

Environmental Education Field Trips: Tips for Leading Outdoor Explorations



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Planning and Preparation before your Field Trip

1. There are lots of things to arrange before taking a class or group of learners into the field. You may want to make a checklist. Here are some things you could include:

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| Arrange transportation | Choose and prepare chaperones |
| Break class into groups | Designate an emergency driver |
| Inform kids which group they're in | Assign teachers as group leaders |
| Collect permission slips | Pre-trip activities |
| Collect release forms | Discuss expected behavior (see list) |
| Final list of who's going | Identify special medical needs |
| Letter home to parents | Make lunch plans |

Advise children what clothes to wear, what to bring (water, hats, snack, etc.)
Learn and share the use rules of the land you're going to visit (e.g. State Parks)
Call the agency for the land you'll visit: They want to know you're coming!

2. Plan your trip around a central message, or "theme." This message is the principal idea you want your kids to grasp as a result of your field excursion. Communicating this theme is your primary objective.

3. Pre-trip activities should build excitement and anticipation and introduce your theme idea. Here are some suggestions:

- Read a story to the class that somehow relates to the upcoming outdoor trip.
- Do an experiment or assign a writing exercise about some aspect of the trip. If children first write about or visualize something, then see it themselves in the field, it adds a level of excitement.
- Develop a mystery or puzzle ahead of time that they will solve on the trip.
- Talk about the subject, the theme and the field trip. What do your students expect? What might they get to see or do?

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The Day of Your Exploration

1. On an outdoor adventure, *flexibility is a key ingredient*. Weather may play you a trick; something will almost certainly be forgotten; or a family of golden eagles may soar over everyone's heads and leave you speechless.
2. Some kids will enjoy activities, games and presentations while others may find them dull or condescending. Groups may also change in their level of attention over the course of a trip. Don't be crushed if an activity or talk flops. Thinking about different learning styles and plan some components to address them.
3. If possible, know the site before you take people there, and plan your walk and stops based on what there is to experience.
4. Emphasize good rules of visitor conduct to protect resources. But never say, "Hey! You can't do that!" without explaining why. Interpret why the rules exists.
5. Make sure your chaperones will truly back you up and come down hard when they must. Sometimes chaperones may create problems by chatting loudly while a teacher is talking, failing to observe rules themselves, or allowing gross behavior problems to slip by.
6. Discourage collecting of natural materials. Be sure to explain why.
7. Be aware of potential dangers such as obstructions on the trail and warn people ahead of time.



Starting Your Exploration

8. As soon as you have a group of students separated out from the class and ready to go, get them moving away from the rest of the students. The sooner they are separated, the sooner they can start exploring (and get away from any chaos around the bus!) Try to keep groups separated from each other during the entire activity: when groups get close or run into one another in the field, they start shouting, waving and distracting each other.
9. When you start off, be sure and state your theme message once more. Try to keep your introduction brief, then move to second spot even if it's not very far, to show that it won't be a static activity.
10. If you are leading a large group, start off walking quickly to get the whole group moving, and then slow down.

11. If you encounter something interesting along the trail but don't want to stop the group, pick a chaperone to stand next to it and make sure every kid sees it as they pass by (e.g. "This plant is poison ivy!")
12. Ask for their help in protecting the resource: staying on the trail, packing out garbage, not collecting forest materials.

The Main Part of the Walk

13. When addressing the class or group as a whole for important information and instructions, wait until the whole group has assembled. It may help to stand above and up wind from the crowd so everyone can see and hear you. If possible, stand with the sun in *your* eyes so the children don't have to look into the glare.
14. Don't try to talk to the whole group while walking unless the group is very small. However, walking from place to place is a great time to answer individual questions.
15. Generally, keep the group on the trail. Explain that this reduces impact to a heavily visited area. If you leave the trail, you must have a good reason and do so with extreme care not to crush plants or erode soil. You are setting an example.
16. Encourage kids to use all their senses--not just sight--and to discover things for themselves. For example, give puzzles or mysteries to solve or questions to answer which relate to the theme of the walk. Encourage them to touch, feel textures, smell, listen.
17. Take advantage of spontaneous occurrences such as "teaching moments" even if they don't relate directly to your topic or purpose for being outdoors.
18. Keep the lead (or at least stay close to the front) at all times, but do not lose sight of the slowest. Designate an adult to bring up the rear and motivate stragglers.
19. If it's hot, stop in the shade; if cold stop in the sun. *Children, being smaller, are much more susceptible to temperature than adults.* A long stop in the hot sun may be uncomfortable for you, and miserable for your students.

Concluding your Program

20. Your final stop on the walk back should present your conclusion, *and restate the theme or main idea you want your kids to take away from the activity.* A final stop may be an opportunity to review, to play a review game, or to share thoughts.
21. **This is best done *before they see the final destination, bus or parking lot.*** As

soon as they see the end of the hike, their mind will immediately transition into what's next and you have lost them.

22. When kids perceive the program is over, they may begin a mad and uncontrolled stampede for the bus. This can be a very dangerous time, since rushing kids are more likely to slip, trip or get hurt. Be on guard, and remind them that you are the group leader.

Back at the Class: Post Trip Activities

There are many ways to cement what kids have learned in the field. Here are some suggestions:

Different groups may have had different experiences. Have them discuss what each group learned.

Data collected in the field can be tabulated and analyzed.

Children can make drawings of what they saw, such as a mental photograph of the most beautiful thing observed; a picture of what the area might have looked like 100 years ago or a million years in the future; a "comic" with several panels that tells the story of the site, etc.

Example Safety Rules

Rules for your safety

- Stay together -- don't go ahead of leader or behind the adult at the end of the line
- If you find yourself lost and alone:
 - STAY CALM!!**
 - Stay where you are. Do NOT try to find your way back.
 - Make yourself visible. Don't hide in bushes; be in the open as much as possible. If you're near a trail or a road, get on it. Make noise, especially if you hear someone nearby. Keep bright clothing visible.
 - If you get cold, jump around in place and wear all your layers.
 - We will find you, there is no dangerous wildlife so **stay calm** and don't try to find us.

Other rules

- Respect the life of every living thing you encounter. There are many small plants just sprouting, please tread lightly.
- Stay on the trail to protect growing and living things off the trail.
- Be sparing when collecting forest materials. If you all fill your pockets with "souvenirs", what will be left for other visitors and for the forest?
- Collecting things may actually be against the law in some parks and protected areas!
- Don't leave trash from lunch or snacks. It could kill an animal.
- Don't leave graffiti or carve names in trees.
- We hope the last group of students will find the forest as fresh as the first group.

Hazards

- No tree or rock climbing.
- Stay away from steep drops.
- Don't try to pet or feed wild animals
- No eating / drinking snow or runoff water.
- Use your sunscreen and sunglasses.
- Avoid thorny plants and broken glass on the ground.
- If you're shivering or getting uncomfortably cold (or warm) tell an adult
- **Drink Plenty of Water** -- Tell an adult if you get headachy.
- Common Sense Hiking
 - Look before you leap, avoid icy areas and tread with caution in snow of unknown depth. **AVOID PUDDLES!!**
 - Don't grab unstable objects such as dead branches or icy rocks for support. If you're not sure, assume it's unstable.