



# INDEPENDENCE ACADEMY

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## PARENT & STUDENT HANDBOOK

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## PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is here to guide both students and their families as part of the Independence Academy community. Inside, you'll find the expectations, procedures, and values that shape our school environment. We believe that when families engage actively, students thrive. Your involvement is essential to cultivating the connected, intentional learning environment we're known for. Please read this handbook carefully and refer back to it throughout the year. Our shared commitment to these policies ensures a supportive and respectful space for everyone.

## OUR STORY: THE HISTORY OF INDEPENDENCE ACADEMY

Independence Academy began as a dream shared by three families who were determined to find a Montessori-inspired education for their children in Harnett County, North Carolina. When they couldn't find what they were looking for, they created it; launching Independence Montessori Academy in April 2015.

With a strong foundation rooted in Montessori philosophy and hands-on school leadership experience, our founders opened a school centered around joyful learning, strong community ties, and stewardship. In June 2020, we evolved into Independence Academy to reflect our blend of Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches. Today, under the leadership of Katelyn Gerhardt, we remain a family-owned and operated school, proudly serving families with intention and heart.

## 3 VALUES DRIVING OUR PHILOSOPHY

At Independence Academy, our approach to education is deeply rooted in three simple yet powerful values: Learn, Grow, Give.

### Learn

We believe every child is born with a natural love of learning. Our job is to nurture that curiosity through a rich, hands-on curriculum that challenges and excites. We're committed to making learning an active, joyful, and lifelong pursuit, for students, staff, and families alike. As educators, we model this value by continuing our own learning and staying connected to our community.

### Grow

Learning at IA is not just academic, it's physical, social, and emotional. As students engage deeply in their work and develop new skills, they build confidence and independence. We also foster a strong sense of interdependence: knowing when to lead, when to follow, and how to collaborate. Growth at IA happens inside and out.

### Give

We teach children to lead by example and uplift others. Older students serve as mentors, and all students contribute to our school community through care, connection and skill. As students progress throughout the school they are given more responsibility to take care of their environment and build real life skills in order to contribute to their community.

## FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF INDEPENDENCE ACADEMY

These four principles form the backbone of everything we do; from daily classroom practices to long-term outcomes. They guide our curriculum, our conversations, and our community as a whole.

### 1. Montessori and Reggio-Inspired Curriculum

At IA, we thoughtfully blend the structure and precision of Montessori education with the creativity and reflection of the Reggio Emilia approach. Our classrooms are designed to be hands-on, with natural, engaging materials that invite curiosity. Montessori materials give students a solid foundation in core academic skills, while Reggio-inspired provocations spark imagination, problem-solving, and meaningful exploration.

### 2. Nature Immersion

We believe children thrive when they're deeply connected to nature. Our outdoor spaces evolve with the seasons and are shaped by the children who play there. Nature walks, outdoor classrooms, and hands-on garden work offer children daily opportunities to observe, interact with, and respect the world around them. These early connections foster a lifelong appreciation for the environment.

### 3. Social and Emotional Growth Through Conscious Discipline

Emotional intelligence is just as important as academic knowledge. Through the Conscious Discipline model, students learn to recognize and regulate their emotions, communicate their needs, and navigate challenges with compassion and resilience. These skills are taught daily and become the foundation for strong, respectful relationships.

### 4. Child Progress Portfolios

We believe every child's growth is unique and worth documenting. Instead of standardized testing, we create a digital portfolio that reflects each student's individual journey. These include photographs, artwork, and developmental reflections tied to learning goals and the NC Foundations. Portfolios support thoughtful conferences with families and serve as a beautiful snapshot of your child's time at IA.

## WHAT MAKES OUR CURRICULUM UNIQUE

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Our curriculum is more than a method, it's a philosophy rooted in respect, independence, and deep engagement. Here's what sets us apart:

- We treat each child as a capable and unique individual, deserving of dignity and trust.
- Multi-age classrooms allow children to grow into leadership roles and benefit from peer mentorship.
- Our curriculum is thoughtfully integrated, linking subjects together in meaningful ways that grow deeper over time.
- Independence is at the heart of our model. As children gain skills, they also gain confidence and purpose.
- Peace education and conflict resolution are daily practices. Children are taught how to live and work respectfully within a community.
- Character development is woven into the curriculum, empowering children to become thoughtful, self sufficient and purposeful adults.
- Learning is hands-on and active. Children aren't passive recipients, they're explorers and creators.
- Classrooms are intentionally designed with materials that support self-directed, self-correcting learning.
- Our school is a true community where children, teachers, and families support one another.
- Creativity is nurtured through the arts and children are encouraged to express themselves through music, writing, poetry, drama, and visual art.

## SCHOOL RECORD KEEPING

The safety, privacy, and confidentiality of each child's records are a top priority. We maintain secure files for all enrolled students and follow best practices for handling sensitive information.

### Confidential Records

- All confidential student records, including incident reports, behavioral notes, and teacher-parent communication are kept securely.
- These records are maintained and accessed only by appropriate administrative and teaching staff.

### Submitting Important Documents

To ensure the security and proper handling of official records:

- All official forms (such as health assessments, immunization records, and other enrollment documents) must be emailed directly to administration at [office@independenceacademync.com](mailto:office@independenceacademync.com) or hand-delivered to the front office.
- Do not send important documents in your child's backpack.
- Handwritten notes regarding sensitive family matters (such as health, custody, or financial information) should also be submitted directly to the Admin Team or Lead Teacher, not sent with the child.

We take great care in protecting the privacy and well-being of your child. Thank you for partnering with us to ensure that sensitive information is handled thoughtfully and securely.

## FEES

### Registration/Application Fee:

- \$75 for all students
- Due at the time the Admissions Application is submitted for enrollment or the waiting pool.
- This is a non-refundable fee.

For returning students, the Registration Fee is due by March 23rd of the preceding school year to hold the student's slot.

### Resource Fee:

- Due at the time of enrollment.
  - Returning and new school year students: Fee is due by July 15.
  - If unpaid by July 15, the student will lose their classroom spot.
  - For students placed in the waiting pool, the Resource Fee is due by the student's first day in attendance.

This fee is non-refundable, unless the student is ultimately not placed due to circumstances on Independence Academy's behalf.

The Resource Fee covers:

- Disposable classroom goods and supplies
- Monthly curriculum and classroom materials
- Spirit shirts
- School technology support and security
- Maintenance of our 13-acre campus

### Resource Fee Amounts:

- Flower Rooms, Tree Rooms, Explorers: \$215
- Inde Elementary: \$315

### Proration Schedule:

- Half fee if enrolling between January 1–March 1
- Monthly proration if enrolling after March 1

### Tuition Discounts:

Maximum of 5% Discount on Tuition only:

- 5% Military Discount
- For Active Duty, Military Retirees & First Responders. ID must be provided for verification before receiving the discount. Discounts are not backdated.
- 5% Sibling Discount
- For families with two or more children concurrently enrolled at Independence Academy.
- We accept ChildCare Aware. \*Tuition is due on the 1<sup>st</sup> regardless of subsidy payment.

Only one discount may be applied. The maximum discount per student is 5%.

## **TUITION AND PAYMENT POLICY**

Tuition at Independence Academy is an investment in high-quality education, intentional care, and a nurturing learning environment. In order to continue providing exceptional programming, pay staff equitably, and maintain our facilities, we ask that all families adhere to the following tuition and payment policies.

### **Tuition Structure:**

- Tuition is billed in monthly installments (unless paid annually or semi-annually), due on the first of each month, regardless of attendance.
- Tuition remains the same each month, including those with school breaks, holidays, or inclement weather closures. These closures are factored into the annual tuition rate and evenly divided across the year. 10 equal installments for Tree Rooms, Explorers and Inde Elementary. 12 equal installments for Flower Rooms. This tuition structure remains the same regardless of time of enrollment.
- Tuition is not prorated for illness, vacation, holidays, or unexpected absences.
- The final payment is due June 1. If payment is not received on June 1, your child may not attend until your account is current.

### **Payment Methods:**

Tuition payments may be made in the following ways:

- QuickBooks Online:
  - ACH payments (1% fee)
  - Credit Card payments (3% fee)
- Check (no fee): may be dropped in the tuition payment box, located just outside the administration office in the main building.

We do not accept cash payments.

### **Late Payments & Delinquent Accounts:**

- A \$50 late fee will be assessed on the 7th of each month if payment has not been received.
- Accounts that are 30 days past due will be considered delinquent and are subject to:
  - Suspension and/or possible dismissal from the program
  - Ineligibility for re-enrollment or participation in special programs or events

### **Financial Responsibility:**

Enrollment at Independence Academy signifies a financial commitment for the full school year. We ask that all families budget accordingly and reach out to administration before an issue arises if experiencing financial hardship. We will do our best to work with you, but tuition obligations must be met in order to maintain enrollment.

Your tuition supports far more than just classroom instruction; it sustains a vibrant school community that nurtures curiosity, character, and growth. We are grateful for your partnership in making this possible.

## WITHDRAWAL POLICY

We understand that family needs and circumstances may change over time. If you choose to withdraw your child from Independence Academy, please review and follow the official withdrawal procedure outlined below:

To initiate withdrawal from IA, the Withdrawal Form must be submitted with a minimum two-week notice (a two week notice is defined as two weeks from the date of submission). Email [admissions@independenceacademync.com](mailto:admissions@independenceacademync.com) to obtain the Withdrawal Form. The tuition installment is due in full for the month in which the student withdraws. If your two-week notice runs into the following month, that month's installment of tuition is due. A withdrawal fee of \$250 is assessed if a child withdraws between August 1, 2025–April 1, 2026 for Tree Rooms, Inde Explorers and Inde Elementary, or June 1, 2025–April 1, 2026 for Flower Rooms. If withdrawal occurs on or after April 1, 2026–June 12, 2026, for all IA students, a \$250 withdrawal fee is due along with the remaining tuition for the school year. The ONLY exception to waive the withdrawal fee is official PCS orders (with a report date of no more than 35 days from the last day in attendance as stated on the Withdrawal Form). WITHOUT MILITARY PCS ORDERS, AS DESCRIBED ABOVE, THERE ARE NO EXCEPTIONS FOR WAIVING THE WITHDRAWAL FEE. Student school records are property of IA and will not be released until accounts are current.

\$250 per student withdrawn

IA requires 14 days written notice to [admissions@independenceacademync.com](mailto:admissions@independenceacademync.com) in order to withdraw from early or aftercare & 30 days notice to cancel Inde Nature Baby. Early and aftercare rates are not prorated.

This policy exists so that we can plan accordingly for staffing, enrollment, and classroom continuity. A smooth transition helps us maintain a stable environment for all children, including those who remain in our care.

### Final Payments:

- All outstanding balances must be paid in full by your child's final day. This includes:
  - Tuition for the month of withdrawal
  - Any withdrawal fees incurred
  - Any other outstanding charges (late fees, lunch charges, etc.)
- If tuition was pre-paid beyond the notice period, a refund will be issued for any applicable unused portion once the account is settled.

### Delinquent Accounts upon Withdrawal:

If any balance, including tuition, fees, or withdrawal charges, is not paid by your child's last day, the following steps will be taken:

1. IA will make three documented attempts to collect payment via email, phone call, or written letter.
2. If no resolution is reached, the account will be filed with small claims court.
3. The parent or guardian will be responsible for all court fees and legal costs associated with the claim, in addition to the outstanding balance.

This policy ensures that we can continue to provide high-quality education and care, compensate our staff fairly, and maintain our facilities for all enrolled children.

We value our partnership with families, and part of that partnership includes honoring the financial commitments that allow our school to operate responsibly and sustainably.

## **SCHOOL HOURS & ARRIVAL EXPECTATIONS**

At Independence Academy, we believe that structure and consistency help children feel secure and prepared for the day. Please review the following schedule and expectations carefully to support a smooth school experience for your child and their classroom.

### **PROGRAM SCHEDULE:**

#### **Early Care**

7:00 AM – 8:30 AM

#### **The Flower Rooms (5 Day)**

8:30 AM – 3:00 PM (Drop-off: 8:15–8:45)

#### **The Flower Rooms (2/3 Day)**

8:30 AM – 12:30 PM (Drop-off: 8:15–8:45)

#### **The Tree Rooms**

8:30 AM – 3:00 PM (Drop-off: 8:15–8:30)

#### **Explorers (2/3/5 Day)**

8:30 AM – 12:30 PM (Drop-off: 8:15-8:30)

#### **Inde Elementary**

(Drop-off: 8:15–8:30)

#### **Extended Exploration (After Care)**

3:00 PM – 6:00 PM

## **EXPECTED ARRIVAL**

Children are expected to arrive on time during the designated drop-off windows listed above. Arrival times are intentional and critical—our classrooms begin important work cycles and lessons shortly after drop-off, and every child's presence is vital to the rhythm and success of the day.

If your child must arrive late due to an emergency or scheduled medical appointment, you must **call (919-343-3004)** the office in advance. These exceptions should be rare and not used as a matter of convenience.

- The latest arrival time is 9:00 AM for all classrooms.**
- If you have not called the office and your child arrives after 9:00 AM, they will not be admitted for the day.**
- Even with notice, children arriving after 10:30 AM will not be permitted to join the class.**

Repeated late arrivals—whether planned or unplanned—are disruptive to the classroom dynamic, interfere with essential learning time, and hinder the child's ability to feel grounded and included. If late drop-offs become habitual or begin to negatively affect your child's experience or the classroom community, a meeting with administration will be scheduled to address the concern and determine a path forward.

We appreciate your partnership in ensuring children begin their day on time, prepared, and fully integrated into the flow of learning.

## **DISMISSAL POLICY AND SAFETY**

A smooth and secure dismissal process helps protect the safety of our students and ensures that every child ends their day in a calm, predictable way.

### **Standard Pick-Up Procedures:**

- Please plan to arrive at your child's designated program ending time:
  - Part-day Flower Room: 12:30 PM
  - Full-day Flower Room: 2:30-3:00 PM
  - Tree Rooms: 2:30–3:00 PM
  - Explorers: 12:30 PM
  - Inde Elementary: VARIES
- If you need to pick up early, please call the office ahead of time.
- For the safety and focus of all children, parents may not enter the classroom prior to dismissal unless prior notice is given.

### **Campus Security:**

The safety of our students, staff and campus is our top priority, and we ask all families to actively participate in keeping our environment secure.

- All doors remain locked at all times.
- **It is required that all parents download and use the Kangarootime app to access the building for both arrival and pick-up.**
- Wi-Fi is available for all families under the network name IAGuest, so that the app is always accessible on-site.
- If you ever need help with access, please stop by the admin office for assistance.
- For added security, our campus is equipped with outdoor surveillance cameras to monitor and ensure the safety of the premises.

We appreciate your partnership in maintaining a secure and orderly environment for all.

### **Late Pick-Up Fees:**

We understand that delays happen. However, to honor the time of our staff and maintain a consistent routine for children, the following late pick-up fees apply:

- A \$1 per minute fee will be assessed for late pick-up beyond a 5-minute grace period after your child's scheduled dismissal time.
- If your child is enrolled in Extended Exploration (aftercare) on a drop-in basis (24 hour notice required) the following fees apply:
  - \$25 per day, (3:05-6:00 PM) or
  - \$10 per day if the child is picked up by 3:30 PM
- The school closes at 6:00 PM each day. If you will be late for any reason:
  - Call the office or message your teacher via Class Dojo
  - A \$1 per minute late fee will be assessed for any pick-up after 6:00 PM

## **Arrival & Dismissal Safety:**

- All students must be accompanied to and from their classrooms by a parent and signed in/out daily.
- Inde Elementary students are dropped off at the gate entering their playground.
- The parking lot is counter-clockwise flow only—this is designed to maintain visibility and reduce risk.
- Please drive slowly and adhere to the 5 mph speed limit on campus.
- Only park in marked parking spots or graveled areas.
- Do not park or drive on the grass, as it creates hazards and damages the grounds.

Thank you for helping us uphold a secure, respectful, and efficient pick-up experience for everyone.

## **PICK-UP PERMISSION**

For your child's safety, only individuals listed as authorized pick-ups in your child's file may retrieve them from school.

If someone other than a previously designated person will be picking up your child, you must:

- Update your emergency contacts in your KangarooTime account,

OR

- Email your updated pick-up list to:

 [office@independenceacademync.com](mailto:office@independenceacademync.com)

Please remind the designated pick-up person that they must present a photo ID at the time of pick-up. This step is non-negotiable and ensures we are doing our part to keep your child safe.

## **AFTER SCHOOL SPECIALS**

We believe learning doesn't stop when the school day ends. Our After School Specials offer students the chance to explore new interests, build skills, and engage in joyful, hands-on enrichment led by passionate instructors.

We offer a variety of rotating specials each semester, which may include:

- Art
- Yoga
- Music
- Spanish
- Soccer
- STEM

## **Enrollment & Commitment**

- After School Specials are offered on a semester basis: Fall and Spring.
- Enrollment is done at our Back to School Bash event in August or by emailing [office@independenceacademync.com](mailto:office@independenceacademync.com)
- Once enrolled, participation is required for the full semester. Mid-semester withdrawals are not permitted, as our staffing and planning are based on full-session enrollment.

## **SAFETY POLICIES**

At Independence Academy, the safety and well-being of each child is of the utmost importance. We are committed to ensuring that all legal custody documentation and emergency communication procedures are followed with care, professionalism, and confidentiality.

### **Custody Agreements**

If a custody agreement is in place for your child, the following policy applies:

- A copy of the custody agreement must be submitted via email to the Admissions Office upon acceptance of enrollment.
- A child may not begin attending school until the custody agreement is on file.
- It is the responsibility of the parent/guardian to keep the school informed of any changes or updates to the custody arrangement throughout the school year.

This policy helps ensure that we honor legal custody arrangements and maintain a safe, supportive environment for every child in our care.

### **Emergency Contact Protocol**

If a student becomes ill or is involved in an incident that requires parental notification (head injury etc.), we follow this procedure:

- Staff will attempt to reach the parent/guardian by phone three times over a 30-minute period.
- If the parent cannot be reached during that timeframe, we will begin calling the listed emergency contacts in the order they are provided.
- In the event of a medical emergency, all contacts — parents and emergency — will be notified immediately.

Please ensure that your child's emergency contact information is accurate and up to date at all times. This allows us to respond swiftly and appropriately in any situation.

## **OUTDOOR SAFETY & MEDICAL ACCIDENT POLICY**

We are proud to offer a unique, nature-rich environment that nurtures curiosity, movement, and real-world learning. Outdoor exploration, physical activity, and safe risk-taking are essential components of our curriculum — not just recess or free time. With this opportunity for growth comes a shared responsibility to prioritize safety, preparedness, and proper care.

### **Outdoor Learning Expectations**

- Each classroom spends a minimum of one hour outside daily, weather permitting.
- Students will engage in risk-aware play, including activities that challenge balance, coordination, and decision-making.
- Teachers closely supervise all outdoor play and provide age-appropriate guidance around safety and body awareness.
- Children will be coached on voice level expectations:
  - Classroom – quiet
  - Gym – louder
  - Playground/Park – loudest (but no screaming)

Screaming is not permitted. Teachers use calm, direct communication and model respectful interactions by walking to students instead of yelling across the space.

## **Required Outdoor Gear**

To ensure safety and comfort in all weather, please send:

- Weather-appropriate layers (jackets, hats, gloves in winter)
- Raincoat and rain boots (to remain at school)
- Proper footwear – closed-toe shoes or sneakers are required; no flip-flops, jellies, or sandals.

## **Allergy Awareness**

- All allergies (insect, food, plant, etc.) must be documented in the admissions packet and communicated to teachers and administrators.
- Please make sure your child is aware of their own allergies and knows how to communicate if something is wrong.
- Children will participate in garden and nature-based experiences where contact with insects and natural materials is likely.

## **Medical Accident Procedures**

We are prepared to respond to accidents, injuries, and illness with care and urgency. Here's how we handle each situation:

### **For Children's Care**

- Minor injuries (scratches, bruises): Washed with soap and water, bandaged if needed, and a written incident report will be sent home at pick-up.
- Bites: If the skin is broken, parents are called immediately. If the skin is not broken, the bite is washed with soap and water and documented. In both cases, an incident report is completed and provided at pick-up.
- Sick children (fever 100.4°F or above, vomiting, diarrhea (2 instances), unexplained rash, or illness complaints): Parents are called immediately to pick up the child. The child will rest in the front office until picked up. Re-entry requires the child to be symptom-free for 24 hours without medication. In some cases, a doctor's note may be required.
- Serious injuries (e.g., severe head bump, loosened teeth): Ice is applied and parents are called right away to pick up their child. The nature of the injury will be clearly described.
- Medical emergencies: If needed, 911 will be called, and all emergency contacts will be notified.

## **Documentation**

- Teachers are required to complete an incident report for every accident, illness, or medical concern the same day it occurs.
- All incident reports must be signed by parents and kept on file.

## **Abuse & Neglect Reporting**

As licensed caregivers, we are legally required to report any suspected abuse or neglect. Our protocol includes:

- Gathering all relevant information and observations
- Assessing the situation with professionalism and care
- Reporting to appropriate authorities as required by law, always with the child's safety and well-being as our top priority

## GROUND RULES FOR EXPLORATION PERIODS

Our exploration periods are intentionally structured to promote independence, curiosity, and meaningful connection. To support this, we have clear expectations for teachers, children, and parents. These guidelines are essential to maintaining a respectful and developmentally appropriate learning environment.

### The Role of the Teacher / Collaborator / Guide

Our teachers serve as collaborators in your child's learning journey. Their primary responsibilities are to:

- Support each child in achieving success through self-directed exploration.
- Protect the child's right to engage in purposeful, independent work.
- Present thoughtful provocations and guide child-led learning experiences.
- Model appropriate emotional responses in alignment with the Conscious Discipline approach.

### The Child

Children are seen as capable, autonomous individuals. The following expectations support their development and classroom culture:

- Children may work independently or in spontaneous groups.
- No one may touch another's work without permission—sharing is never forced.
- Children walk respectfully around work rugs.
- Calm, focused bodies are encouraged during group stories or lessons.
- Children sit quietly with arms and legs folded.
- Each child is responsible for managing their personal belongings:
- Hanging their own coat, buttoning/zipping up, and packing up at dismissal.
- Appropriate footwear supports focus and safety:
- Athletic shoes or soft-soled classroom slippers are encouraged.
- Children are responsible for keeping their classroom clean and cared for.
- Children lead their work; teachers follow their needs and interests.
- We follow the child—they do not follow our pace. All expectations are developmentally appropriate.
- Children are taught to communicate respectfully and calmly:
- They do not call out from across the room, but instead wait quietly nearby or gently place a hand on the teacher's arm for assistance.

## The Parent

As a school community, we view parents as an integral part of the learning environment. These expectations help create consistency between home and school:

- Please leave all toys at home. If a toy is brought in, it will be stored in the child's backpack until the end of the day.
- Aim for calm, unhurried mornings to help your child arrive relaxed and ready to learn.
- Talk about school ground rules positively and practice calm voices at home.
- Support your child in learning the difference between indoor and outdoor behavior.
- Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled twice yearly, but may be requested at any time by either party.
- Avoid using tangible rewards for learning accomplishments—children should find joy in learning itself.
- Keep routines at home, which provide children with a strong sense of security.
- Return communication folders promptly and respond to teacher or administration messages in a timely manner.
- If you have questions or concerns, notify your child's Lead Teacher via:
  - Email
  - Private message on Class Dojo
  - Phone call through the office
- Remember: You are your child's first teacher. We aim to support you by modeling respect, consistency, and compassion. Building trust and shared goals between parents and teachers ensures the best outcomes for your child.

## CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Parents are welcome to observe in the classroom—this offers valuable insight into your child's learning experience. However, please note:

- Observations must be scheduled in advance through the front office and communicated with the Lead Teacher.
- Classroom visits are not permitted before mid-October to allow students time to settle into routines.
- No photos or videos may be taken during an observation.
- Observations are limited to one hour.
- Observers must not interact with students during their visit to preserve the natural classroom dynamic.
- Observation opportunities may be limited if state guidelines restrict access to the building

## THE FLOWER ROOMS (TODDLERS)

Drop-off for The Flower Rooms is between 8:15 AM – 8:45 AM. Upon arrival, children should wash their hands and store jackets and shoes on or under their assigned hallway hooks. Children may wear house shoes (e.g., Crocs, moccasins, or soft-soled indoor shoes) while inside. Please note: socks alone are a slip/fall hazard and should not be worn without shoes.

The exploration cycle takes place from 8:30 AM – 12:00 PM, and may include outdoor experiences in the playground, garden, or nature walk—weather permitting.

Lunch is often enjoyed outdoors at the picnic area, or indoors in the classroom if the weather does not allow. All children have nap/quiet time following lunch.

Each child will receive a nap gear bag upon enrollment. All nap items (blanket, sheet, etc.) must fit inside this bag and nap items must be brought home weekly for washing.

## THE TREE ROOMS (PRESCHOOL)

Drop-off for The Tree Rooms is between 8:15 AM – 8:30 AM. Upon arrival, children should wash their hands and store jackets and shoes on or under their assigned hallway hooks. Children may wear house shoes (e.g., Crocs, moccasins, or soft-soled indoor shoes) while inside. Please note: socks alone are a slip/fall hazard and should not be worn without shoes.

The exploration cycle runs from 8:30 AM – 12:00 PM, and will often include time outdoors in the playground, garden, or on a nature walk.

Weather permitting, lunch may be held outdoors. Otherwise, students will eat in the classroom. After lunch, children prepare for nap time. All children are required to participate in nap or quiet time. Each child will receive a nap gear bag upon enrollment. All nap items (blanket, sheet, etc.) must fit inside this bag and nap items must be brought home weekly for washing.

### **Important Note:**

Children in The Tree Rooms must be **fully toilet trained**. Teachers in this program are not required to assist with toileting or cleaning after bathroom use. Accidents must be rare and students must be able to clean themselves and change their clothes.

## INDE EXPLORERS

Drop-off for Inde Explorers is 8:15 AM - 8:45 AM. The exploration cycle runs from 8:30AM – 11:45 AM. Lunch is held picnic style on the tables or on a blanket.

Please dress your child in weather-appropriate outdoor gear and send them with plenty of extra clothes daily. Refer to the [Inde Nature School Gear Guide](#) for specific recommendations.

The program is designed around outdoor exploration, and children will be outside the majority of their day. They are off the grid, immersed in nature, using hand washing stations and our porta-potty that is kept pristinely clean! In cases of unsafe weather, the classroom will shift into the off the grid clubhouse with meaningful and engaging activities.

### **Important Note:**

Children in Inde Explorers must be fully toilet trained. Teachers in this program are not required to assist with toileting or cleaning after bathroom use. Accidents must be rare and students must be able to clean themselves and change their clothes.

## INDE ELEMENTARY

All students must be registered as home-school students with the state of North Carolina prior to the first day of school. We are a team to in their education. We provide a block of instruction on campus in conjunction with your support at home. All testing is done by the administartor of the homechool (the family).

Inde Elementary is a homeschoo co-op program serving Kindergarten through 3rd grade students. With a maximum of 22 students and two dedicated teachers, the program offers a blend of personalized instruction and the benefits of a mixed-age, collaborative learning environment. We partner together with you to facilitate a well rounded educational experience. Your expertise in the classroom is a necessary component to the experience.

Children are immersed in both nature and knowledge as they explore our 13-acre campus, engaging in outdoor exploration, indoor academic work, animal care, and creative expression. The classroom is located in the Inde Nature Elementary House, intentionally designed to feel warm and inviting while offering seamless access to outdoor learning opportunities.

### Curriculum: Roots and Wings

Inde Elementary uses Roots and Wings, a proprietary curriculum developed specifically for learners at Independence Academy. Created over the past decade, it is rooted in how children learn best—through connection, relevance, movement, and imagination.

Each thematic unit integrates:

- Literacy
- Math
- Science
- Social Studies
- Art

Themes are inspired by global discovery, environmental stewardship, and self-awareness. Instruction is hands-on and discussion-rich, and incorporates Montessori materials for foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Instead of a textbook-and-desk model, students experience:

- Comfortable reading nooks with natural light
- Outdoor journaling and math under the trees
- Literature circles and creative writing inspired by nature
- A “Nature House” classroom with both indoor comfort and outdoor freedom
- Daily animal care (chickens, ducks, pigs) woven into the rhythm of the day

Core Themes Throughout the Year Include:

- Environmental Stewardship & an Entrepreneurial Mindset
- Global Citizenship & Social-Emotional Competence
- Scientific Discovery & Creative Expression

Students are encouraged to think critically, collaborate respectfully, and express themselves with creativity and confidence. Roots and Wings provides a strong academic foundation while preserving the wonder and joy of childhood.

Teachers and parents work collaboratively to ensure consistent support and communication around student progress and engagement.

## **PARENT VOLUNTEERS**

We value and welcome parent involvement! It truly takes a village to raise our children! Your presence and contributions strengthen our community and enrich the learning environment for all students.

There are many meaningful ways for parents to volunteer within both the classroom and the broader school setting. Opportunities may include:

- Sharing a special talent or skill (e.g., gardening, music, dance, art, yoga)
- Presenting an extracurricular lesson or demonstration
- Helping organize or host classroom socials
- Reading aloud to students during the school day

We encourage you to connect with your child's Lead Teacher if you're interested in volunteering. Volunteer opportunities will also be shared periodically via school communication channels and classroom updates.

Your support, whether big or small, makes a lasting impact and models the value of community involvement to our children.

While volunteering please refrain from taking any videos or photos. Your time with the class will be specifically for the pre-determined event. When you arrive please sign in, in the Visitor Book, in the main building hallway, to ensure we have accountability of all school time visitors.

## **FIELD TRIPS & CHAPERONES**

Field trips are an exciting and valuable part of the Independence Academy experience. These off-campus, or on-campus, learning opportunities allow students to explore the world around them, connect curriculum to real life, and deepen their sense of community.

Families will be notified in advance of each field trip. You will receive:

- A permission slip with all relevant details
- The cost of admission (if applicable)

Permission slips must be signed and returned in order for your child to attend.

If a trip requires paid admission, payment is due at the time the permission slip is submitted. IA submits payment in one lump sum for the group; therefore, it is the parent's responsibility to pay for their child's admission by the deadline.

Chaperone Requirement:

Each family is responsible for providing a chaperone for their child(ren) during field trips. This can be a:

- Parent
- Grandparent
- Babysitter or other trusted adult (listed in your child's KangarooTime account)

Note: Permission slips will specify whether or not siblings are allowed to attend.

Parent Chaperone Responsibilities:

- Chaperones must remain present and attentive to their child(ren) at all times during the trip.

- Chaperones are expected to follow all plans and guidelines outlined by the teachers in advance.
- Chaperones are responsible for signing children in and out with the classroom teacher.

These guidelines ensure safety, organization, and a smooth experience for all participants. Your partnership in preparing for and participating in field trips helps create meaningful, memorable learning experiences for your child and their peers.

## **BABYSITTING & OUTSIDE CARE CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

We strive to maintain the highest level of professional integrity within our community. To avoid any potential conflict of interest, we have a clear policy regarding outside care arrangements between staff and school families.

Staff members are not permitted to babysit or provide outside care for enrolled students. This includes care before or after school hours, on weekends, or during breaks.

This policy is in place to:

- Maintain professional boundaries
- Ensure consistency of care during school hours
- Avoid any perception of favoritism or divided responsibilities

We understand that strong bonds naturally form between children and staff, and we value those connections. However, upholding this boundary protects both our educators and our families, and preserves the trusted, equitable environment we've built within our school community.

We kindly ask that all families respect this policy. If you have questions or require childcare recommendations outside of school hours, the administration is happy to assist in directing you to local resources and you can refer to our IA Community Guide for babysitting references.

## **HEALTH POLICY**

The health and well-being of our students and staff is a top priority at Independence Academy. To ensure a safe and thriving environment for all, we follow the North Carolina DHHS child care rules, which are required by law—not optional.

NC-Mandated Health Requirements

Health Assessment:

Every child is required to have a health assessment conducted by a licensed medical provider—physician, nurse practitioner, or public health nurse—prior to enrollment or within 30 days of their first day at school. This assessment must include:

- A current vaccination record,
- OR
- A religious exemption letter on file

This documentation is required for your child to remain enrolled in our program. It helps keep our school safe, nurturing, and ready for learning every day.

## **Your Child Must Stay Home If They Have:**

- A fever of 100.4°F or higher
- Vomiting or diarrhea within the past 24 hours
- Persistent coughing or difficulty breathing
- Yellow or green nasal discharge
- Sore throat, especially when accompanied by fever or swollen glands
- Unexplained rash or skin lesions
- Conjunctivitis (pink eye) or eye discharge
- Head lice or nits

Children must be symptom-free without medication for a full 24 hours before returning to school.

If your child becomes ill during the school day, a parent or emergency contact will be called for immediate pick-up. Please keep all emergency contact information up to date at all times.

## **Communicable Disease Notification**

If your child tests positive for a communicable illness (such as COVID-19, flu, strep throat, etc.), please notify the school administration via email as soon as possible. This allows us to promptly and confidentially inform families whose children may have been exposed, so they can monitor for symptoms and take appropriate precautions.

Your timely communication protects the health and safety of our entire school community.

## **Medication at School**

If your child needs medication during the school day, the following steps must be followed:

- Submit a completed Medication Authorization Form, signed by a parent or guardian.
- All medication must be provided in its original container, clearly labeled with your child's name and dosage instructions.
- Medication will be stored securely and administered by a designated staff member in compliance with NC child care regulations.

Please note:

Over-the-counter medication will not be administered without written permission and proper documentation. (ie: sunscreen, bug spray, etc.)

## **DISCIPLINE POLICY**

We believe that discipline is about guidance, not punishment. Our approach is rooted in teaching children how to make respectful, responsible choices through clear boundaries, consistent expectations, and compassionate communication.

Our staff is trained to use positive discipline strategies, through the Conscious Discipline method including:

- Redirection
- Natural and logical consequences
- Consistent routines and expectations
- Restorative conversations
- Modeling respectful behavior

We work to understand the root of a behavior, rather than simply address the symptom. Children are supported in building the skills they need to regulate their emotions, resolve conflicts peacefully, and thrive in a group setting.

## **If Challenging Behaviors Arise**

If a child is having difficulty meeting expectations or consistently disrupting the classroom environment, the following steps will be taken:

### **1. Documentation & Observation**

Teachers will observe and document the behavior over time to identify patterns, triggers, and possible solutions.

### **2. Parent Communication**

Families will be contacted to discuss concerns and partner together in finding supportive strategies. Open, respectful communication between home and school is essential. When teachers request a meeting with parents/guardians we kindly ask that a response be delivered within 48 hours and a meeting scheduled in person or via Zoom within 7 days from the time of original contact.

### **3. Individual Support Plan: Partnership Plan**

If needed, a written plan may be developed to provide additional guidance and consistency for the child across home and school settings. This plan will be agreed upon by teachers, staff and parents/guardians. It will be revisited in specific increments of time determined ahead of time. This includes making reasonable accommodations for a child's needs.

### **4. Outside Support Referral (if applicable)**

In some cases, we may recommend collaboration with an outside specialist (e.g., behavioral therapist, occupational therapist, counselor) to better support the child's needs.

## **Behaviors That May Require Immediate Administrative Intervention:**

Certain behaviors may result in an immediate meeting with administration. These include, but are not limited to:

- Physical aggression (hitting, kicking, biting, etc.)
- Ongoing defiance or non-compliance
- Unsafe behaviors that endanger the child or others
- Property destruction
- Repeated disruption of the learning environment

In rare cases, if a child's behavior consistently impacts the safety or well-being of the classroom and all reasonable support strategies have been exhausted, **IA reserves the right to dismiss a student from the program.** Parents/guardians, teachers and staff must be committed to the plan and mutual goals for the student. In the rare event that parents/guardians and staff cannot agree on mutual goals, the student may be dismissed.

This decision is never made lightly and is always based on what is best for the child, the classroom community, and the school as a whole.

We are committed to nurturing each child's growth while maintaining a respectful and peaceful learning environment for all. Your partnership in this process is essential.

## **Biting:**

We understand that biting is a common behavior among toddlers and some primary-aged children. While biting can be distressing, it is often a result of developmental factors such as limited communication skills and emerging impulse control.

### **Understanding Why Children Bite**

Biting often stems from:

- Frustration or the inability to communicate needs
- Lack of language to express emotions or resolve conflict
- Difficulty regulating impulses, particularly in moments of high emotion or excitement

Younger children, especially toddlers, are still learning to express themselves with words. In the absence of verbal skills, they may use physical means—pushing, grabbing, scratching, or biting—to communicate or respond to stimuli. With support and language modeling, most children outgrow this behavior quickly.

### **Our Response to Biting Incidents:**

When a child bites another child at Independence Academy:

- Both sets of parents are informed of the incident.
- Children's names are never disclosed to other families to protect privacy and confidentiality.
- The child who bit is immediately told that biting hurts and that biting is not allowed.
- Teachers support the child by:
  - Offering language and modeling to express frustration or conflict in words
  - Teaching appropriate alternatives, such as taking turns or asking for help
  - Encouraging the biting child to help repair the harm by offering an ice pack or showing care

The child who was bitten:

- Receives immediate first aid and comfort from a teacher
- Is reassured that the adults will help keep them safe
- Has the wound washed with soap and water and receives any necessary follow-up care

### **Documentation & Follow-Up**

- An incident report is completed by the classroom teachers and placed in both children's cubbies to be signed and returned by parents.
- The biting child is "shadowed" by a teacher to prevent further incidents, provide close guidance, and support with emotional regulation and language.

### **If Biting Persists**

- If a child bites twice in one week, a meeting is scheduled between the Director and the child's parents.
- If a child bites twice in one day, the parents will be called to pick up their child immediately.
- The Director may recommend the family seek additional support such as:
  - Oral/motor sensory therapy
  - Play therapy or other child development services
- 

### **Ongoing Concerns**

If the above strategies are not successful in curbing the biting behavior, the Director will schedule a follow-up meeting with the family to discuss alternative options for support or placement.

This policy ensures a safe, nurturing learning environment while supporting children through essential stages of social-emotional development. We thank families for partnering with us with patience and consistency as we guide children through this important learning process.

## **Special Needs Accommodation Policy**

Independence Academy is a private school that provides a nurturing, nature-based educational environment grounded in developmentally appropriate practices and individualized attention. While we are committed to supporting the diverse learning needs of our students, we are not a designated special education school, nor do we have staff specifically trained in special education or neurodivergent instructional methodologies.

We strive to partner with families and will make reasonable accommodations whenever possible to support students who may need additional help. These accommodations are considered on a case-by-case basis and require open, ongoing communication and collaboration between the school and the family. In certain situations, a Partnership Plan may be created to outline expectations, strategies, and any support the school is able to offer within the scope of our resources.

However, there may be instances when a child's needs exceed what we can reasonably and safely provide. In such cases, we will work with the family to help identify more appropriate educational settings or services that can better support the child's development and well-being.

Our goal is always to honor the dignity of each child while maintaining the integrity and balance of our classroom environments for all learners.

## **INCLEMENT WEATHER POLICY**

The safety of our students, families, and staff is our top priority when it comes to inclement weather. We closely monitor weather conditions and make decisions with care and caution.

In the event of snow, ice, flooding, high winds, or other severe weather, Independence Academy may delay opening, close early, or close for the day.

### **Communication:**

You will receive notifications about weather-related changes via:

- Email
- Class Dojo

We do our best to communicate decisions by 6:30 AM whenever possible.

### **Closures & Delays:**

Independence Academy does not follow a specific district's inclement weather decisions; however, we do take into account what Harnett County and nearby districts decide, as our students and staff travel from many different areas. While their closures may influence our process, final decisions are made independently based on the unique conditions and accessibility of our own campus.

#### **Please note:**

- No tuition refunds or credits will be given for weather-related closures or delays.
- In the event of a mid-day weather emergency, families will be notified for early pick-up. Please keep your emergency contact information up to date.

We appreciate your flexibility and understanding as we prioritize the safety of our school community during unpredictable weather conditions.

## **CLOTHING & SUPPLIES**

Children at Independence Academy spend their days exploring, learning through play, and engaging with nature. To ensure they are safe, comfortable, and fully prepared, please adhere to the following clothing and supply requirements:

### **Clothing Requirements:**

- Each child must have two full extra sets of clothing kept at school at all times. This includes shirts, pants, socks, and underwear—everything needed for a complete change. Clothing should be placed in labeled gallon-sized ziplock bags with your child's full name.
- Children should arrive in weather-appropriate clothing every day. This includes:
  - A warm jacket during winter months
  - Gloves and a hat when it's cold
  - A raincoat on wet or drizzly days
- Children are required to wear closed-toed shoes for safety during outdoor play and nature walks.
  - They may bring soft, indoor house shoes for use in the classroom.
  - Each child must also have a pair of rain boots that stay at school.
- The following items are expected to remain at school:
  - Two full changes of clothes
  - Rain boots
  - Indoor house shoes
- Please label all clothing and footwear (including jackets, gloves, hats, etc.) with your child's full name to prevent items from getting lost or misplaced.

### **Supplies:**

- A classroom-specific supply list will be sent out by your child's Lead Teacher before the school year begins. Lists may vary slightly by classroom based on age group and curriculum.
- Teachers may also send occasional wish list items throughout the year for optional donations that help enrich the classroom experience.

### **Daily Required Items:**

Please send the following items with your child each day:

- A reusable water bottle, clearly labeled with your child's full name and the date
- A lunch and snack, both clearly labeled with your child's full name and the date
- Nap/rest items (if applicable), which must fit inside their small tote bag and be kept on their designated hook

# **FOOD POLICY**

At Independence Academy, we believe that healthy eating fuels both the body and the mind. Families are responsible for providing their child's lunch and snack each day, clearly labeled with the child's full name and the date. We do not provide any food.

## **Food Guidelines**

- Meals and snacks should be healthy and balanced, with minimal processed or high-sugar foods.
- Please avoid candy, soda, or juice, as they do not support focus or energy levels during the school day.
- We encourage whole foods like fruits, vegetables, proteins, and whole grains to keep your child energized and engaged.

## **Lunch & Snack**

- Children enjoy meals either outdoors or in their classrooms, depending on weather conditions.
- Please pack all food in reusable containers to reduce waste.
- Fast food lunches are not permitted. If your child forgets their lunch, you will be contacted to bring one to the school office.

## **Food Heating & Storage**

- We do not have the capacity to heat food.
  - If you wish to send a hot meal, please use a thermos or insulated container to keep food warm.
- Refrigeration is available in all classrooms except Explorers - please pack lunches with multiple ice packs.

## **Special Treats**

- All treats must be store-bought and pre-approved by your child's Lead Teacher.
- If sending high-sugar items (e.g., cupcakes for a birthday), please ensure they are mini or bite-sized for easier sharing and portion control.

## **Allergies**

Please communicate any food allergies to the administration and your child's Lead Teacher. We take allergies seriously and strive to keep all students safe by adjusting classroom food practices as needed.

# **BIRTHDAYS & CELEBRATIONS**

We love celebrating milestones and creating meaningful memories with our students—and birthdays are a special time to honor each child!

## **Birthday Celebrations:**

- Each class celebrates birthdays in a way that is simple, sweet, and centered around the child.
- Families are welcome to send in a special treat for their child's class. All treats must:
  - Be store-bought (not homemade- this is a NCDHHS rule)
  - Be pre-approved by the Lead Teacher
  - Be mini or bite-sized, when possible
- Please coordinate with your child's teacher at least one week in advance.

We do not host full birthday parties during school hours (only on weekends!), and we ask that you do not send balloons, gifts, or party favors to school.

## **Invitations to Outside Parties:**

If you are planning a birthday party and wish to invite classmates, we kindly ask that:

- Invitations be distributed outside of school, unless every child in the class is invited.

## **Holidays & Cultural Celebrations:**

Our school celebrates a variety of seasonal and cultural traditions throughout the year, often tied to our curriculum and classroom themes. If your family observes a special tradition or holiday you'd like to share, please reach out to your child's teacher. We love learning about and honoring the rich diversity of our families.

## **TECHNOLOGY POLICY**

At Independence Academy, we are deeply committed to preserving childhood and fostering meaningful, real-world experiences. As part of that commitment, we maintain a low-tech environment across all age groups.

We believe that children (and all humans, for that matter) thrive when they are fully present; engaged with nature, peers, teachers, and hands-on learning opportunities. Excessive screen time can interfere with imagination, focus, and relationship-building, which are cornerstones of our educational philosophy.

### **Technology Guidelines:**

- Children are not permitted to bring personal electronic devices (including tablets, phones, smartwatches, or handheld games) to school.
- If a child arrives with any of these items, they will be stored by the teacher and returned at the end of the day.
- In classrooms where technology is used (such as research or a short educational video), it is limited, intentional, and always supervised by staff.

### **Photography & Social Media:**

- Staff may occasionally take photos or videos for classroom updates, newsletters, or school marketing (with parent consent).
- Upon enrollment a Photo & Media Consent Form must be completed by the parent/guardian.
- Photos of children are never shared publicly without prior written permission from a parent or guardian. Please note that un-identifying group photos where children are not named are permitted to be used unless otherwise specified by the parent or guardian.

Our goal is to create a space where children are free to be curious, collaborative, and deeply engaged in the real world around them, without the distractions of technology.

# COMMUNICATION

At Independence Academy, we believe strong, respectful communication between families and staff is foundational to a thriving school community. We are committed to clear, timely, and professional communication and we ask the same in return.

## Primary Communication Channels:

To ensure consistency and protect staff privacy, all school-related communication must go through the following official platforms:

- Class Dojo – for classroom updates, reminders, and short messages
- Official school email addresses – for more detailed communication
- School phone line – for urgent matters, absences, or administrative needs

## Communication Boundaries:

To maintain professional boundaries and protect staff privacy, the following policy is strictly enforced:

- Personal phone numbers and personal email addresses of teachers and staff may not be shared with or requested by parents.
- All communication must take place via the official platforms listed above.

This ensures clarity, professionalism, and healthy work-life boundaries for all members of our school community.

## Response Times:

- Teachers and staff will respond to messages within 24–48 hours during the school week.
- Please remember that during the school day, teachers are focused on the children and may not be able to reply immediately.

For urgent or time-sensitive issues (such as last-minute pick-up changes), please call the school office directly.

## Concerns or Questions:

We believe that most challenges can be resolved through respectful, honest communication. If you have a concern:

1. Begin by contacting your child's teacher through official school channels.
2. If the issue requires further attention, please reach out to the school administration to schedule a conversation.

## Conferences & Updates:

- Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled twice a year.
- Teachers may also request meetings as needed to discuss your child's progress.
- You'll receive periodic updates on classroom activities, school news, and community events throughout the year.

When families and staff communicate with care, consistency, and mutual respect, we build the kind of collaborative community that helps children flourish.

## **Monthly Classroom Updates**

Each month, your child's classroom teachers will provide a Monthly Newsletter that summarizes classroom activities and thematic work from the previous weeks. This update may be sent by email or printed and hung on your child's hook for easy access. These newsletters help you stay in touch with the classroom rhythm and celebrate your child's experiences.

## **School-Wide Newsletter**

The Directress and Administrative Team produce a Whole-School Newsletter, which is sent out during the first week of every month. This newsletter includes updates, upcoming events, announcements, and highlights from across our programs. Additional information or time-sensitive updates will be shared as needed via email or Class Dojo.

## **COMMUNITY EVENTS**

At Independence Academy, community is not just a value — it's a way of life. We believe that raising children should not be an isolated journey. It takes a village filled with like-minded families, strong role models, and shared values. Our events are designed to foster connection, build relationships, and strengthen the circle of support that surrounds each child in our care.

We host community events at least once per quarter, bringing together families, staff, and friends to celebrate, collaborate, and create lasting memories. Here's a look at some of our cornerstone gatherings:

### **Community Build Days**

Held a few Saturday mornings throughout the year, Community Build Days are a chance for families to work side by side on meaningful projects that directly impact their child's environment. Together, we maintain and beautify school grounds, tend to gardens and trails, and even build new structures or equipment for the children. These mornings offer a unique opportunity to connect with other parents and be a helping hand in the spaces where our children learn and grow.

### **Back to School Bash – August**

This high-energy celebration kicks off the school year with fun for the whole family! Our Back to School Bash is open to the public and includes enriching experiences, food trucks, games, and opportunities for families to meet one another and get to know our staff and campus. It's the perfect way to welcome new families and celebrate the start of a new year.

### **Fall Festival**

Our Fall Festival is a seasonal celebration filled with family fun, community connection, and autumn charm. With local vendors, food trucks, a petting zoo, and our Not-So-Spooky Nature Trail, it's a joyful opportunity for families to spend time together, enjoy the outdoors, and make lasting memories on campus.

### **Give S'more Thanks**

As the holidays approach, we gather under the stars for Give S'more Thanks — a cozy evening around the bonfire with marshmallow roasting, s'mores, and heartfelt connection. It's a quiet moment of gratitude and community during a busy season, and a chance to be present with one another.

### **Spring Festival**

Our Spring Festival is a guided on-campus field trip experience created just for IA families. With spring-themed activities and stations throughout the property, it's a celebration of the season and a joyful way to wrap up the school year together.

We design these events with intentionality and heart, knowing that our children benefit deeply when they see the adults in their lives come together in community. These shared experiences model kindness, collaboration, and care — the very values we want to instill in our students.

At Independence Academy, no one walks this path alone. We're rebuilding the village — together.

## **PET & ANIMAL POLICY**

At Independence Academy, our farm animals are an important part of the learning environment. Children engage with chickens, ducks, pigs, and other animals as part of their rhythm—learning responsibility, empathy, and real-world life skills. Please note that children enrolled in our main building will have visual contact with our animals but will not participate in the care due to licensing regulations.

To ensure the health, safety, and comfort of both our students and animals, we have clear guidelines regarding pets and animals on campus:

### **Farm Animals & Daily Care:**

- All animal care routines are supervised by staff and integrated into Explorers and Inde Elementary classroom learning.
- Children are taught to interact with animals respectfully and safely.
- Regular care includes feeding, cleaning, observation, and gentle handling.

### **Outside Pets:**

- For the safety of our students and resident animals, families may not bring personal pets (dogs, cats, reptiles, etc.) onto campus during drop-off, pick-up, or events unless:
  - Explicit permission is granted by school administration in advance.
  - The animal is a certified service animal and properly identified.

Even friendly, well-behaved pets can be unpredictable or frightening for young children. Please help us maintain a calm and safe environment by leaving personal pets at home.

### **Special Visits & Educational Guests:**

- From time to time, we may welcome animal experts or mobile farms to enhance curriculum through guided, educational visits.
- These visits are planned and supervised in accordance with safety and health standards.

We love animals and believe they offer powerful lessons in compassion and care. By following these policies, we ensure that those lessons are safe and enriching for everyone.

# PREVENTION OF SHAKEN BABY SYNDROME AND ABUSIVE HEAD TRAUMA POLICY

We, Independence Academy, believe that preventing, recognizing, responding to, and reporting shaken baby syndrome and abusive head trauma (SBS/AHT) is an important function of keeping children safe, protecting their healthy development, providing quality child care, and educating families.

## Background

SBS/AHT is the name given to a form of physical child abuse that occurs when an infant or small child is violently shaken and/or there is trauma to the head. Shaking may last only a few seconds but can result in severe injury or even death. According to North Carolina Child Care Rule (child care centers, 10A NCAC 09 .0608, family child care homes, 10A NCAC 09 .1726), each child care facility licensed to care for children up to five years of age shall develop and adopt a policy to prevent SBS/AHT.

## Procedure/Practice

### Recognizing:

- Children are observed for signs of abusive head trauma including irritability and/or high-pitched crying, difficulty staying awake/lethargy or loss of consciousness, difficulty breathing, inability to lift the head, seizures, lack of appetite, vomiting, bruises, poor feeding/sucking, no smiling or vocalization, inability of the eyes to track and/or decreased muscle tone. Bruises may be found on the upper arms, rib cage, or head resulting from gripping or from hitting the head.

### Responding to:

- If SBS/AHT is suspected, staff will:
  - Call 911 immediately upon suspecting SBS/AHT and inform the director and call the parents/guardians.
  - If the child has stopped breathing, trained staff will begin pediatric CPR.

### Reporting:

- Instances of suspected child maltreatment in child care are reported to the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) by calling 1-800-859-0829 or by emailing [webmasterdcd@dhhs.nc.gov](mailto:webmasterdcd@dhhs.nc.gov).
- Instances of suspected child maltreatment in the home are reported to the Harnett County Department of Social Services. Phone number: 910-893-7500

### Prevention Strategies to Assist Staff in Coping with a Crying, Fussing, or Distraught Child\*

Staff first determine if the child has any physical needs such as being hungry, tired, sick, or in need of a diaper change. If no physical need is identified, staff will attempt one or more of the following strategies:

- Rock the child, hold the child close, or walk with the child.
- Stand up, hold the child close, and repeatedly bend knees.
- Sing or talk to the child in a soothing voice.
- Gently rub or stroke the child's back, chest, or tummy.
- Offer a pacifier or try to distract the child with a rattle or toy.
- Take the child for a ride in a stroller.
- Turn on music or white noise.

### In addition, the facility:

- Provides support when parents/guardians are trying to calm a crying child and encourage parents to take a calming break if needed.

### Behaviors That Are Prohibited Include (but Are Not Limited To):

- Shaking or jerking a child
- Tossing a child into the air or into a crib, chair, or car seat
- Pushing a child into walls, doors, or furniture

## Strategies to Ensure Staff Members Understand the Brain Development of Children up to Five Years of Age

All staff take training on SBS/AHT within the first two weeks of employment. Training includes recognizing, responding to, and reporting child abuse, neglect, or maltreatment as well as the brain development of children up to five years of age. Staff review and discuss:

- Brain Development from Birth video, the National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, [www.zerotothree.org/resources/156-brain-wonders-nurturing-healthy-brain-development-from-birth](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/156-brain-wonders-nurturing-healthy-brain-development-from-birth)
- The Science of Early Childhood Development, Center on the Developing Child, [developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/)

## Resources

### Parent Web Resources

- The American Academy of Pediatrics: [www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Abusive-Head-Trauma-Shaken-Baby-Syndrome.aspx](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Abusive-Head-Trauma-Shaken-Baby-Syndrome.aspx)
- The National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome: <http://dontshake.org/family-resources>
- The Period of Purple Crying: <http://purplecrying.info/>

### Facility Web Resources

- Caring for Our Children, Standard 3.4.4.3 Preventing and Identifying Shaken Baby Syndrome/Abusive Head Trauma, <http://cfoc.nrckids.org/StandardView.cfm?StdNum=3.4.4.3&=+>
- Preventing Shaken Baby Syndrome, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/trprev/Preventing\\_SBS\\_508-a.pdf](http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/trprev/Preventing_SBS_508-a.pdf)
- Early Development & Well-Being, Zero to Three, [www.zerotothree.org/early-development](http://www.zerotothree.org/early-development)

## References

1. The National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome, [www.dontshake.org](http://www.dontshake.org)
2. NC DCDEE, [ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/general/mb\\_ccrulespublic.asp](http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/general/mb_ccrulespublic.asp)
3. Shaken baby syndrome, the Mayo Clinic, [www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/shaken-baby-syndrome/basics/symptoms/con-20034461](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/shaken-baby-syndrome/basics/symptoms/con-20034461)
4. Pediatric First Aid/CPR/AED, American Red Cross, [www.redcross.org/images/MEDIA\\_CustomProductCatalog/m4240175\\_Pediatric\\_ready\\_reference.pdf](http://www.redcross.org/images/MEDIA_CustomProductCatalog/m4240175_Pediatric_ready_reference.pdf)
5. Calming Techniques for a Crying Baby, Children's Hospital Colorado, [www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/calm-a-crying-baby/calming-techniques](http://www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/calm-a-crying-baby/calming-techniques)
6. Caring for Our Children, Standard 1.7.0.5: Stress <http://cfoc.nrckids.org/StandardView/1.7.0.5>

## Application

This policy applies to children up to five years of age and their families, operators, early educators, substitute providers, and uncompensated providers.

## **EMERGENCY PLAN**

At Independence Academy, the safety and well-being of every child is our top priority. While we hope never to face a true emergency, our team is trained and ready to respond quickly and effectively should the need arise. This Emergency Plan outlines how we prepare for, respond to, and communicate during potential crisis situations.

### **Emergency Contact Numbers**

In the event of a serious emergency requiring immediate assistance, staff will follow this emergency response protocol:

- Ambulance Services: 911
- Police: 911
- Fire Department: 911
- Poison Control Center: 1-800-222-1222
- For area-wide emergencies, listen to local radio stations or news outlets for official guidance.

### **Nearest Hospitals:**

- Womack Army Medical Center, Fort Bragg
- Central Carolina Hospital, Sanford, NC

### **Annual Inspections**

Independence Academy is fully licensed by the State of North Carolina and undergoes routine inspections by:

- Fire and Safety Department
- Department of Public Health
- Department of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE)

These inspections ensure compliance with all state safety and sanitation standards.

### **Training & Drills**

To stay prepared, we conduct the following safety drills:

- Fire drills monthly
- Lockdown drills at least quarterly

Participation is required for all students and staff. Office staff maintain accurate records of each drill.

### **Fire Drill Procedures:**

- Evacuate the building immediately and take roll using wireless radio communication.
- Close all windows and doors during evacuation.
- If smoke is present, stay low to the ground.
- Test closed doors with the back of your hand for heat before opening.
- Shut down HVAC systems (air conditioners/fans).
- Await official fire department clearance before reentering the building.

### **Fire Safety Tips:**

- Teachers must always know the location of every child in their care.
- Exit the building safely and calmly — no running.
- If trapped in smoke, crawl to safety.
- Do not open warm doors; look for alternate exits.
- If clothes catch fire: Stop, Drop, and Roll.
- Follow posted evacuation routes in every classroom.
- Do not block doorways or exits with any objects.

## **Responses to Specific Emergency Situations**

### **Fire:**

Evacuate immediately to the designated meeting place in the main parking lot.

### **Armed Intruder / Threatening Individual:**

#### **Initiate Lockdown/Shelter-in-Place protocol:**

Bring all students and staff into lockable rooms.

Do not leave out anyone still in hallways or bathrooms.

Lock all classroom and office doors.

Cover glass windows on doors, turn off lights, sit silently away from windows.

Do not respond to bells or alarms (unless advised).

Lock all exterior doors and prevent access to the building.

Do not leave the secure space unless directed by law enforcement.

Do not attempt to confront or engage the intruder.

### **Sheltering in Place:**

If advised by Emergency Services or Harnett County Sheriff's Department to shelter in place or lock down:

No parents or visitors will be allowed to enter or exit the building until cleared by officials.

All exterior access points will remain locked during the school day, aside from high-traffic transition periods.

### **Parent Notification During Emergency**

Whenever possible, Independence Academy will notify parents using:

Email/Class Dojo

Classroom call lists via teacher cell phones

If these systems are inoperable, children will remain with their classroom teachers until released to an approved adult listed on the student's admissions form. For the safety of every child, no exceptions will be made to the pickup list during emergencies.

## **Non-Discrimination Policy**

Independence Academy admits students of any race, color, gender, religion, national or ethnic origin, disability, family structure, or cultural background to all the rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made available to students at the school.

We do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, religion, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, or any other protected status in the administration of our educational policies, admissions policies, financial aid programs, hiring practices, or any other school-administered programs.