



Garden to Table Tips for Outdoor Classroom Management

Gardens and other outdoor spaces provide the perfect setting for experiential learning, and are especially attractive as schools look to maximize the benefits of fresh air. If we can grow comfortable with the idea of using “distractions” as teaching moments and opportunities to focus student learning, then extra energy and enthusiasm found outside can be channeled into some memorable lessons. Here are some tips that may make teaching outside a more positive experience for all:

Setting the Stage

- Teachers can set the stage by referring to gardens and other outdoor learning spaces as extensions of the classroom, where norms of learning and respect from inside the classroom continue to be practiced.
 - Think about describing the setting as a “garden classroom,” “living lab,” or “satellite classroom.” Remind students that it is class time, not recess.
 - Don’t worry too much about “doing it right”. Gardens are messy and can’t really be broken. Mistakes might happen, but it is the experience that is worthwhile, not a perfect garden or lesson.
- If time allows, it may be worth it to spend one or more class sessions in the outdoor learning space just exploring and practicing learning routines.
- Plan to use rotating learning stations in the garden to engage students in different activities in different areas of the garden. If you don’t have enough adult guides for each small group, have one of the stations be free exploration within boundaries to encourage self-directed activity.

Ownership and Choice

- While classroom expectations need to be clearly expressed and followed, it’s also fun to learn outside! By giving students opportunities to work in groups, to have impact on the space, and to make choices, they will come to see this as their learning space just as they do in their beloved classroom.
 - Consider moving team-building group activities outside to the learning space.
 - Look for opportunities for students to make choices within their outdoor learning space - can they design and/or build the seating setup?
 - Have students explore the garden with the intention of discovering something surprising, mysterious or problematic (a phenomenon) that can become the focus of inquiry.
 - Students will finish assigned tasks at different times. Set aside a place for free exploration to keep students engaged while others are still working.
- Modeling your own enthusiasm for outdoor learning, including actively participating in the hands-on portions, is a great way to build a relationship with your students.



Expectations

- As in any educational setting, it's important to set clear and reasonable expectations of acceptable behaviors in the outside learning space.
 - Consequences may look different in the outdoors than in the classroom.
 - Are you ok with a more informal conversational style outside, and how does that work with respectful listening?
- Safety is of course more important outside!
 - Students may enjoy discussing how to best work to keep themselves and the living environment around them safe while learning outdoors.
 - This is a great opportunity for children to become aware of their impact on all living things - plants, animals, fellow students, and adults. (Teachers and parents are humans, too!)
- If tools or alternate seating solutions are to be used, it's worth spending some time thinking of how these may be "creatively repurposed" by students and set parameters and consequences ahead of time for misuse.
- If you don't already use a call-back signal, now is a great time to put one to practice!

Planning Ahead

- As you know from classroom teaching, flexibility can save your sanity. Teaching outside can mean using a momentary distraction as an opportunity to take learning in an expected but fascinating direction. Allow yourself and your students some space for things to not go as planned.
- Think about the physical space and ways that you can mitigate possible frustrations or distractions that just can't be absorbed. Some things to think about:
 - Sun angle - Will it be in the students' eyes, or yours?
 - Seating - What happens if the grass is wet or the pavement is hot?
 - Projectiles - Does your outdoor space have stones or seeds that will be hard to resist? (And could you start with a throwing session to get it out of their systems?)
 - Noise - Is there a busy road nearby, or an active playground? What about kids scuffing feet on dirt or gravel?
 - Stinging things - Bees and wasps may be present. Modeling calm can help a lot, as does having quick access to emergency supplies.
 - First Aid - What supplies could you have on hand that might keep the entire class from having to head inside if someone needs a bandage?
- What can students bring from home to limit the distraction of being uncomfortable?
 - Sunscreen, hats, water
 - Appropriate layers of clothing and footwear (possibly water-resistant shoes or a dry pair to change into)
 - Some students are bothered by the sensation of dirty hands, and may be more inclined to fully participate if they have gloves