

TIPS FOR TEACHING OUTSIDE

Using the outdoors as a classroom for formal and non-formal education can help students of all ages gain knowledge and skills while connecting with nature. Many of the activities in Hennepin County's Environmental Education Activity Guides could be completed outside. Use the following tips for teaching outside to increase confidence among those leading activities outdoors.

Outcomes

- Leaders will gain confidence in teaching outside.
- Use the outdoors as a classroom to better engage participants and connect them to nature.

Audience

Leaders conducting activities

Time

Varies based on activity

Concepts

- Teaching outside can enhance learning.
- Teaching outside can connect participants with nature and motivate them to protect the environment.

Supplies

- Supplies vary based on which activity is being done outside



TIPS FOR TEACHING OUTSIDE

Preparation

- A variety of settings can be used for outdoor learning including a yard outside your school or organization, a local park, or a small forest or woodlot. Be creative and remember any outdoor setting can be used to connect participants with nature.
- Get permission before using an outdoor space and plan safe transportation or route to get there.
- Before going outside with participants, get to know the area's outdoor spaces on your own. Look for any hazards ahead of time so you can avoid them when you bring participants outside. Ask someone who is familiar with nature to identify plants and animals and point out any natural hazards.
- Make sure you inform parents beforehand that their children may get dirty during the outdoor activity.
- Be aware of the weather forecast before going outside with participants. Make sure participants have appropriate clothing for the weather.
- Establish and practice expected behavior in the outdoor classroom using the same rules you have established in the indoor classroom. If you have younger participants, remind them that learning outside is not the same as recess.
- Make sure you have a first aid kit and cell phone on hand before going outside.
- Create an outdoor classroom setting by bringing appropriate supplies, which may include blankets or sheets to lay out, clipboards, magnifying glasses, notebooks, and writing utensils.
- Make an "outdoor kit" for yourself that includes supplies for the activity you plan to do, a first aid kit, cell phone, water bottle, insect repellent and sunscreen.
- Make accommodations for participants with disabilities. Arrange for a paraprofessional to escort participants with special needs.

Procedure

Use the following tips to help you teach outside:

- Remember to have a balance of structured activities and free time for participants to explore the outdoor space. Be flexible and take advantage of unexpected learning opportunities such as spotting a bird close by, noticing changing leaf colors, observing the weather, etc. These "teachable moments" can be a powerful education tool.
- Try a simple activity for the first time you bring participants outside. Let participants learn their boundaries and get to know the outdoor space.
- Plan short activities to keep participants engaged on the way to the outdoor space. Ideas include picking a color and having participants find as many things in nature that have that color, picking a letter of the alphabet and having participants find as many items as they can that begin with that letter, or looking for signs of the season and making predictions about what will happen to the landscape in the next one to two months.
- Establish a central meeting place for your outdoor space. Use a signal that participants will recognize to meet at the central meeting point. Tell participants to go to the central meeting point if they get lost.
- If you are teaching with English Language Learner (ELL) students, the outdoors is a great place to learn new vocabulary terms.
- Have participants use field journals to make observations about what they see outdoors. Field journals can be used over time to document changes in seasons. Creating the journals together can be a great introduction to outdoor learning.
- Document the process while you go through it so you can look back and learn from what went well next time you teach outside.
- Before you leave the outdoor space, make sure the area is left the way you found it. Check that no participants, supplies or equipment were left behind.

Discussion questions

- How did participants react to teaching outside?
- What went well for participants outside? What could be improved next time you teach outside?
- Did teaching outside reveal anything new about the area around your school, work, office, etc.?