



N O U R I S H Y O U R N E E D F O R

NATURE™

SPRING/SUMMER 2025



CELEBRATING

25 YEARS

OF DODGE
NATURE
PRESCHOOL

D O D G E N A T U R E C E N T E R A N D P R E S C H O O L



25 YEARS OF PLAY, DISCOVERY, AND COMMUNITY

For 25 years, the backyard behind Dodge Nature Preschool has been an essential part of the early childhood learning experience. With room to run, dirt to dig in, and logs to climb, imaginations bloom and naturally curious minds are nurtured. Over the decades, the backyard has evolved alongside the needs of students, staff, and the community.

“The goals of developing the Preschool in the beginning were about fostering community,” says Sheila Williams-Ridge, former Preschool staff and current Dodge Board Member.

Sheila started at the Preschool in 2000, before there was even a building, and alongside founding Preschool Director Julie Powers she was instrumental in the school’s strong start. Sheila and Julie hoped Preschool families would feel connected to the space—physically and emotionally—and return for programs, school-aged camps, and more.

In 2020, life at the Preschool shifted in response to emerging community health needs. To keep classes running and serve the volume of students enrolled, teachers shifted to an all-outside model. Snack time became outdoor picnics, students circled up for stories around campfires, and the backyard space shifted into three distinct outdoor classrooms. It became apparent then the space was in dire need of upgrades.

“It wasn’t the quality experience we wanted to offer,” says Joey Schoen, Assistant Preschool Director.

“Anything needs to be refreshed 20 years in. That’s just the nature of working outside.”

The Preschool was intentionally built with easy access to nature center grounds—wetlands and woods are mere steps outside the gate. This also means the backyard sits on land that had slowly eroded over the years. It needed major hardscape work.

Just as teachers shape curriculum to engage students’ curiosities, their ideas helped shape the redesign of the outdoor classrooms. Teachers gave students blank maps and asked them to draw what they wanted. “Some of them had fantastical ideas like a pool and a waterslide, but that still told us they value water play,” says Joey.

Members of the redesign task force continued to plan and enhance the three separate outdoor classrooms. While it started as a necessity during the pandemic, teachers found the dedicated spaces better served both students and staff.

Community at the Preschool may look different now, but it still feels vibrant after 25 years.

“While the spaces are separate, there’s so much more community,” says Joey. “We’re still very connected. We think of each other as neighbors.”

See the new outdoor classrooms for yourself at Rock the Barn on May 17! Get tickets at DodgeNatureCenter.org/RTB.

Left: Olivia Irvine Dodge, the founder of Dodge Nature Center, and Sheila Williams-Ridge at the opening day of Dodge Nature Preschool in September 2000. **Middle:** The Dodge Nature Preschool building during its construction. **Right:** Students in the Preschool backyard in June 2003.





Following Their Footsteps Outdoors

When Hilary Chart started exploring childcare for her son Rohan and first toured Dodge Nature Preschool in 2017, she knew it was the right place.

“It seemed so magical,” says Hilary. “Being outside all the time, there were so many different opportunities.”

Initially, the Preschool wasn’t feasible for their family. They would have a significant commute and Hilary and her husband Rasika both worked full time. But Hilary continued to think wistfully of Dodge. When the pandemic hit, they both realized Dodge was where Rohan needed to be.

“The Preschool was committing to this totally outdoor model,” Hilary says. “We needed a place where he could keep learning and mixing safely with other kids. We were like, ‘We’re going to make this work.’”

Hilary watched Rohan thrive at the Preschool and didn’t hesitate to enroll her daughter Solveij when she became old enough to attend. As both their

children spent every day outside learning, exploring, and growing, Hilary and Rasika began to see the outdoors from a different perspective.

“Our commitment to have Ro and Sosi outside every day opened the outdoors up to our whole family,” Hilary notes. “Our entire relationship with the natural world shifted. We started to see and appreciate the wildness all around us.”

Instead of playgrounds, the family sought out natural parks and trails. Camping trips filled their summers (and winters). They frequently visited the nature center grounds for family hikes through familiar fields and forests, with tools like magnifying glasses and their curiosity in tow.

“The Preschool has been super important for us as a whole family, and that’s not something I anticipated,” Hilary shares. **“The kids knew how to be outside, but as adults, we had forgotten. Dodge reminded us.”**

Nature Activities

MAY - AUGUST 2025

For activity details and registration, visit DodgeNatureCenter.org/Activities

MAY

15	Pride Outside	Grades 5-12
15	Here a Chick, There a Chick*	All Ages
15	Wild Cocktails	Adults 21+

17 Rock the Barn All Ages

Giddy up for our annual farm and music festival supporting Preschool scholarships. Along with event favorites (live bands, pony rides, and farm babies), join us for a special celebration this year—**Dodge Nature Preschool’s 25th anniversary!**

Festivities include a happy birthday sing-along, a party favor, and special t-shirts and stickers for sale.

Tickets: \$8 Ages 3+ Free! Ages 2 and under DodgeNatureCenter.org/RTB

21	Foraged Foods	All Ages
22	Blacksmithing Basics (Series)*	Adults 18+
22	Foraged Foods*	All Ages
31	Poetry in the Wild*	Adults 16+

JUNE

5, 12, 19, 26	Blacksmithing Basics (Series)*	Adults 16+
11	Forest Bathing	Adults 16+
13, 20, 27	Elemental Yoga	Adults 18+
19	ROCC the City Juneteenth Celebration	All Ages
20	Farm Fun	All Ages
20	Nature Game Night	All Ages
25	Incredible Insects*	Families

JULY

10, 17	Blacksmithing Basics (Series)*	Adults 16+
11, 18	Elemental Yoga	Adults 18+
19	Blacksmithing Project Shop: Bottle Opener*	Adults 18+

AUGUST

1	Universe in the Park	All Ages
11	Morning at Shepard Farm*	All Ages
12	Farm Fun	All Ages
15	Nighttime Animals*	Families
22	Universe in the Park*	All Ages

*Located at our Shepard Farm Property in Cottage Grove

GATHER • GIVE • GROW

Night for Nature

09.18.25

An evening in support of environmental education.

NATURE TOTS: OUTDOOR LEARNING FOR LITTLE LEARNERS

"Hello, how are you!" greets Melissa Thompson as a family rolls in for her Nature Tots class. "I love seeing your big smile every time."

It's a brisk, windy spring day at the nature center. But adults with toddlers in tow are ready for a morning outside at Nature Tots.

Launched in October 2024, Nature Tots is a six-week-long program for ages 16 months to 3 years old. The program helps families gain confidence outdoors and offers strategies to support their children's development.

Melissa recognized the need for toddler activities in the community—and right at home. "During pick up time at the Preschool, I saw toddlers waiting for their siblings," Melissa explains. Now substitute teaching after welcoming her daughter in 2023, she missed being full-time at the Preschool. "I had my 1.5-year-old daughter Beverly and still wanted to be involved in the Dodge culture."

As families trickle in, self-guided stations are ready for the kids to explore at their own pace. Melissa developed simple, yet engaging activities that foster motor and social skills.

A space for coloring supports fine motor development, introduces a beginning writing grip, encourages creativity, and serves as a calming activity that aids emotional regulation. A sensory bin filled with dried beans and other small trinkets encourages language development—and because it's a favorite for the children, it also helps them practice sharing and communication.

"Come on over and hold a handle!" Melissa sings to gather the full group as she unravels a colorful parachute.

Every Nature Tots session starts (and ends) with a song—this helps kids understand routine and transitions.

"We're going to sing our wind song! Do you feel the wind today?" Melissa leads. Adults grab the parachute handles as it balloons into the air. Toddlers teeter under, jumping and dancing beneath the billowing chute.

Mid-program, a preschooler hiking with his class spots his mom and sibling at Nature Tots and sprints over. After a quick hug, he rejoins his class.

"When we moved to Minnesota, we found Dodge and loved it," shares his mom, Tori Sadofsky. She's at Nature Tots with her younger son, 2-year-old Henry. "Nature Tots gives Henry the ability to feel like he's involved, too. He sees how much his older brother loves the Preschool. This is a great bridge for him to experience it on a smaller scale."

Now in its 25th year, the Preschool is a trusted provider of high-quality, nature-based early childhood education. Melissa hopes Nature Tots will introduce more families to Dodge and give them a look into life at the Preschool.

"This is her first experience with any kind of school," shares Molly Lauth with daughter Clara beside her. "It puts her out of her comfort zone in a good way. It's a gentle way to be exposed to other kids and experience a group environment."

After a short walk to the pond, snack and story time, and more time with activity stations, the program wraps up. "We had a big day at Nature Tots!" Melissa says as she gathers everyone for the closing song. "We gotta go now, bye, bye! See ya later, alligator, in a while, crocodile, see you next time."

Find upcoming summer sessions of Nature Tots at DodgeNatureCenter.org/Activities.



Above: Melissa leading the group through a song during parachute time.

Below: Molly Lauth sitting with her daughter Clara during a walk to the pond.



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