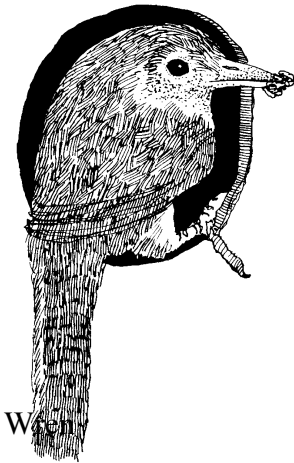


# Important Information about the Mighty Acorns Program

## Who are the key players?

Mighty Acorns is by design a collaborative program, requiring organizations and communities to work together to provide children with meaningful, sustained interactions with the natural world. In each location where Mighty Acorns takes place, there are five key players:



**Partners:** “Partners” are organizations or agencies that sponsor Mighty Acorns in a particular geographic area. A partner could be a public agency, park district, private organization, or cultural institution. Each partner has a formal relationship with a natural area through which the partner can involve students in stewardship field trips. Partners identify local schools that are interested in Mighty Acorns and work closely with schools during the implementation year to ensure that the program will succeed long-term. In cooperation with schools, during the implementation year partners lead teacher and volunteer training, coordinate field trips, plan stewardship activities, and assess and develop volunteer resources at the local level. Through focusing resources on the first year of each school’s program, partners enable schools to take on long-term leadership for their Mighty Acorns program.

**Schools:** Mighty Acorns partners link up with local schools to enable entire classrooms to participate in this year-long program. Both public and private schools, as well as home schooling groups, are involved in Mighty Acorns. Administration plays a critical role in the program by supporting teachers in all aspects of the program, including teachers’ participation in seasonal field and classroom training during the first year of the program and periodic professional development opportunities in subsequent years. Administration also supports volunteer leadership in the program through exploring avenues for local volunteer recruitment and development.

**Teachers:** Teachers provide the critical link to the classroom for this field-based program. Through training lead by partner staff, teachers gain in-depth knowledge about the region’s natural history, become comfortable with the field site, and learn field and classroom activities through which to lead students. In the implementation year, partner staff works intensively with teachers to ensure that they are comfortable with the program, that the program has multiple links into the curriculum, and that the program is meeting academic standards and goals. During the first year, partners and teachers identify long-term goals for the program’s development and leadership at the school. In subsequent years, partners continue to act as a resource for each school and tailor support based on local needs.

**Volunteers:** Volunteers may take on a variety of leadership roles within the Mighty Acorns program. The primary role that a volunteer plays is a field-trip leader. As field-trip leaders, volunteers guide small groups of students (ideally 5–7 per group) through activities including informal exploration of the site, educational activities, and stewardship. Volunteers attend trainings held by the partners so that they understand how to lead the on-site activity, the stewardship activity, and the free exploration.

**Program Director:** The Mighty Acorns Program Director works with partners to develop, expand, and evaluate the Mighty Acorns program. Through quarterly meetings, partners and the program director develop ways of addressing program needs in areas including professional development; program-wide communication among partners, teachers, and volunteers; public awareness opportunities; and networking.

## What Happens During a Typical Mighty Acorns Year?

The yearly timeline for the Mighty Acorns program follows in general outline. Each local Mighty Acorns program's schedule may vary slightly from this outline. The field trips take place in the time range given in order to accomplish the stewardship projects and to ensure that students see nature at its peak each season. Teacher and volunteer training ideally should take place no earlier than 2–3 weeks prior to the start of field trips. Nature is in a constant state of change, and if training takes place too far in advance, the field site will look quite different by the time of the trip. Each season classroom activities to prepare students for their field experience (the pre-visit activity) should take place the week before the trip, and classroom activities to wrap-up the field experience (the post-visit activities) should take place in the week after the trip.

### Fall

Late August–mid September: Teachers and volunteers are trained

Mid September–Thanksgiving: Field trips take place

### Winter

Early–mid-January: Teachers and volunteers are trained

January–mid-March: Field trips take place

### Spring

Early–late April: Teachers and volunteers are trained

Late April–early June: Field trips take place



## What Happens During a typical Mighty Acorns Field Trip

Though partners may structure the visits from a classroom in a variety of different ways, all field trips do have the same three components, the on-site activity, the stewardship activity, and the free exploration activity. Three leaders are needed to lead each of the components. Ideally 2-3 volunteers can be trained to lead these parts of the field trip with a partner or staff person overseeing and organizing the event. When a class arrives they are divided into three smaller groups and each group rotates through the three different activities.

## How is a Mighty Acorns Program Started?

If you are considering how Mighty Acorns can become a part of your organization's permanent education program, simply do the following.

- 1) *Contact the Mighty Acorns Program Director* at the Field Museum, 312-665-7442, for information about the program.
- 2) *Assess how the program will meet the goals of your organization.* With appropriate staff, determine what niche Mighty Acorns can fill in your organization, how it may link with other education programs you offer, and what staff resources may be assigned to the program.
- 3) *Determine which natural areas you could utilize for field trips.* Ideally, each classroom has a field site it "adopts" for the entire year to visit each season. Field sites should be located as close as possible to the school. The field site must include natural areas such as prairies, woodlands, and wetlands that would benefit from student involvement in stewardship.
- 4) *Determine if there are appropriate seasonal stewardship activities for students at the field site.* Stewardship activities should make meaningful contributions to the restoration and management of natural areas, and they must be part of an overall management plan for the site.
- 5) *Identify schools for involvement in your Mighty Acorns program.* Schools should be located as close as possible to the field sites you have and should demonstrate a strong desire to integrate stewardship education into their curricula. Mighty Acorns works with a wide range of schools, but places emphasis on reaching schools with students from underserved communities. In 1997 with support from Grand Victoria Mighty Acorns began to work with teachers and students not traditionally served by programs of this status. The success of working with underserved schools has been dramatic. Students that have never visited a natural area have become interested in learning about native ecosystems and have developed feelings of stewardship about the sites that they have been restoring.
- 6) *Work with Mighty Acorns Program Director to initiate a program in your area.* Once you have the key elements lined up for initiated Mighty Acorns at your organization, contact the program director to get started.

## How is a Mighty Acorns Program Managed?

Partners are responsible for all aspects of implementing a Mighty Acorns program at their schools. In order to transfer knowledge and leadership to schools, which is the long-term goal of the program, partners work with a school, providing teacher training each season, and modeling pre- and post-visit classroom activities. Partners also facilitate leadership of field trips and plan stewardship activities in accordance with land management plans. Quarterly meetings, which are attended by all partners, provide continued feedback, networking, and program and professional development opportunities. If financial resources have been provided through grants to the overall program, partners submit annual budgets to the program director. However, partners are strongly encouraged to obtain independent funding.