

Outdoor Classroom Management

Working with students in an outdoor learning environment is different from teaching in a traditional classroom setting. To make sure your time in the garden is both productive and enjoyable, here are a few tips on classroom management:

Establish garden rules. Create a set of simple rules and share them with students before you go out to the garden. Additionally, post the rules in the garden as a reminder. Try to phrase them in a positive way. Rules may include items like remembering to walk on paths, asking before you pick, and remaining in the garden area during class. Keep the list short so rules are easy to remember and follow.

Train students on using tools. Before going out to the garden, show students all the different tools they may use and demonstrate the proper way to use them. Make sure they know to carry the working end of the tool below their waist and not to run while holding tools. Also discuss proper storage of the tools and why it is important not to leave them lying in pathways.

Recruit help. You will need at least one other adult in the garden to be prepared for emergencies (if one child needs special attention, you cannot leave the rest of the class outside alone). Depending on the size of your class, it may be preferable to have three or four adult volunteers. Keeping the activities hands-on is an important aspect of learning in the garden, and this is hard to accomplish without plenty of volunteer support.

Divide your class into small groups. Smaller groups allow for more hands-on experience. It is best if you have a volunteer to lead each group, but if that is not possible, provide clear instructions for what each group should accomplish. Choose the groups carefully, taking care to match up students who will work well together.

Provide a comfortable sitting area. If you are planning to talk to the class as a whole for an extended time in the garden, use an area where they can comfortably sit to listen. Trying to talk to the group in a small space with obstructed views turns into a frustrating experience, and students quickly lose interest. It is best if this area allows them to sit in a circle or semicircle so they can clearly see you and feel connected to the rest of the group. Some schools create sitting areas with benches, hay bales, or even a well-maintained lawn area. If you do not have a good sitting area in your garden, deliver all group presentations or demonstrations in the classroom and reserve the garden for the smaller group activities.

Be prepared for emergencies. Always have a first aid kit in the garden. Know if any of your students have special health concerns, such as asthma or an allergy to bee stings.

Tips on Outdoor Classroom Management

- **Provide a shady space** for students so they have a place to listen, write, and retreat from full-sun days.
- **Use clipboards with pencils attached** so that papers and science notebooks don't blow away, get lost, etc. (Having someone in charge of the portable pencil sharpener is helpful too!)
- **Rotate responsibilities** among small groups or individuals, e.g., watering, garden hose pickup, toolshed key security, etc.
- **Preview/review your strategy.** Before going out to the garden, discuss what will be done, review which teams are in charge of what, and preview academic science content. After gardening, review what was accomplished, how things went logistically, and what were the ties to additional lessons. Linking garden activities to classroom learning reinforces the importance of taking garden time seriously.
- **Build opportunities for free exploration** into garden activities where possible. This is an important part of inquiry-based learning, and kids are naturally going to stray from focused activities when drawn to some phenomenon of their own interest. I've found that if they know that they will have a set time in the garden to freely explore their individual interests, they'll remain more focused during more formal instructional activities.

- * Set routine/expectations at the beginning of lesson. Start each activity by gathering in a circle to talk about main ideas and expectations. Close lesson by returning to the circle. (you can use carpet pads, or stumps for a smaller group)
- * Discuss the importance of staying safe and respecting all living things - plants, animals, one another, and adults.
- * Establish rules for tools and model proper behavior. For example:
 - keep the pointed end below your knees at all times
 - always walk when moving with a tool
 - always return tool to where you got it and make sure it is clean
- * Establish a call back signal to let students know it's time to return to the circle, or rotate groups. This can be an animal sound like an owl or wolf, or even a bell or whistle.
- * Keep students comfortable by providing shade when possible or keeping their backs to the sun when they are being addressed by an adult.
- * Try to give choices whenever possible.
- * Keep an open mind about teachable moments...so many more opportunities than inside the classroom.

4 P's of Prevention

Perceptions

- Students usually outside for recess for fast, loud activities. Attempt to shift perception and refer to the space and "Learning Garden" or "Outdoor Classroom"
- Use same disciplinary tools from the classroom. Bring cards and/or rewards that are normally used. Otherwise, share with students what will be different.
- Establish rules for tools, model proper behavior, and role play. For example:
 - keep the pointed end below your knees at all times
 - always walk when moving with a tool
 - always return tool to where you got it and make sure it is clean
- Have visual keys for clean-up. Establish a place for everything to be returned.
- Have jobs ready to be assigned.

Personal Relationships

- Learn names or use name tags, or give them nature or garden names.
- Calling by name makes them respond
- Engage with them as they enter the space - high five, greeting, make a personal connection, etc
- Consider a quick ice breaker to get started (give out garden names)

Participation Strategies

- Try to keep conversations open to all students and not just the "rapid responders".
- Use dialogue starters:
 - "I noticed that..."
 - "At first I thought _____, but now I think

