



Tips for Overcoming Barriers to Taking your Class Outdoors

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For some quick and easy schoolyard learning activities:

- https://www.hctfeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/C2C_EasyPlaceBasedActivities.pdf

Check out these links! Field Trip Planning Primers:

- *Step by Step Field Trip Planning* <http://hctfeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Field-Trip-Checklist.pdf>
- *Outdoor Classroom Tools - Simple Things to Make and Take on your Excursions* <http://hctfeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Outdoor-Classroom-Essentials.pdf>



Yes, it's worth the effort!

The evidence is indisputable. Bringing students outdoors helps regulate behaviour, builds collaboration and self-confidence, and most of all, creates rich, meaningful and memorable learning experiences. But how does one do it? Some educators have shared their challenges in taking students outdoors from permission slips, support of parents, safety, outdoor classroom management, weather and more. It may seem overwhelming. Is it worth it? YES! And like anything, the more you go outdoors to learn, the easier it will become for teachers, students, and all others involved. Here are some strategies and tips to address some of the challenges faced by educators in taking their students outdoors.

1. Plan for Success

- **Abide by the "KISS often!" rule of thumb: Keep It Short, Simple and go out Often!** Start small.
- **Go outdoors as much as possible.** Even if it's the schoolyard on a regular basis with simple learning and exploration activities. This helps give students practice so that they get used to outdoor classroom rules and expectations (it's not recess time!). It also gives teachers the opportunity to establish a routine and to identify and address challenges before going on longer excursions.

2. Manage the Paperwork

"There are so many forms to make and collect!"

- **One field trip form for the year.** Some schools have a single form sent out to parents at the start of the school year explaining the benefits of outdoor learning and asking for permission for low risk walking field trips from the school grounds for the school year. This way you don't have to send out and collect permission slips for every field trip and it allows for some spontaneity with the timing of short excursions with favourable weather or other natural events. See if this is possible within your school.
- **Use a sample form.** Talk to other teachers to see if they have a form that they can share with you. Organizations in your community that provide outdoor experiences may have forms to help you avoid reinventing the wheel and may have features you may not think of otherwise. Use a sample form to create an electronic version, easily modified and customized for all teachers to use in your school.
- **Use technology such as fillable field trip and e-signature forms.** Check with your School District polices to make sure you are meeting the requirements for coverage.



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3. Build Your Village of Support

“I don’t have support from the parent community”

It takes a village to build successful outdoor learning opportunities. The village includes your students’ parents! If you are finding that parents are reluctant to have their children outdoors, learn about the root of their concerns so that you can address them.

- **Outline your objectives** and point out how it ties in with the curriculum when asking for permission slips. Use the term “field studies” instead of field trip to help set expectations.
- **Share your rationale for outdoor education and research** showing its benefits to learning, skill development, health and wellness, and social development. Share the concerns among educators when children do not have access to experiential and outdoor learning opportunities.
- **Invite parents to an informational session** to demonstrate and discuss the benefits of outdoor learning.
- **Canvas the parent community to understand what their concerns are.** Assemble information and procedures to address their specific concerns.
- **Invite students from another class** or program to share the value of their experiences in a format that would help parents see the benefits.

“I don’t have enough drivers”

- **Explore your 100m field trip options.** Try going on outdoor experiences within walking distance of the school in the natural and built environment.
- **Use public transit.** If there is an option to take public transit this is also a great way to reduce the carbon footprint. Check with the transit companies as there may be some school discounts available.
- **Apply for a GO Grant** to get funding for a school bus for your field trip. GO Grants can cover up to \$600 for a class or \$3500 for a school trip, including transportation, project materials, and/or program fees. Funding preference is given to outdoor field trips with hands-on learning about BC’s fish, wildlife, habitats, and biodiversity. Deadlines are February and September 1st. <https://www.hctfeducation.ca/go-grants/>

“How can I engage parent volunteers and chaperones?”

Adult volunteers can be a great asset on your field outings. They can help keep the group together, escort students to the bathroom, and assist with outdoor activities or stations. Remember that many adult volunteers may not have a background in education or working with children. This may hold them back from being involved due to lack of confidence or skill set. Set up your volunteers for success.

- **Share your expectations and roles for parent volunteers** and ways they can help before going on the field trip. This can be done when initially asking for volunteers.



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Remind that they are there to help students explore and enjoy. This should include helping them with tasks if needed, but not giving answers or solving all the problems for the students.

- **Share the handout: Tips For Field Trip Helpers** <https://www.hctfeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Working-with-Field-Trip-Helpers.pdf>
- **Create a field trip schedule** or an outline of the day's events.
- **Make a contact list.** Provide volunteers with a copy of everyone's cell phone numbers.
- **Assign each adult a small group of students** that they are to stay with and keep track of during the outing.
- **Outline emergency procedures** and location of medical kit.
- **Make sure that the adults know how much they are appreciated** for taking the time to support the students and your class.

4. Being Safe Outdoors

"I'm worried about safety"

The main ways to be prepared and to minimize risks associated with outdoor learning include:

- **Visit the site in advance.** Even if you are already familiar with the site, ideally you should visit it again soon before your trip. There may have been recent changes, such as construction, closed bathrooms, closed trails, or natural occurrences (such as fire, wind, snow, rain, or animal activity) that have changed the site conditions. If you are unable to visit the site, call park managers or speak with others who have visited the site recently, to learn of current conditions. Some things to look for when you visit the field trip site:
 - Where will drivers park or the bus drop you off? Is there enough space for the bus to turn around?
 - Where are the bathrooms?
 - Is cell service accessible and reliable in case of emergency? If not, does your school have a satellite phone or SPOT that can be used?
 - Follow the route that you will go with the students and take note of the following:
 - Where are larger, natural gathering places for games or nature study?
 - Are there covered or sheltered areas in case of poor weather?
 - Where is a good location for a snack and lunch break?



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- Identify natural features that can be used to set boundaries so that students can explore but still be within sight and hearing distance.
 - Note any hazardous areas to avoid such as steep or rocky areas, areas close to bodies of water, tree falls or other obstacles.
 - Identify sensitive natural areas that should be off limits, such as wildflower meadows, fragile soils, nest sites or other important wildlife habitat.
- **Know the site rules.** Learn the existing rules and guidelines for the location and share it with your students.
 - Is collecting for nature study permitted?
 - Can people venture off-trail?
 - Are there areas where noise must be kept to a minimum to as not disturb wildlife?
 - Consider additional rules and safety steps that you want to add for your class.
 - Have the students provide their own input on guidelines for safe and ethical behaviour in the outdoors. By engaging the students it helps increase their own understanding and collaboration. Identify and address any concerns they may have.
- **Share a field trip packing list for students and parents.** Make sure students and adults pack adequate food and water, and appropriate clothing and footwear for the field trip.
- **Bring a first aid kit** and make sure that all know where it will be. Identify and assign a point person with First Aid credentials.
- **Review safety procedures** with students and adult chaperones.

“Wolves and Cougars and Bears, Oh My!”

When we go out in nature we are entering the home of other animals. Much of the reward of being in the outdoors is in experiencing the wild- the sights, sounds, and smells of nature that most people have become so disconnected from. Most animals want nothing to do with us and keep their distance, especially from a large and noisy group of students! Nonetheless, we live in a part of the world where large mammals may be encountered. By educating ourselves and our students about what to do in the unlikely event of an encounter, we can feel more prepared and confident.

Some general tips related to wildlife safety:

- **Identify wildlife concerns** specific to the area and the time of year. Provide relevant background to students and parents.



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- **Dispel the myths** of risks associated with wildlife encounters by bringing in a guest speaker to the class, summarizing the myths and associated facts into a True/False game for students as well as a corresponding fact sheet for parents to review and invite their questions.
- **Recognize wildlife signs** with your students, such as tracks and scat. This can be a fun and educational pre-trip activity and could alert you to recent wildlife activity when in the field.
- **Stay together as a group.** Make sure you have a system in place for grouping and ensuring all students and volunteers are accounted for in case of an encounter.
- **Review strategies for wildlife encounters.** Use existing animal preparedness tools available online such as Bear Aware and WildSafe BC. Role-play any procedures that are relevant and of greatest concern. Treat responses to such situations with the same preparedness as you would to conduct a fire drill.
- **Domestic animal safety.** Most encounters with animals are usually with dogs. Although dogs are typically “man’s best friend” and loved by most children, off-leash dogs that approach your students may be frightening, and some dogs do not want to be pet by strangers.
 - Teach students in advance that they should never pet a dog that they don’t know unless given permission by the owner. Practice this through role play.
 - Identify in advance if any students have fears of dogs. If you will be in a place that is frequented by dogs, ensure that the student will be close to an adult.

5. Outdoor Field Trip Gear

Having certain items and tools prepared in advance can help make the field trip run smoothly. In addition to the essentials of food, water, appropriate clothing and extra layers (sun and rain protection), and first aid supplies, here are some other useful tips regarding field trip gear.

- **Identify your field equipment** needed for your trip. Gather or make materials that will be used for the field study in advance. Prepare and organize all the tools prior to the outing.
- **Practice using field studies tools.** Magnifiers, binoculars, cameras or other digital technology, in the classroom or schoolyard.
- **Create a set of outdoor field studies backpack.** If possible, gather a class set of small backpacks each containing safety items and an observation kit. Small, kid-sized backpacks (rather than the giant ones that kids often have) are preferable.
- **Outdoor clothing.** Prepare students as to what they should wear outdoors including foot wear. 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.



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- **Include a few personal supplies.** Bring water bottle, snacks, toilet paper, plastic bags - practice Leave No Trace. Some teachers bring a potty to use with younger students in areas without bathrooms.

“But it’s cold outside!”

As they say, there’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. The key to being prepared for the weather is advanced planning.

- **Check the weather conditions** at the location, as these may differ greatly from school setting. Be prepared for sudden changes in weather.
- **Places to take cover.** Check to see if there are any shelters at the site and sheltered areas.
- **Prepare for weather with students** by asking them to help you decide what to put into a ‘daypack’ after they learn a little about the place and program planned. Use props to illustrate their ideas and add in any additional ideas of your own.
- **Create a checklist of outdoor supplies needed items** and rationale for their use. Share this with parents at the start of the school year and create a collection of items as a class set for excursions by donation or funded by the school’s PAC.
- **Do a practice run in the classroom.** Have students bring and model their weather gear in advance of the day.
- **Bring some extra supplies** for students who forgot or need something. Garbage bags can make for last minute ponchos and smaller bags to provide protection from the wet weather by wearing them over socks inside shoes.
- **Bring a thermos.** Have warm apple cider or a thermos of hot chocolate to drink – great for warming up, a break, and to connect the group together for learning.

6. Outdoor Classroom Management

Teaching outdoors has different challenges for managing your students than being confined in 4 walls of the classroom. The outdoor classroom offers a variety of sensory and situational opportunities. If you practice going outdoors in the schoolyard you can establish a routine and identify and overcome challenges prior to going farther afield. Here are some additional tips:

- **Keep students focused with specific tasks**, working in pairs or groups up to four or with a buddy class. Try to have a product of some sort that students can take home, such as a piece of art, a piece of writing, pictures, etc. or gather data to take back to the classroom rather than analyze it in the field. Have the students come back to the post-task location with something: a completed data sheet, a drawing, a list, a specimen, a photo, an idea or observation. Have a plan as to how students will share and process what they have returned with.



- **Set field location boundaries.** Make very clear the boundaries of where students are permitted to go and what areas are off limits. Use soccer or traffic cones to mark boundaries for field work.
- **Establish a signal to get student and teacher attention.** Use something that students are familiar with, such as a whistle, to call everyone to attention, give directions, and to gather the group. Provide a mechanism, such as a raised flag, to allow students to hail the instructor, as needed.
- **Pick a regroup location and time** if students are scattered within specified boundaries and within sight to explore and investigate an area. Use the signal for getting attention and to call them back to the pre-determined gathering place.
- **Assign volunteers** to groups of students. Circulate among the students. Have a volunteer be the caboose on hikes and you or the leader be at the front.
- **Have a Plan B.** Be ready to modify and adapt your plans in case of inclement weather or other unforeseen contingencies.
- **Be enthusiastic and have fun!** Explore and discover with the students. Don't talk too much- let the students' inquiries lead the way.
- **Outline expectations in the classroom** before going out. Solicit ideas for expectations from the students and have your own bottom lines (safety first).
- **Do a practice run outside in the schoolyard.** Go on regular outdoor walks to view and compare environments with the field trip location; build up outdoor experience and stamina.
- **Share details about the location.** Show students photographs of key features (wildlife, plants, landscapes) of areas in advance to help connect students to the site where they will be going. Use computer or local field guides/species lists to create a visual checklist or field guide to help identify local plants and animal life that will be likely seen on the field trip.
- **Provide name tags** for students, volunteers and program leaders.

"The students don't want to leave!"

An outdoor day can be very exciting for students and getting them back inside or on the bus can be stressful if there is a tight timeline but it is also exciting to see your students so engaged. Here are few ideas:

- **Establish ground rules** before you begin. This could include some free time to explore if you have time to build that in.
- **Do a wrap-up activity.** Before leaving have a final gathering location and a group wrap up/circle for sharing and reflection on the outdoor experience.



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- **Sharing the joy with parents.** Creating some ideas or ways for students to share with their parents about what they enjoyed about being outdoors.

“But I don’t have the expertise!”

- **Select hands-on or experiential activities** that do not require content expertise. Give yourself permission to teach experiential lessons without feeling you need to know any more than you already do!
- **Attend a pro-d session** on outdoor or place-based learning to collect ideas for your toolkit.
- **Let inquiry be the guide.** Resist the temptation to convey everything you do know, particularly the Latin names of plants and animals. Focus instead on having students create names for what they discover based on their observations of the characteristics of living things. If students return to the classroom with their own names for a series of plants and animals, then reveal the origin of naming and see how many of the actual names also reflect the observed characteristics that scientists made to assign names, just as the students did!
- **Incorporate free exploration time.** Learn stories about plants and animals with your students, ask open-ended questions, concepts and helping students formulate questions for their return to the classroom.

“Next time I will...” Reflection and Preparing for the Next Trip

- **Reflect** on what worked well and what you would have done differently. Write down your thoughts while it is fresh in your mind.
- **Discuss with others** present on the outing to share insights and their experiences of the highlights and challenges.
- **Try it again differently.** Sometimes things don’t always go as you had planned or hoped, sometimes they go even better. Learn from a previous experience and build on it.

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