

Tips and Techniques for Teaching Outdoors

Tip #1: Organize students into Discovery Teams. Give each team member an assignment in preparation for an outdoor learning activity. For instance, one student can check on the weather forecast and make sure everyone knows to bring the right clothing. Another team member can be responsible for clipboard organization, and others can make sure supplies are gathered and packed.

TIP #2: Use sensory exercises to quiet your students before beginning an outdoor lesson. Remind students that the primary tools they will use outdoors are their eyes, ears, nose, and sense of touch. Gather students in a circle and try this 'listen and share' activity. Ask each person to listen quietly and choose a particular sound. Then have each student take a turn sharing information about the sound s/he chose, without repeating any other student exactly. If one student says, "I heard a bird singing," the next student who heard a bird will have to say it differently, such as, "I heard a bird that sounds like this ..." This exercise helps sharpen students' listening skills and allows time to become calm and focused.

TIP #3: Have students use Nature Journals every time the class goes outdoors. These journals can be entirely hand-made or simple store-bought report folders, but each should have a student-created cover that relates to the natural world and a way to add pages. Require student observations, measurements, sketches, lab sheets, and so forth in the journals.

TIP #4: Clipboards are outdoor desks, and trash bags are seats. Prepare a classroom set of clipboards and have them ready to go. Attach the papers you will need ahead of time and have each student carry his or her own clipboard. Light-weight, rain-resistant clipboards can be made from foam core and pinch clips. Students can sit on folded trash bags, which are light and reusable.

TIP #5: Your vest pockets or fanny pack are drawers to fill with teaching tools. Get a crow or owl call whistle from a sporting goods store to use as a signal for gathering or ending an activity. A cell phone is a good idea for safety, especially if you are the only leader with your students. Be sure to carry a first aid kit, magnifying lenses, blindfolds, lesson props, field guides, wipes, etc.

TIP #6: You are the leader- be a role model. This is important for outdoor learning safety. If your students crowd you and get ahead of you, you can't stop the group when you need to explain or point out something. Position parent helpers at the back of the line for support. If you are enthusiastic about being outdoors and making discoveries, demonstrate respect for life, enjoy a walk in the rain, your students will do the same. But if you are annoyed, fearful, and uncomfortable, so will your students be. Demonstrate respect for the site and leave it like you found it. Be careful what you collect. Encourage releasing study items back to the environment.

TIP #7: Use soccer or traffic cones to mark boundaries for field work. Keep students on the trail unless you are doing an activity that requires work in another area. Make sure students know where they should be during an activity, using cones as boundaries.

TIP #8: Recruit “Outdoor Classroom Parents.” These parents can help with all the outdoor learning and classroom field trips and provide support when students are outdoors. Also recruit grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Tip #9: Dress in proper clothes, including shoes, rain gear, jackets, etc. Encourage students to be prepared for outdoor learning. You can lead by example. Keep an extra pair of outdoor shoes at school for outdoor exploration. Collect clothes needed for the outdoors from unclaimed Lost and Found, for students who come unprepared. Teach students the importance of layering clothes so they can remove a layer when they get too warm or add a layer when the weather is cool.

Tip #10 Be respectful of plants and animals.

Poisonous Plants - Leaves of three, let 'em be! Teach students to recognize poison ivy and avoid touching it. Poison ivy is a common plant and contact with skin can produce an annoying, itchy rash. The plant tissues are loaded with "urushiol," a poisonous oil which takes about 3 hours to get going so washing with soap and water will help. A cloth soaked in apple cider vinegar will help blisters that have been opened. The vinegar dries up the itch in hours. Poison ivy does produce food for birds and deer. Animals aren't allergic.

Animals – Observe, don't touch. Any animal can bite if it feels threatened. If you see a snake, observe and stay at a safe distance. It will make every effort to get out of your way. Teach students to recognize copperheads. Know which students are allergic to bee stings and make sure they have their medication. Carry benadryl in your pack.

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