

Tips and Tricks for Taking Kids Outside

By Nalani McCutcheon and Andrea Swanson

If the best learning lies on the edge of chaos, then in order to be comfortable there, you need to be sure of your footing when you are close to that line.

In the middle of the night, are you jolted from your bed by nightmarish images of children running hither and yon in the wilderness as you take them out to investigate water quality in the nearby stream, play a predator-prey game, or study the life cycle of monarchs? If so, you are not alone.

Many educators have tackled these fears and made such adventures seem routine. It just takes practice -- and keeping in mind a few key guidelines.

Have clear expectations.

Before you walk out the door and into the wilderness -- or even into the schoolyard - with your very excited and enthusiastic class, discuss behavioral expectations. This conversation can make or break your time together outside. Allowing students to help determine expectations (including the agreement to have expectations in the first place) sets up an atmosphere of mutual respect and ensures greater understanding of the rules and a greater willingness to follow them.

Make a list of a few specific behaviors and state them in the positive. For example, an expectation that there will be "no yelling and screaming" may have the same intent as "use quiet voices," but the latter is a positive statement of the specific behavior you wish to see.

Plan the logistics.

- Have a clear signal for getting everyone's attention and gathering. Practice it before you go outside.
- Discuss where you will gather when you get outside. If you will be on trails, establish clear meeting places such as trail intersections and trailheads.
- Explain to students that, if they get separated from the group, they should sit down and wait. Someone will come for them.
- Decide who will lead the group as you travel down the trail. Create opportunities for children to take turns leading.
- Provide opportunities to walk and run. Let children know that this will happen.
- Use a variety of group sizes. Have students spend some time working in large groups, small groups, pairs, and independently.
- To help focus attention, give specific assignments.
- Have a plan, while still being open to teachable moments, and let your students know what it is.
- Discuss safety. If you will be near water, clearly explain the potential hazards. If you will be walking in the hot sun, make sure everyone has drinking water, sunscreen on exposed skin, and hats on heads. If you are using snowshoes or cross-country skis, discuss their appropriate use. Bring a first aid kit and, if someone is allergic to bees, a bee-sting kit.
- Be ready for any kind of weather and dress appropriately. Bring extra mittens, hats, and boots if necessary. Rain gear and warm coats will make an enormous difference in the outcome of your outdoor activity.

Evaluate your time together when you return indoors. Discuss what went well and what didn't. Gather suggestions for activities and behavioral expectations for future trips outside.

Practice and model activities.

Having clear assignments for students to complete when they go outdoors will help focus their attention. The clearer your goals and expectations, the safer and more comfortable children will feel. This added comfort will increase their willingness to participate and complete their work.

And whether it is a paper-and-pencil activity or an active game that illustrates an ecological concept, your expectations will be clearer to students if you practice before going outside. Even as you head out the door, you may want to have a few practice runs at gathering together using your signal. That way, you too can enjoy the experience outside and not have to worry continually about gathering the flock.

Whenever possible, model what you want your students to do by becoming an active participant yourself. For example, if your students are drawing or writing in their journals along the trail, you should do it as well. This not only demonstrates that you value the activity; it is also an opportunity to show your students that you too are a student.

Be flexible.

No matter how wonderful a teacher you are, natural lessons outdoors will sometimes be more compelling than the task at hand. The turkey vulture soaring overhead or the rabbit running across the trail may interrupt your lesson, but accept that it is a natural attention magnet for students.

Take the broader view of learning and turn these opportunities to your advantage. They are the moments your students will likely never forget, and if you can bridge these spontaneous events to the lesson at hand, you will likely cement the learning. Your challenge is to find the bridge - and there will be one. The great thing about the natural world is that everything is connected to everything else!

Communicate strategically.

In communicating with students outdoors, be prepared to face noise, atmospheric conditions, and other distractions that you cannot control. Take a lesson from the interpretive field and keep the following in mind:

- Make sure the sun is in your eyes; then you can be sure that it isn't in your students' eyes.
- Put the wind to your back. This will push the sound of your voice toward the students.
- As you talk to students, try to reduce the distance between your mouth and their ears. Unless you are working with older students, this means kneeling down when talking. It keeps your voice from being lost in the wind and gives you a better perspective on what the world looks like from their view.
- If you are on a narrow trail and some students are having trouble seeing or hearing, have students form a double-file line. Stop the group, step off the trail, and walk toward the middle of the group. Have the students turn to face the side of the trail you are on and have those in the front row kneel down. That way, everyone can see and hear without tromping off the trail.
- If you see something that you want to look at as a group (and it is appropriate to walk off the trail to it), lead the students in a single- or double-file line behind you and form a circle around it. Step into the center, and everyone can see.
- If you are on a trail you use often, place flags or markers along the way. Then if you want to allow students to travel up ahead of you, you can tell them to move at their own pace, but to stop at the next flag.

Bring props.

At first you may fear having unfocused students and not knowing how to reclaim their attention. Many teachers use a prop bag packed with focusing games (nature bingo, scavenger hunts, recipe of a forest), natural artifacts (seeds, leaves, antlers, fur, feathers), tools (hand lenses, jewelers loupes, binoculars), and other aids.

When you need to focus students' attention, pull an appropriate item out of the bag. Students usually can't wait to see what will come out next. In fact, you may find that you want to continue to use this technique even after you gain proficiency in taking your students outside.

Empower yourself.

Let's face it: To be a good teacher, you have to know yourself. You must have clear expectations and personal goals and a sense of their priority so you can monitor and adjust in a heartbeat to assure that the end result is satisfactory. If the best learning lies on the edge of chaos, then in order to be comfortable there, you need to be sure of your footing when you are close to that line. Just as an athlete takes time to practice on a new field before a competition, so too must teachers take time to establish a personal comfort with the new learning environment.

Prior to taking your students outside, visit the area and become familiar with it. Visualize in your mind where your students will be during different parts of the lesson and what areas you want to make sure they avoid.

Structure your lessons to take advantage of the opportunities available while remembering the potential challenges. A trip to the pond is full of exciting learning possibilities, but there are wet shoes and clothing to think about as well.

The size of your group should depend on your comfort level, the nature of the site, and your field-trip objectives. Some people enjoy larger groups of 20 to 25 while others prefer groups of 10 to 15.

Bringing additional adults to assist with your outdoor adventure can be helpful, and most schools have policies that require a certain ratio of children to adults. Make sure the supporting adults are aware of your expectations, both of the children and of them.

Finally, remember that your level of comfort is not built by your classroom walls; it is built within your mind. If you set clear expectations, plan ahead, and follow a few key guidelines, you will eliminate most potential stumbling blocks. You will also find that your outdoor excursions will be more fun for everyone, including you.

Now sleep well!

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