



ST. MATTHEW'S EARLY LEARNING CENTER

Parent Handbook

Effective February 2026

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Kalispell, Montana
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406-756-6807

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Welcome and Program Overview
2. Mission, Philosophy, and Educational Framework
3. What Makes Our Program Unique
4. Governance and Licensing
5. Hours of Operation and School Calendar
6. Enrollment and Tuition Policies
7. After School Care Program
8. Arrival and Departure Procedures
9. Program Structure and Daily Schedule
10. Outdoor Play and Weather Policy
11. Health and Safety Policies
12. Illness and Exclusion Policy
13. Medication Administration
14. Safe Sleep Policy (Infant Program)
15. Shaken Baby Syndrome / Abusive Head Trauma Policy
16. Child Guidance and Discipline
17. Biting Policy
18. Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect
19. Nutrition and Lunch Program
20. Toilet Training Policy
21. Family Communication and Partnership
22. Volunteers and Field Trips
23. Community Resources
24. Non-Discrimination and Complaint Procedures
25. Withdrawal and Termination of Care
26. Parent Acknowledgment

1. Welcome and Program Overview

Welcome to St. Matthew's Early Learning Center (ELC), a ministry of St. Matthew's Catholic School in Kalispell, Montana.

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center is a play-based, faith-centered early childhood program serving children ages three months through five years. The program operates as an extension of St. Matthew's Catholic School and supports children's academic, social-emotional, physical, and spiritual development within a structured and professionally supervised environment.

The Early Learning Center operates:

Monday through Friday
7:30 AM – 5:30 PM

The instructional portion of the day begins at 8:15 AM. Early drop-off begins at 7:30 AM. The school day concludes at 3:15 PM, with extended care available until 5:30 PM for enrolled families.

The program maintains compliance with:

- Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) Child Care Licensing Regulations
- Governance policies of the Diocese of Helena
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards

Licensing and accreditation standards are not merely regulatory obligations. They represent our commitment to providing families with a safe, accountable, developmentally appropriate, and professionally operated early childhood program.

Early childhood experiences establish the foundation for lifelong learning. We recognize the responsibility entrusted to us and strive to partner with families to ensure children begin their educational journey in a secure and nurturing environment.

2. Mission, Philosophy, and Educational Framework

Mission

The mission of St. Matthew's Early Learning Center is to provide a structured, developmentally appropriate early childhood program rooted in Catholic values and aligned with best practices in early education.

We are committed to educating the whole child. This includes fostering intellectual growth, emotional security, physical development, social competence, independence, and spiritual awareness. Our goal is to cultivate curiosity, confidence, responsibility, and a lifelong love of learning.

Educational Philosophy: Play-Based and Purposeful

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center implements a play-based educational model grounded in Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). We recognize purposeful play as the primary vehicle for early childhood learning and cognitive development.

Play in our classrooms is not unstructured free time. It is:

- Intentionally planned by qualified educators
- Structured within consistent daily routines
- Aligned with developmental milestones
- Guided by active teacher interaction
- Supported through language-rich conversation and questioning

Children engage in carefully designed learning experiences that include:

- Literacy-rich environments with books, storytelling, and early writing opportunities
- Early mathematics experiences including counting, sorting, patterning, and measurement
- Scientific exploration through observation and hands-on investigation
- Dramatic play that promotes social interaction and problem-solving
- Art and creative expression that encourages imagination and fine motor development
- Large motor activities that strengthen coordination and physical health

Teachers observe and document children's progress regularly. Instruction is adjusted to meet individual developmental needs. This ensures each child is appropriately challenged and supported.

Our philosophy aligns with:

- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards
 - Montana Early Learning Guidelines
- Catholic educational principles recognizing the dignity and individuality of each child

3. What Makes Our Program Unique

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center is distinctive because it operates within a Catholic K–8 school while maintaining a strong foundation in early childhood best practices.

Faith Integrated into Daily Experience

Faith is woven naturally into daily classroom life. Children learn simple prayers, participate in discussions about kindness and gratitude, and attend weekly school Mass on Wednesdays. At the early childhood level, faith instruction emphasizes:

- Respect for others
- Compassion and empathy
- Responsibility
- Gratitude
- Service to community

Faith development is integrated in developmentally appropriate ways that support children's understanding.

Enrichment within a K–8 School Community

ELC students participate in weekly enrichment classes in:

- Art
- Library
- Music
- Spanish
- Physical Education

These enrichment experiences expand children's exposure to specialized instruction and promote continuity as they transition into elementary school.

Structured Play with Academic Intention

Our play-based classrooms are intentionally structured to build academic readiness. Teachers plan experiences that support:

- Phonemic awareness
- Vocabulary development
- Early number sense
- Problem-solving skills
- Social cooperation & Self-regulation
- Learning centers are carefully arranged to promote engagement and independence.

Kindergarten Readiness and Assessment

For three-, four-, and five-year-old students, formal assessments are conducted three times annually. These assessments:

- Identify strengths
- Highlight areas needing support
- Guide instructional planning
- Ensure children are prepared for the next stage of learning

Assessment data is used for instructional improvement, not comparison between children.

4. Governance and Licensing

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center operates under the governance of St. Matthew's Catholic School and the Diocese of Helena.

The Center is licensed by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). Licensing regulations require compliance in areas including:

- Staff qualifications and background checks
- Staff-to-child ratios
- Active supervision
- Health and sanitation procedures
- Emergency preparedness
- Safe sleep practices
- Staff training requirements

The Early Learning Center maintains all required documentation and participates in required inspections.

Confidentiality regarding families and children is maintained at all times.

5. Hours of Operation and School Calendar

Hours of Operation

The Early Learning Center operates:

Monday through Friday

7:30 AM – 5:30 PM

The instructional portion of the school day begins at 8:15 AM and concludes at 3:15 PM.

Extended care is available from 3:30 PM to 5:30 PM for enrolled families.

School Closures

The Early Learning Center follows the St. Matthew's Catholic School calendar. The Center is closed on the following:

- One - two weeks before the school year begins (TBD on a yearly basis)
- Labor Day
- MEA Professional Development Days (3rd Thursday and Friday in October)
- All Saints Day (November 1)
- Thanksgiving Break
- Christmas Break
- Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday
- Presidents' Day
- Spring Break
- Good Friday
- Easter Monday
- Memorial Day
- Independence Day
- One week following the last day of school in June (Summer classroom preparation)
- Snow Days or other closures determined by St. Matthew's Catholic School and/or School District #5

Dates are subject to change. Families should review the monthly calendar and school communications regularly.

Tuition is not prorated for scheduled closures.

6. Enrollment and Tuition Policies

Enrollment Procedures

Enrollment at St. Matthew's Early Learning Center is confirmed only after all required documentation has been submitted and processed. Prior to a child's first day of attendance, families must complete:

- Online St. Matthew's Catholic School Registration
- Required DPHHS Child Care Licensing forms
- Online FACTS tuition payment agreement
- Submission of current immunization records
- Completion of emergency contact and authorization forms

All required documentation must be submitted before the child may begin attendance.

Incomplete enrollment files may delay a child's start date.

Registration Fees

- Returning Family Non-Refundable Registration Fee (Early Registration): \$120
- New Family Non-Refundable Registration Fee: \$225

Registration fees secure a child's placement and are non-refundable.

2026–2027 Tuition Schedule

Infant/Toddler Program (Ages 3 Months – 3 Years)

Program Hours: 7:30 AM – 3:15 PM

- 5 Full Days (Monday–Friday): \$10,800 annually (\$1,200 per month)
- 3 Full Days (Monday/Wednesday/Friday): \$7,020 annually (\$780 per month)
- 2 Full Days (Tuesday/Thursday): \$4,680 annually (\$520 per month)

ELC 3, ELC 4, ELC 5 Programs

Program Hours: 7:30 AM – 3:15 PM

- 5-Day Program (Monday–Friday): \$8,798 annually
- ELC 3 – 3-Day Program (Monday/Wednesday/Friday): \$6,413 annually
- ELC 3 – 2-Day Program (Tuesday/Thursday): \$4,273.92 annually

Annual Supply Fee

An Annual Supply Fee of \$220 per child is required.

This fee covers:

- Classroom instructional materials
- Art supplies
- Curriculum consumables/Learning center materials
- Seasonal classroom resources

This fee supports the ongoing maintenance of high-quality classroom environments.

Tuition Payment Policies

Tuition payments are processed through the FACTS tuition management system.

Tuition reserves:

- Your child's placement
- Classroom space
- Staffing allocation

Tuition is not prorated for:

- Illness
- Vacation
- Personal absence
- School holidays
- Snow days
- Professional development days & Scheduled school closures

Families are financially responsible for tuition during all scheduled school days and closures as outlined in the school calendar.

7. After School Care Program

The After School Care Program operates from:

3:30 PM – 5:30 PM

Monday through Friday

Enrollment Options:

- Monthly Enrollment (Monday–Friday): \$200 per month per child
- Specific Day Enrollment: \$20 per day per child

The After School Care Program is not a drop-in service. Advance registration is required through the Enrollment Form.

After School Care includes:

- Supervised free play
- Quiet activities
- Outdoor play when weather permits
- Structured end-of-day routines

Prompt pick-up by 5:30 PM is required. Repeated late pick-ups may result in additional fees or review of enrollment status.

8. Arrival and Departure Procedures

Parents must escort their child into the Early Learning Center and complete daily sign-in procedures using the designated system.

Children must be signed out before leaving the facility.

Authorized Pick-Up

- Children will only be released to individuals listed on the child's Authorization Form.
- If someone not listed will be picking up a child, parents must notify the school in advance.
- Identification may be required before release.
- Minors are not permitted to pick up children.

9. Program Structure and Daily Schedule

Children benefit from consistent structure and predictable routines.

The daily schedule includes:

- Morning transition and arrival activities
- Teacher-guided instruction and small group work
- Learning center exploration
- Outdoor play (weather permitting)
- Lunch and structured mealtime
- Rest or quiet time
- Afternoon enrichment or guided play

Rest time follows lunch and provides children with an opportunity to rest quietly.

Parents must provide:

- Blanket
- Small pillow
- Comfort item (if desired)

All rest items must be taken home weekly for laundering.

10. Outdoor Play and Weather Policy

Outdoor play is an essential part of early childhood development.

Weather permitting, children go outside daily.

The Early Learning Center follows the Child Care Weather Watch guidelines established by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services to determine safe outdoor conditions.

When outdoor conditions are unsafe due to extreme temperatures, air quality, or severe weather, indoor gross motor activities are provided.

Parents must provide weather-appropriate clothing, including:

Cold Weather:

- Coat
- Hat
- Gloves
- Boots
- Snow pants

Warm Weather:

- Appropriate spring or summer attire

Winter Requirement:

Children must have indoor shoes separate from outdoor boots. Slippers are not permitted. Closed-toed tennis shoes are required for gym participation.

11. Health and Safety Policies

The safety and well-being of children are central to all operations.

Staff-to-Child Ratios

Infants/Toddlers (3 months–3 years): 4:1

ELC 3 (3 years): 8:1

ELC 4 & ELC 5 (4–5 years): 10:1

Staff maintain active supervision at all times.

Teachers position themselves strategically to observe all children during classroom activities, transitions, rest periods, and outdoor play.

Accident Protocol

Minor Accidents:

Staff administer first aid and provide parents with a written Accident/Incident Report at pick-up.

Serious Emergencies:

Emergency response units are contacted immediately. Parents are notified as soon as possible.

Parents must ensure contact information remains current.

Continuing the full expanded Parent Handbook — final operational sections below.

12. Illness and Exclusion Policy

Young children are naturally exposed to common illnesses. To protect the health and safety of all children and staff, families are expected to follow the illness and exclusion guidelines outlined below.

A child must remain home if experiencing any of the following symptoms:

- Fever of 100°F or higher
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Undiagnosed rash
- Red or irritated eyes with discharge
- Persistent coughing accompanied by discomfort
- Signs of contagious infection
- Bacterial infections such as strep throat

If a child develops symptoms while at school, parents will be contacted and expected to pick up the child promptly.

Children may return to school when:

- They have been fever-free for at least 24 hours without fever-reducing medication
- They have not vomited or experienced diarrhea within the previous 24 hours
- They have begun prescribed antibiotic treatment and completed the required time period as directed by a physician

Parents are required to notify the school if their child will be absent due to illness.

These guidelines help protect the entire school community.

13. Medication Administration

Medication will only be administered when:

- A completed Medication Authorization Form is on file
- The medication is in its original container
- The child's name is clearly labeled
- Dosage instructions are provided

Prescription medications must remain in original pharmacy packaging.

Over-the-counter medications require signed parental authorization.

Medication is stored securely and administered by authorized staff. All administration is documented.

14. Safe Sleep Policy (Infant Program)

The Early Learning Center follows safe sleep practices to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Infants are placed on their backs to sleep unless written medical documentation specifies otherwise.

Each infant is placed in an approved crib containing:

- A firm mattress
- A fitted sheet

The following are not permitted in cribs:

- Loose blankets
- Pillows
- Stuffed animals
- Sleep positioners
- Extra padding

Infants are visually supervised at all times during sleep.

Safe sleep practices are reviewed with staff annually.

15. Shaken Baby Syndrome / Abusive Head Trauma Policy

All staff receive training in the prevention and recognition of Shaken Baby Syndrome and Abusive Head Trauma.

Under no circumstances is shaking, aggressive handling, or physical punishment permitted.

If an infant or child is inconsolable, staff implement calming strategies and request assistance from another staff member as needed.

This policy exists to protect the physical safety of all children.

16. Child Guidance and Discipline

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center promotes respectful behavior through guidance, consistency, and modeling.

Teachers:

- Establish clear expectations
- Maintain consistent routines
- Reinforce positive behavior
- Redirect inappropriate behavior
- Teach problem-solving and emotional regulation

Corporal punishment, yelling, humiliation, or threats are never used.

If behavior presents ongoing safety concerns, parents will be contacted to collaborate on a support plan.

The Center reserves the right to discontinue enrollment if a child's needs cannot be safely met within the classroom environment.

17. Biting Policy

Biting is a developmentally common behavior in early childhood; however, it can pose safety concerns for both children and staff. Our goal is to support children through guidance, redirection, and developmentally appropriate interventions while maintaining a safe environment for all.

If biting occurs, Early Learning Center teachers and administration will assess each situation individually. Responses will be determined at the discretion of the Early Learning Center teachers and Director based on factors including, but not limited to, the severity of the bite, frequency of incidents, intent, age and developmental stage of the child, and overall safety concerns.

Possible responses may include:

- Parent notification
- Completion of incident reports for both the child who bit and the child who was bitten
- Increased supervision and behavioral support strategies
- Request for early pick-up or removal for the remainder of the day if deemed necessary

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

18. Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect

In accordance with Montana law, the Director and all employees of a licensed child care facility are mandated reporters.

If a staff member has reasonable cause to suspect abuse or neglect, the report must be made immediately to:

Child Abuse Hotline:
1-866-820-5437

Reports are made through the Children & Family Services Division of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

Reports are confidential and required by law.

19. Nutrition and Lunch Program

Parents are responsible for providing:

- A labeled water bottle
- A healthy morning snack
- Lunch
- An afternoon snack

The Early Learning Center (ELC 3, ELC 4, ELC 5 ONLY) participates in the St. Matthew's School Lunch Program. All families are required to complete the Free and Reduced Lunch Program form annually.

Lunch Prices:

- Hot Lunch (includes milk and salad bar): \$3.00
- Milk Only: \$0.60
- Salad Bar Only: \$1.20

Prices are subject to change.

Mealtime is structured and supervised. Children are encouraged to practice independence, appropriate table manners, and respectful conversation.

20. Toilet Training Policy

Children enrolled in ELC 3, ELC 4, and ELC 5 are expected to be fully toilet-trained.

A child is considered toilet-trained when he or she can:

- Verbalize the need to use the restroom in time
- Pull clothing up and down independently
- Clean themselves appropriately after toileting

Occasional accidents are expected; however, if a child experiences more than two accidents in one day, parents will be contacted for pick-up.

If a child is not consistently toilet-trained, enrollment may be reviewed.

21. Family Communication and Partnership

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center maintains an Open Door Policy.

Families receive a weekly newsletter outlining classroom learning, upcoming events, and important reminders.

The St. Matthew's Catholic School App provides updates on:

- School closures
- Late starts
- Early releases
- Special events

Parents are encouraged to:

1. Speak with the Lead Teacher regarding concerns.
2. Schedule a meeting with the Director if further discussion is needed.

Open communication supports a strong school community.

Director: Tanya Reynolds
406-756-6807

22. Volunteers and Field Trips

Parent Volunteers

Parents are welcome to participate in classroom activities.

Volunteer Requirements:

- Completion of a Volunteer Form
- Completion of Virtus Training

Parents may not supervise children (other than their own) or drive children on field trips unless Virtus Training has been completed.

Field Trips

Walking Field Trips:

Parents sign an annual Walking Field Trip Permission Slip covering neighborhood outings.

Non-Walking Field Trips:

Parents receive advance notification. Signed permission slips and driver release forms are required.

A child may not participate without signed permission.

23. Community Resources

The Early Learning Center supports families by connecting them with community organizations.

The Nurturing Center

406-756-1414
nurturingcenter.org

Services include:

- Childcare referrals
- Best Beginnings Scholarship assistance
- Parenting education
- Child and Adult Care Food Program participation

Early Childhood Coalition of Flathead Valley

eccflatheadvalley@gmail.com

The Coalition works to coordinate services for families and eliminate barriers to early childhood support.

Families seeking additional assistance are encouraged to contact the Director for referrals.

24. Non-Discrimination and Complaint Procedures

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, or other protected status.

In accordance with Federal Law and U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, discrimination is prohibited.

To file a complaint of discrimination, contact:

USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights
Room 326-W, Whitten Building
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-9710
Phone: 202-720-5964

25. Withdrawal and Termination of Care

If withdrawal is necessary due to relocation, employment changes, or personal circumstances, a two-week written notice is required.

Registration fees are non-refundable.

St. Matthew's Early Learning Center reserves the right to discontinue enrollment if:

- Tuition obligations are not met
- Policies are not followed
- The program cannot safely meet a child's needs

Decisions are made carefully and communicated professionally.

26. Parent Acknowledgment

I acknowledge receipt of the St. Matthew's Early Learning Center Parent Handbook and agree to comply with the policies outlined.

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____