

Getting Started With Place-based Some Easy and Free Ideas

At HCTF, we believe in place-based learning that gets children and teachers outside and connected to nature. Outdoor environments are rich with opportunities for active learning of social, emotional, and academic objectives in tons of subject areas. First hand observation and hands-on experiences grab the attention of students as they uncover the world around them and begin to appreciate the interconnectedness of disciplines.

We want to make it easy-peasy for you to jump into place-based activities with your students, so we've loaded this article with practical stuff. In the first half, we've outlined some of the top challenges that crop up along with potential solutions for each.

In the second half, we've put together a variety of easy activity ideas that are focused on taking students outdoors, around the school or within walking distance and with an environmental or natural theme.

Challenge

Children may lack physical fitness for even short walks.

Solution

Try activities like orienteering which will have students running around finding the controls. If you're walking, give them something to focus on like a scavenger hunt. They'll be busy with the task and forget to complain.

Challenge

Children and their parents fear children getting dirty and/or hurt (including small cuts and scrapes).

Solution

Remind children and parents that clothes wash and that bumps and scrapes are part of learning and building new skills. Getting outside is natural and healthy activity. More and more research is revealing that it's an essential part of both physical and mental health.



How do you take a class of 32 wild inner city grade 8 kids out there without injury ... and make sure they all come back?

Ontario teacher, Pamela Depooter, reports she has 4 rules that have never failed her "even with the toughest inner city kids that no one wants to take anywhere."

1. You must always be in sight of one of the adults.
2. You must always be within hearing distance of one of the adults.
3. If you hear three blasts on a whistle go directly to that whistle sound. This is a sound of distress. Someone may need our help or there may be an emergency.
4. HAVE FUN, BE CURIOUS and EXPLORE!

P.58- <http://www.back2nature.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Stepping-Into-Nature-2013June04.pdf>



Ask kids to wear older clothes and good footwear for outside days or leave a change of clothes at school. Carry a small first aid kit with the essentials. For older students or as part of a buddy system activity, bringing in an expert to teach first aid to your class or multiple classes and teachers is an option.

Take pictures of the students engaged outside or with broad smiles getting dirty. Send along to parents or post on a special page so they can see what their children are up to and how much they're enjoying it (you can even put students in charge of this as a project asking them to capture fun moments for everyone in the class).

Listen for quotable moments from students like, "That was the best science class ever!" and send them along with the photos. Children may be hesitant at first but it won't take long for them to remember they're children.

Challenge

It takes effort to go out in all kinds of weather and children and parents don't know how to dress for it anymore. Many fear sending children out in the cold.

Solution

Teach children to dress in layers by doing a demo in class. You can even post a video for parents. Get mitts, toques, etc. from lost and found, garage sales or local thrift store. A box of garbage bags can serve as impromptu rain coats.

Challenge

Many students only go outside for recess or gym class and may have trouble controlling themselves with the new freedom of learning outdoors.

Solution

Recognize the uniqueness of each class and students and plan accordingly. Discussing behaviour expectations, arranging for volunteer help and starting in the school grounds where you know it's safe are all things that will help.

Give students time to explore when you first arrive at a new place (either as free time or with a loose activity). Debrief with students following outside expeditions about what worked and what didn't. The first outings may feel chaotic but everyone will soon get the hang of it.

Different activity types are good for managing energy levels. Faster paced activities take the edge off hyped up kids or wake up sleepy ones. Quiet, individual activities like listening, journaling or reading provide students with down time to refocus in a busy day. Taking the pulse on student energy levels throughout the day and using different kinds activities to help students transition to other activities that require more focus or a longer attention span will enhance your teaching tremendously.



Grab and Go!

A "grab and go" backpack filled with items for outdoor explorations reduces teacher prep time.

Julie Johnston, Resource Teacher at Pender Island School, has a bin at her school so she can easily grab what she needs. Here's what in her bin:

- Magnifying glasses (class set or 1 for every 2 students)
- Bug boxes (1 for every student)
- Ziploc® bags or envelopes for collecting things (enough for every student to have 1 or 2)
- Outdoor microscopes (6)
- Class set of lightweight clipboards and/or leaf rubbing plates
- Waterproof container filled with a class set of pencils/erasers and a sharpener
- Outdoor pencil crayon sets (ie, plastic cases with sharpener) (6)
- Class set of compasses on strings
- First aid kit and booklet
- Butterfly/pond nets (1 for every 2 students)
- Binoculars (1 for every 2 students, if possible. It's better to spend money for high quality and build a class set over time)
- Field guides (6 per topic): edible wilds, plants/trees, birds, insects, intertidal marine life, pond life
- Card decks of edible wild plants (6)
- A set of life cycle cards (www.acornnaturalists.com/store/LIFE-CYCLES-ANIMATED-CARD-SET-P7661C0.aspx)
- Class set of sit-upons (things for sitting on in muddy, wet areas)



Challenge

A few students disrupt the experience for all by complaining or criticizing.

Solution

Don't give complaints too much credence. In fact, they're likely to happen, especially in the middle to high school grades. For some kids, it's just their *modus operandi*. Other times, it's a way they've learned to cope with the discomfort of experiencing something new.

Oddly enough, just because someone complains doesn't mean they're not having fun! When complaints happen, you can redirect the child by asking a question or focusing them in on details of what they're observing.

If a child isn't engaging in a task, remind them of their competence in an area they love. Eg. "You know all the dinosaurs, Matthew, I don't think you'll have any trouble identifying 3 trees."

Easy Place-based Starter Activities

Al Fresco Outings

Get your class outside for regular walks – daily, weekly or bi-weekly. Share and investigate together what you experience in the world beyond the classroom walls. This is a simple commitment, yet rich enough to become a focal point for your entire curriculum.

Minibeast Explorations

Visit the tiny, fascinating world of the insect. There is no end to what can be learned from insects – everything from science to community. And they are everywhere, including the most urbanized of environments (In fact, you can get started by looking for signs of them in your classroom).

Tools such as handheld magnifying glasses, trowels, magnifying boxes or microscopes enhance student interest tremendously. They enable students to get up close and personal with their small acquaintances, revealing all kinds of adaptations and faces only a mother could love.

Consider combining insect learning with gardening activities to heighten the experience eg. Learn about plant reproduction by examining flowers you plant and observing the bees and butterflies pollinating them.

Feathered Friends

Our feathered friends can teach us so much about the environments we share. From their ability to fly to the music they make, humans find birds magical.

People often identify the species and then stop paying attention. It's much more interesting to observe behaviour. As you watch the actions of birds and listen to their calls, you'll discover whole worlds you weren't aware of. Birds tell us what's going on in the environment and connect us to the bigger landscape.

- Notice bird language – Birds are constantly communicating with one another and mammals. They use songs and calls to establish territories, find mates, solve disputes, and communicate what's going on around them such as what animals (including humans) are up to. Students can sit quietly with their journal or a sheet of paper and watch and listen for birds and capture a description. What did it sound like? How can you represent its song or call on your paper? How does its vocalization make you feel? How big was it? Bigger or smaller than a robin? (or any other bird they might know) Did you note any colors? Any other observations? How did it behave?
- Construct nest boxes and watch for adaptations for feeding and flying.

Sky Watching

No matter where you live, the sky is something we all share. Watching the sky can be as simple as having students lie back and watch the cloud patterns change. Students can identify cloud types or watch the patterns and make up stories that they can later write about.

Sky watching can also be a jumping off point for much more complex discussions around topics such as weather, time, atmosphere and climate change. Connecting to the awesomeness and wonder of natural phenomenon such as the sky provides a deeper connection that decreases anxiety and provides hope.

Nuts, Anyone?

Squirrels are an easy and safe wildlife species to observe. What do squirrels eat? The usual answer is 'nuts'. But is that true? What kind of nuts and where do they get them? Are there other foods they depend on? Record observations of squirrel behavior as they gather food to feed their young or in preparation for winter.



Take Art Outside

Tibetan Buddhist monks spend days making beautiful and intricate mandalas from coloured sand and then sweep them away to demonstrate the ideas of impermanence and nonattachment. Students can do the same using found objects in nature to make art on the ground or 3-dimensional sculptures. Let them loose and you'll be amazed at the creativity that transpires. Capture their finished works of art in photographs.

- Use leaf rubbings to make bookmarks or to learn about the variety of leaves in nature.
- Thread different leaves on a stick and stick it in the ground or string and hang them in the sunlight or in the classroom window (they'll be a bit like stained glass). Watch out for stinging nettle and poison ivy.
- Use flowers or leaves and paint to make prints.
- Use stones create mosaics on the ground. Encourage students to see the variety of color in stones and use them to build patterns or images.
- Build mobiles using collected materials.
- Study labyrinths and create one or more outside.

For more ideas and inspiration, check out Richard Schilling's <http://landartforkids.com/>. Richard has written a series of books on land art for kids.

Remember that you're not allowed to remove anything from parks. Rangers and land managers may get plenty excited if they come across a class of students picking at park plants so you may want to avoid a park for this activity. Have a conversation with your students about land ethics before sending them out to collect so that they don't completely strip any trees of leaves!

Orienteering

Orienteering is a bit like a treasure hunt – without the treasure (although some teachers incorporate tickets that can be traded for snacks, etc). Instead, students find the "controls" (flags put as markers at different places that they hunt and find).

So, what are the benefits? Students will learn to read maps, compare maps to terrain, locate selves on map, get plenty of exercise and work collaboratively with others.

Many teachers do orienteering activities in parks and other natural areas, however you can start right in your schoolyard.

You (or your students) can make a map of your playground using Google Maps and Adobe Photoshop Elements. In Google Maps, zoom in on your playground and take a



screenshot. This map won't be detailed enough for an orienteering activity. You can add details by opening the screenshot in Photoshop and using Elements to insert additional features using symbols you decide upon. You can also add these by hand-drawing them on the map. Lastly, add a legend.

Traditionally in orienteering, the controls that you have to find are little red and white flags. On a playground that is flat and open, these flags may be too easily visible to make the activity fun. Here are some other ideas:

- Make little flags by laminating paper and either stapling them to popsicle sticks to plant in the ground or taping them in place. Give teams different coloured crayons to mark the flags to show they found it.
- You can also use tickets, small pieces of colored paper (different colors for each team), stickers in envelopes, or have a different symbol at each station that they have to draw to show they found the station.
- Use different routes – either teams finding different controls or the controls in a different order – so teams aren't just following each other. The added bonus is that this allows you to individualize it for different students. For example, you can send students who are full of energy running distances back and forth around the playground and give students who need to work up to getting into shape shorter and less intense routes.
- Usually students are given the map of their whole route at the start, but you can also keep them guessing by leaving just the next section of their route in the control envelope.



Plant Something

Anyone who has ever gardened knows there's something magical about getting your hands in the soil and watching plants break through the earth or buds blossoming into leaves.

Planting projects can range from full-scale gardens, to growing plants on window sills, to replanting riparian (the areas beside streams and other waterways) areas.

Meet the Macroinvertebrates

Streams and ponds contain a whole world of aquatic macroinvertebrates that will immediately capture the attention of kids (and adults). Macroinvertebrates are organisms without backbones, which are visible to the eye without the aid of a microscope (however, a couple of microscopes add tremendously to the excitement of getting to know these wonderful creatures).

Aquatic macroinvertebrates live on, under, and around rocks and sediment on the bottoms of lakes, rivers, ponds and streams and are easy to collect. Macroinvertebrate populations tell us a great deal about the health of our waterways; basically, the healthier a waterway, the higher the population numbers and the more diverse the community.

Pond Adventures

Do you have a pond near your school? Pond studies are particularly satisfying during season changes. Explore how the pond environment transforms in the fall or spring and who the changing visitors are. Ponds are great places to look for signs of wildlife because the water brings many visitors.

Other ideas:

- Estimating the populations of pond inhabitants such as tadpoles builds math skills.
- Make boats from bits of wood, sticks and leaves. Have contests for which float best, move the fastest, are most beautiful or most creative. Students can work individually or in teams.
- It's also fun to send boats down creeks. Students can hypothesize the route they think their boats will take and then test their theories.

Build a Fort

Building forts was once a rite of childhood. Most of today's children never get that opportunity. Constructing a structure teaches math and physics, spatial recognition, team building and so much more!

Simple forts can be made with sticks, leaves and grass. Snow forts are an easy way to go in the winter.

To make it more interesting for older students, provide parameters like all team members have to be able to fit inside or put limiters on the activity such as a construction time limit. You can provide teams with a couple of items to get started like a tarp or rope. All teams can get the same materials or you pass out surprise materials to each group. You can also put all the helper materials in a large pile, have groups pick a number and allow them to choose one item at a time until everything has been distributed.

Take Out the Aliens

Invasive plant species have become a huge issue in many areas. They destroy the biodiversity of an area because they outcompete local native species.

Generally, it's pretty easy to connect with a local community group who will be thrilled to have your class come out and help remove invasive species. Not only can these groups help you identify areas that needs your aid, but also they'll usually have people who will be excited to talk to your students about invasives and teach them how to identify what to remove and how to do it.

Consider the Outdoors

No matter what you're teaching, consider doing the lesson outside. Often, simply moving a lesson outside enhances it tremendously. Singing is improved by the emotional connection to nature. Mathematic skills are heightened by community shapes, patterns and numbers. Hands-on learning deepens science skills and retention.

Daily Physical Activity is also enriched by fresh air. Rather than struggling to get students to run another lap in the gym, take them outside, where opportunities for fun activities are limitless: – climbing and rolling down hills, learning to negotiate uneven natural surfaces, playing tag in the woods, balancing while walking on downed logs... the activity ideas are as bountiful as your and your students' imagination.

Whatever your students are learning, taking the lessons outdoors improves the quality of the learning experience and makes it more fun.

