



Next Step Learning Center

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Parent Handbook

This handbook outlines the policies, procedures, and expectations for families enrolled in Next Step Learning Center.

Contents

1. 1. Mission & Learning Philosophy
2. 2. Program Participation
3. 3. Non-Discrimination
4. 4. Hours of Operation & Attendance
5. 5. Enrollment Requirements
6. 6. Tuition, Fees & Notices
7. 7. Communication & Family Partnership
8. 8. Drop-Off, Pick-Up & Safety
9. 9. Health, Illness & Exclusion
10. 10. Medication (if applicable)
11. 11. Nutrition & CACFP Practices
12. 12. Diapering, Toileting & Soiled Clothing
13. 13. Rest/Nap Time
14. 14. Outdoor Play
15. 15. Personal Belongings & Clothing
16. 16. Behavior Guidance
17. 17. Emergency Preparedness & Closures
18. 18. Holidays & Planned Breaks
19. 19. Confidentiality & Staff Babysitting
20. 20. Mandated Reporting of Abuse/Neglect
21. 21. Licensing & Compliance
22. 22. Amendments

1. Mission & Learning Philosophy

Provide a safe, loving, and developmentally-rich environment where children learn through play, exploration, and guided instruction.

Teachers facilitate social-emotional, cognitive, physical, and language development with age-appropriate, hands-on experiences.

We value family partnership and two-way, respectful communication.

2. Program Participation

Alabama Child Care Subsidy (Family Guidance/Alabama DHR): Next Step participates in the state subsidy program administered by Alabama DHR and local child care management agencies (e.g., Family Guidance Center of Alabama). Families must maintain eligibility, comply with attendance verification, and pay any required parent co-pay and non-covered fees.

USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP): We provide CACFP-compliant meals and snacks. As of Oct. 1, 2025, CACFP requires:

- Yogurt: ≤ 12 g added sugars per 6 oz.
- Breakfast cereals: ≤ 6 g added sugars per dry oz.

We follow current USDA guidance for grains/crediting and menu planning.

3. Non-Discrimination

Enrollment and services are offered without discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or religion. (Also required under CACFP civil-rights assurances.)

4. Hours of Operation & Attendance

Center hours: 6:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. (Mon–Fri).

Maximum daily stay: up to 9.5 hours per child to support appropriate rest and staffing continuity.

Notify the center by 9:00 a.m. for absences or late arrivals (supports staffing, lunch counts, and safety).

5. Enrollment Requirements

Age: We enroll children 6 weeks–12 years (program availability varies by age).

Before start: completed enrollment packet, medical form/physical as required, current immunization record, emergency contacts, and paid registration + one-week security deposit.

Pre-start visit: a brief classroom visit for child/parent orientation is encouraged to support smoother transitions.

Children with special needs: We will make reasonable efforts to accommodate. If specialized training/equipment is required beyond our capacity, we will collaborate on referrals to ensure safe, appropriate care.

6. Tuition, Fees & Notices

Weekly tuition is due Monday before the service week; monthly tuition is due by the 3rd of the month.

Late fee: \$40 if weekly tuition is not paid by Monday 6:00 p.m. or monthly tuition by the 3rd.

Returned checks/NSF: \$50 fee per occurrence; after two NSF incidents, payment must be by cashier's check or money order.

Late pick-up: \$10 for the initial interval, then \$1 per minute thereafter (due before the child returns).

Withdrawals: Two weeks' written notice required; tuition and registration fees are non-refundable. With proper notice, the deposit may apply to the final balance.

Subsidy families: Parent/guardian is responsible for co-pays, registration/security deposits, and any amount not covered by DHR/Family Guidance.

Fee changes: At least 14 days' written notice will be provided for tuition/fee adjustments.

If legal action becomes necessary to collect fees, parent/guardian is responsible for reasonable costs/fees.

7. Communication & Family Partnership

We encourage open, solutions-focused communication between families and staff.

Please keep your contact, emergency, and medical information current.

Check your child's bag daily for notes, incident reports, artwork, or soiled clothing.

Please minimize cell phone use during drop-off/pick-up for safety and focused transitions.

8. Drop-Off, Pick-Up & Safety

Enter and exit through the front door only; sign-in/sign-out is required at arrival and departure.

Children must be released directly to a staff member at arrival and picked up by an authorized adult with identification.

Custody orders: Provide a notarized court order if applicable; we will follow the most recent order on file.

Children must be transported according to Alabama Motor Vehicle Laws (proper restraints; no impaired/underage drivers).

To protect children and staff, individuals engaging in profanity, aggression, or intoxication may be excluded from the premises.

Please respect nap times by arriving/departing quietly when children are sleeping.

Call the center by 9:00 a.m. if your child will be absent or late; this supports staffing, safety, and lunch counts.

9. Health, Illness & Exclusion

We care for well children only. Keep your child home if they are not able to participate in a normal day or show symptoms of a contagious illness.

Arrival health check: Children may be visually screened at drop-off; those who appear ill may be asked to return home.

Exclusion criteria include (non-exhaustive):

- Fever: $\geq 100^{\circ}\text{F}$ (axillary) or $\geq 101^{\circ}\text{F}$ (oral); child must be fever-free for 24 hours without fever-reducing medicine before return.
- Three or more loose stools in 24 hours.
- Vomiting, severe cough, difficulty/rapid breathing, conjunctivitis, unexplained rash, mouth sores, infected skin patches, persistent itching, unusual lethargy, headache with stiff neck, tea-colored/bloody urine, or loss of appetite accompanying illness.

If a child becomes ill at the center, a parent/guardian must pick up within 30 minutes. If unreachable, emergency contacts will be called.

Serious illness/injury: We will call emergency medical services as needed and notify the parent/guardian immediately.

Communicable disease: Notify the center within 24 hours of a known/suspected communicable disease in your child or household so we can post health alerts as appropriate.

10. Medication (if applicable)

Medication is administered only with written parent/guardian authorization.

All medication must be in the original container with the child's name, dosage, and instructions.

We document dose/time and store medication securely per state guidance.

11. Nutrition & CACFP Practices

We provide breakfast, lunch, and one snack daily under CACFP.

Menus emphasize whole-grain-rich foods and balanced meals; grain-based desserts do not credit toward meal components.

Added-sugars limits effective Oct. 1, 2025:

- Yogurt: ≤ 12 g added sugars per 6 oz.
- Breakfast cereals: ≤ 6 g added sugars per dry oz.

Milk and juice service align with CACFP age-appropriate guidance.

Food from home must be healthy, ready-to-eat, and previously tolerated to reduce allergy risks.

Infant foods/bottles must be labeled; bottles are single-feed only and unfinished portions are discarded daily.

12. Diapering, Toileting & Soiled Clothing

Disposable diapers are required; please supply sufficient diapers and wipes for the week.

Center-supplied diapers (if used) are charged at \$3 per diaper.

Soiled clothing is sent home un-rinsed in a sealed bag per public health guidance.

Toilet learning is collaborative and child-ready, using positive reinforcement and consistent routines.

13. Rest/Nap Time

Infants sleep in assigned cribs following safe-sleep guidance (placed on their backs unless otherwise ordered by a physician).

Toddlers and preschoolers rest on assigned mats after lunch; quiet activities are offered for non-sleepers.

Parents provide labeled bedding; please launder and return weekly.

14. Outdoor Play

Children play outside daily weather-permitting to support health and gross-motor development.

Keep children home if they are too ill to participate in normal indoor/outdoor activities.

Dress children for the weather and for active, sometimes messy, play.

15. Personal Belongings & Clothing

Provide at least one labeled, season-appropriate change of clothing.

Space is limited: travel-size pillows only; avoid sending toys from home unless they can be safely shared.

Toy weapons or real/replica weapons are not permitted and may result in dismissal for safety reasons.

The center is not responsible for lost items; label all belongings clearly.

16. Behavior Guidance

Positive, developmentally appropriate guidance is used; expectations are clear and consistent.

Prohibited: corporal punishment, humiliation, threats, isolation, or withholding food/sleep.

When additional support is needed, we partner with families and, when appropriate, outside specialists to implement a plan.

Persistent unsafe or extreme behaviors that cannot be supported within our setting may result in withdrawal after reasonable interventions.

17. Emergency Preparedness & Closures

Fire and evacuation drills are practiced regularly.

Emergency relocation site: a church building directly in front of Next Step Learning Center (parents will be notified if relocation occurs).

Weather/utility closures follow local advisories; families receive text/call updates.

Tuition remains due during closures outside our control to ensure operational continuity.

18. Holidays & Planned Breaks

The annual holiday/break schedule is posted at the beginning of each year.

The center is closed on designated holidays and for a two-week winter break for staff leave.

Regular tuition applies during scheduled closures.

19. Confidentiality & Staff Babysitting

Child records are confidential; regulatory agencies may review records as allowed by law to ensure safety and compliance.

Off-hours babysitting by staff is a private arrangement between families and staff; the center is not responsible for off-site services.

Solicitation of staff during center hours is not permitted; failure to respect this may result in disenrollment.

20. Mandated Reporting of Abuse/Neglect

All staff are mandated reporters and will immediately report suspected abuse or neglect to Alabama DHR or law enforcement.

Reports will be followed by any required written documentation per state law and licensing rules.

21. Licensing & Compliance

Next Step operates under Alabama DHR Child Care Licensing and adheres to state Minimum Standards.

Licensure is maintained on the required renewal cycle; inspection reports are available upon request where permitted.

22. Amendments

Policies may be updated to meet evolving state and federal requirements.

Families will receive written notice of significant changes.

PARENT HANDBOOK AGREEMENT — Next Step Learning Center

I, the parent/guardian of _____, have read and understand the policies and procedures outlined in the Next Step Learning Center Parent Handbook (2025). I agree to comply with all policies and acknowledge that failure to do so may result in termination of my child's enrollment.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature (optional second): _____ Date: _____

Center Director Signature: _____ Date: _____