigued	Spellbound	Curious
<b>Joyful</b>	Amused	Delighted	Glad	Jubilant
<b>Peaceful</b>	Calm	Centered	Relaxed	Serene
<b>Excited</b>	Invigorated	Dazzled	Giddy	Vibrant
<b>Exhilarated</b>	Blissful	Ecstatic	Elated	Radiant
<b>Grateful</b>	Appreciative	Moved	Thankful	Touched
<b>Hopeful</b>	Expectant	Encouraged	Optimistic	
<b>Refreshed</b>	Enlivened	Renewed	Rested	Revived
<b>Inspired</b>	Amazed	Awed	Wonder	

Feelings we may experience when our needs are *not* being met:

<b>Afraid</b>	Dread	Foreboding	Mistrustful	Terrified
<b>Annoyed</b>	Aggravated	Dismayed	Disgruntled	Irritated
<b>Angry</b>	Enraged	Furious	Incensed	Livid
<b>Yearning</b>	Envious	Jealous	Longing	Wistful
<b>Aversion</b>	Animosity	Appalled	Contempt	Dislike
<b>Confused</b>	Ambivalence	Baffled	Dazed	Lost
<b>Fatigued</b>	Beat	Burnt Out	Lethargic	Tired
<b>Vulnerable</b>	Fragile	Guarded	Leery	Shaky
<b>Disconnected</b>	Alienated	Aloof	Distant	Numb
<b>Disquiet</b>	Agitated	Disturbed	Restless	Troubled
<b>Embarrassed</b>	Flustered	Mortified	Ashamed	Guilty
<b>Pain</b>	Agony	Miserable	Regretful	Devastated
<b>Sad</b>	Depressed	Despair	Forlorn	Hopeless
<b>Tense</b>	Anxious	Distraught	Edgy	Jittery

### *Judgment and Interpretation Words*

Words that express how we interpret others, rather than how we feel:

<b>Abandoned</b>	Abused	Attacked	Betrayed	Bullied
<b>Cheated</b>	Cheated	Diminished	Distrusted	Interrupted
<b>Manipulated</b>	Misunderstood	Neglected	Overworked	Patronized
<b>Pressured</b>	Provoked	Put Down	Unappreciated	Unheard
<b>Unseen</b>	Unsupported	Unwanted	Used	

### *A List of Needs*

<b>Connection</b>	Acceptance	Belonging	Intimacy	Understood
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<b>Honesty</b>	Authenticity	Integrity	Presence	
<b>Play</b>	Joy	Humor		
<b>Peace</b>	Ease	Equity	Harmony	Inspiration
<b>Well Being</b>	Safety	Touch	Sleep	Movement
<b>Meaning</b>	Clarity	Competence	Creativity	Hope
<b>Autonomy</b>	Choice	Freedom	Space	Spontaneity

### ***Responses to Children's Feelings***

We listen for underlying unmet needs, always assume there is a good reason for what is happening, and that we don't need to know the reason in order to respond warmly and with our full attention. Tears and tantrums flow until the child is done, allowing the child to shed any distress accumulated in the trials of living and being.

We avoid showing a face that is stern or disapproving, as this only amplifies or confirms feelings of hurt or disconnect inside a child. This is why we don't use punishment or anger as a motivator for "good" behavior. As Aletha Solter put it, "It is ironic but true, children are the most in need of our loving attention when they act the least deserving of it."

### ***Activities: A Way to Explore Ideas***

The school aims to offer a range of choices: activities that stimulate and challenge the mind, the body, and the heart. What happens during a school day may vary based on the mood of the group, the intuition of the staff, the suggestions of children, and what the various members of the community bring to share.

As staff we consider ourselves not so much teachers, as sharers. Therefore, the child is free to join or not as they are moved to, to enter an activity fully rather than as the passive recipient, and to lend their own thinking, excitement, and wonderings to wherever the project leads.

We are neither anti-academic, nor anti-play. We are in favor of exploration and support, joyful learning and growing, unencumbered by ideas of right/wrong, punishment/reward, or fear of disapproval.

General Intentions:

## Philosophy, Strategies and Logistics

- *Two structured activities per day. These may have been sparked by children's, parents or teachers interests.*
- *Cooking weekly*
- *Art – planned and unplanned*
- *Movement*
- *Music*

### ***Gatherings***

This time provides a unique opportunity for children to know themselves as a community, to share and be heard, to laugh, to discuss ideas, wonderings, to plan for the day as a group. This may include:

- *Reading*
- *Dancing*
- *Playing group games*
- *Acting out stories*
- *Doing yoga/movement*
- *Discussing our worries, wonderings, and joys*

If you have an interest you'd like to share, please let us know.

### ***Judgments/'isms***

In the interest of everyone's need for freedom of choice, we strive to respond to children as human beings first and foremost. We avoid generalizations around age, understanding, gender, race or any other "ism", wanting to broaden, not limit, how children see themselves and the choices available to them.

### ***Evaluations and Praise***

Children best learn and thrive in environments free from anxiety and fear, in which their interests, creations, words and feelings flow freely out of them, unchecked by outside opinions or evaluations- negative OR positive. We believe that children need unconditional support and love- *with no strings attached*. "Good job!" is conditional. It means we're offering attention and acknowledgement and approval for jumping through *our* hoops, for doing things that please *us* (acknowledgments to Alfie Kohn). Our goal is to step back and allow children's natural desires and impulses to form authentically, without restraint; and free from limiting roles or behaviors imposed from outside.

*Commenting, acknowledging, and praising children for their achievements and other well-intended interventions foster dependency on external validation and undermine the children's trust in themselves. Children who are subjected to endless commentary, acknowledgment, and praise eventually learn to do things not for their own sake, but to please others.*

*When we intervene with praise, wants, advice, and rewards, doubts sneak in and shake loose our children's trust in themselves and in us...they perceive that we have an agenda - that we are manipulating them toward some preferred or "improved" end result...As educator John Holt has said of children, "They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them hang over their heads like a cloud." In short...the happiness we see (as a result of praise) is not pleasure, but rather relief that another pleasing act has been accomplished, securing parental approval (emotional survival) and concealing a feeling of deep loss.*

- Naomi Aldort

This article excerpt by Naomi Aldort appeared in a 1994 issue of Mothering Magazine; read more of her articles at [www.naturalchild.org](http://www.naturalchild.org)

For more on praise and rewards: <http://www.alfiekohn.org/>

We ask that you avoid using evaluative words in the class. Clearly this is not an easy request, as praise and disapproval seem to come so easily! So don't be hard on your self, there is sure to be another chance!

**Common words that evaluate include:** good, bad, right, wrong, pretty, beautiful, smart, nice, great, ugly, etc.

**Some suggestions to replace evaluative language:** asking a child to tell you about their work, silent companionship in wonder, an expression of your own feelings and needs that are met, guesses about the feelings and needs of the child, listening attentively, describing what you see, etc.

## **Setting Limits**

*Grateful acknowledgements to Patty Wipfler for the information here*

It is vital to learning and life that children know they are safe, will be respected, and will have the support they need to stop themselves when they are feeling out of control. Everyday stress can result in children losing their patience, their love of fun, their easygoing ability to enjoy the day. At these times, they may act irritable, antagonistic, out of their bodies; or they may insist on having things someone else has, or want one thing after another, without gaining satisfaction.

At times like these, adults can play a very positive role. We can set limits on children's behavior by stepping in with the support they need to regain their innate joy, ease and caring for others.

### ***Protect***

If a child is doing something that compromises needs for safety or respect, it's time to step in. Get down so you are at eye level, step in gently, and state the limit. If she's throwing toys in anger, put your hand on the toy she's about to throw, and say, "I won't let you throw that." No punishment is needed, no lectures are needed, no harshness is needed. Simply step in.

### ***Connect***

Once everyone is safe, this is the time for empathy. (Generally, empathy is needed for all the children involved).

"You really wanted those blocks...I see how frustrated you feel. I'll help you work it out."

"Were you wanting him to know you weren't done yet?"

"It's really hard to wait when you are feeling so impatient."

This is the "stress release" step that will help your child immensely- with a compassionate ear, she will most likely begin to cry, storm, or tantrum. This is constructive. It is your child's way of getting rid of the tension that resulted in the behavior in the first place. If you can stay close while she cries or storms, she will continue until she has regained her ability to listen, to be cooperative, and to make the best of the situation at hand. Your empathy and understanding is the essential ingredient to this recovery.

### ***Parent Teachers - Why Am I Doing this?***

*Excerpts from an article by Lois Todd, past parent and teacher at the Cedar Hills Cooperative School*

“Being a parent teacher is an amazing opportunity to step out of the fast-lane long enough to enjoy to this time in your child’s life. But wait a minute- it dawns on you “I need to spend time in the class every month! What was I thinking? Will I know what to do? Isn’t it going to cut into the free time I was planning on using for myself? Why didn’t I pick a program where I could just drop off and pick up?”

Take heart – you are not only giving your child a wonderful start, but the side benefits for yourself are definitely worth the effort. What is unique about this style of classroom is that you are part of the action, not just a spectator. The teacher will train you in your responsibilities and will be there to support you. In turn you will learn an unbelievable amount from their modeling about how to interact with children. Additionally, when you have witnessed a daily routine and shared the experience with your child, you have an inside track on many of the adventures that are part of their school life.

By becoming a significant addition to the classroom you will be giving all the children the experience of interacting with someone other than their own family. The other parents are doing the same for your child. This is probably one of the most important volunteer jobs you will undertake to benefit your child’s school career. It seems insignificant, but can mean so much in the future for the child to be able to get the most from the many adults who will be their teachers in all aspects of their learning years.

As you help other children, you will become aware of different learning styles, and in so doing know your own child better. You will see that not all children of any given age approach new material in the same way and you can make allowances and adjustments to give you child room to learn in her own way. This will make you a better advocate for you child as you confer with her teachers. Knowing how to become a partner with educators instead of an adversary may be the best gift a parent can give a child.”

We ask that when you are in the classroom you:

- Follow the lead of the teacher and staff
- Support and be consistent with the school philosophy.

Please talk to a staff member outside of class time if you have questions or concerns, or have a skill, interest or project you would like to share with the children!

There will be a parent in the classroom every day.

### *Sharing*

In the classroom, we follow these guidelines:

- *All materials are for anyone to use.*
- *They may use the material/toy until they are done.*
- *An adult will help the other child wait. Adult help may include empathizing with one or both of the children, and helping them talk to one another about what they are wanting.*
- *Respect and empathy are offered to both children, without judgment.*

When children appear to having a conflict over an object, it is almost never about the object. We avoid jumping to problem solving or fixing, and instead focus on the feelings that come up for each child, using empathy guesses. It is often helpful to gently reassure children that you will stay with them, or ask if it would help for you to hold the object in question, until both are satisfied and ready to move on. In this way, the adult also “holds” the hope that has been shaken, restoring faith in the process.

### *TV/Media*

We strongly encourage you to limit or eliminate altogether your child’s exposure to TV, movies, and computer games. We believe that a child’s imagination provides them with everything they need for rich, joyful play. We value and want to preserve this innate creativity. Additionally, recent brain imaging studies conducted by Dr. John Murray indicate that

*...when children watch violent movies, they may know intellectually that they are watching make-believe scenes -- but their brains process the images as ‘real’ and store those images in the same place where real-life traumatic events are stored. According to Dr. Murray, “The brain treats entertainment violence as something significant and something real -- and it stores this violence as long-term memory.”*

*Murray's MRI imaging research showed that children store memories of violent entertainment images in the same part of the brain where veterans store severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) memories and where women store memories of rape. "These children are forming indelible memories," said Murray. Such intense memories and images are quickly recalled and can be used as guides for future behavior. "Our concern is for the long-term effects of these violent scenes on children's behavior", Dr. Murray recently told a Senate Subcommittee.*

[\\*http://www.changingchannels.org/effects1b.htm](http://www.changingchannels.org/effects1b.htm)

## **Classroom Logistics:**

### ***Drop Off/ Pick Up***

Please always sign your child in, make sure the teacher knows you and your child have arrived, and check your child's cubby and the announcement board in the entryway for any notices. The same goes for leaving. Always tell your child and teacher when you are leaving and if anyone else is picking your child up. Also, please make sure a teacher knows that you have come and are taking your child at the end of the school day. Arrangements to have anyone other than the adults listed on your enrollment forms pick up your child must be made with the teacher on a case-by-case basis.

### ***Goodbyes***

We welcome parents in the classroom anytime, for as long as it works well for you and your child. We will make every effort to make transitions easy and warm, and to create an atmosphere that welcomes and reassures. However, our primary goal is not to get parents out the door, or for children to accept their leaving happily, but to connect with and respond to whatever is most alive for each child, in each moment. We welcome tears and fears. We hope you will feel completely comfortable staying with your child until s/he, or you, decide it is time to go. This may be minutes, hours, days, or weeks- you know what "fits" for your family. Please alert a staff member if you intend to leave and your child is having feelings about this, so we can be present to listen and empathize.

### ***Lunches***

In keeping with the school philosophy of supporting healthy choice and autonomy for children, in particular as it relates to the body:

- *There is no set time when children are expected to sit and eat.*
- *Sack lunches will be brought from home and will be available for children to eat when they are hungry.*
- *We suggest avoiding candy or soda*
- *Any snacks provided will be vegetarian.*
- *Feel free to put lunches in the refrigerator*

### ***When to keep your child home***

If your child is ill, please keep them home, and call the school to notify the teacher. A child who hasn't slept well, has a fever, severe cough, or stomach ache needs the extra nurturing home provides. If in doubt, call us.

We will call you to come get your child if they appear too ill to enjoy being at school. We also encourage you to keep your child home if they are asking for a day with you and it works for you to be with them that day. Children are easily overwhelmed and often need a day off from the rush of school and life!

### ***Weather***

We will follow the Portland Public Schools weather policy. Additionally:

- If Trillium Charter School is closed, so are we.
- If Trillium Charter School is one hour late, so are we.
- If Trillium Charter School is two hours late, PFF will be closed for the day.

You can get up-to-date closure information at  
<http://www.pps.k12.or.us/info/weather/>

### ***Dressing for School***

Children need to move and create freely, without having to worry about getting their clothes dirty. We request that you dress your child in:

- Old, soft, comfortable clothes that can be easily washed
- Clothing that does not portray violent acts or any stereotyped image such as Barbie, etc. TV/Media images, as fun and exciting as they can be, are often simply designed to sell a product. Violent and/or sexualized images obscure less marketed avenues for expressing and play, thus interfering with a child's need for choice.

Children of both genders are welcome to remove shirts, shoes, and socks. We ask that all children keep their underwear on. It may happen that children's clothing become soiled or wet in the course of the day. Please assure that your

child always has a supply of extra clothes in his/her cubby, so s/he can always choose to be warm and dry.

### ***Toys from Home***

If your child has a blanket or stuffed animal they enjoy, they are welcome to bring it, as well as anything else: a birds nest, rock, old sock, dead bug, rubber band or any other fascinating object they have discovered and want to share! We ask that you keep all weapons, media related items, and electronics at home.

We generally find that toys from home, particularly weapons and electronics, tend to limit the range and type of interactions, getting in the way in a child's need to connect with others in the class. If children do choose to bring a toy from home, we will treat it like any other classroom material (see "sharing", above); or, they may put the toy in their cubby.

### ***Why No Weapons at PFF?***

This is a learning community in which children are free to feel their deepest feelings, express their rage and fear fully, and practice doing this with tools that contribute to greater connection and understanding. We aim to contradict the pervasive notion that there is only one way to solve problems, and instead reflect the myriad of possibilities of human interaction.

While we are keeping weapons out of the classroom, play that involves conflict or anger, any explorations of power, rage, fear and themes of life/death is heartily welcomed as an important part of being alive. Children express and explore a wide range of feelings here and can expect a compassionate response. The goal is working to meet all the children's needs. We do attend carefully to be sure that one child's need for expression does not compromise another child's- or adults- need for safety or respect.

Regardless of whatever tools children use during play, be it swords, crayons, or hammers- the deepest need is for connection. All children have behaviors that sometimes do not meet their need for closeness, acceptance and friendship. We will work with each child to find strategies that could better meet those needs.

### *Siblings*

Siblings are always welcome! You are solely responsible for the supervision of any child you bring that is not enrolled on that day.

### *Holidays*

The school calendar will generally reflect seasonal celebrations (harvest, solstice, etc) and lean away from holidays that are already widely promoted by the media. Check the school calendar for details.

Birthdays: Please join us for closing circle on your child's birthday and talk to the teacher about birthday celebrations.

## **General Logistics:**

### ***Getting your Questions and Concerns Answered***

For questions/ concerns related to:

- *Classroom or children's needs - please talk with the PFF teacher.*
- *For legal issues - contact the President of the Board*
- *Enrollment - contact PFF teacher*
- *Financial issues - contact the treasurer*

To meet needs for trust and open communication, if an issue arises, we ask that you talk directly to the person with whom you have an issue. You may also request a staff mediator to be present.

### ***Tuition***

Deposit your tuition in the tuition box at school by the 5th of the month.

### ***Parent meetings***

PFF strongly requests (our version of "mandatory"!) your participation in parent meetings throughout the year. Please talk to a staff person if you have a schedule conflict.

Portland Family Freeschool is a member of the Parent Child Preschools of Oregon (PCPO), and as such must be in compliance with PCPO policies, specifically, all parents are required to attend at least three school meetings per year.

### ***Parent Help days***

- *All parents will have scheduled times when they will join the class for the day*
- *Parent Helper will set up and clean up, and be with the children as the teacher requests.*
- *On the days that you are Parent Helper, please arrive at 8:45am.*
- *Check your PH tasks for the day posted in the kitchen*
- *Please read the Parent Help document for more details.*
- *Please reread the Strategies section above.*



## Items To Consider Bringing on the First Day

- *Photo album filled with photos, pictures or whatever your child would like to see each day, to hang in your child's cubby.*
- *Two rolls of film*
- *One full change of clothes to keep at school*
- *Rubber boots to keep at school*
- *Raincoat to keep at school*
- *Soft, warm inside shoes (slippers work well)*
- *Unbreakable cup your child will easily recognize as theirs*
- *A cloth hand towel that your child will recognize as theirs, that has a small loop sewn into a corner for hanging. Note: using cloth will reduce waste.*
- ***Every day:** Lunch for your child; please include a cloth napkin. Note: using cloth will reduce waste.*