

Preparing to Teach in the Field

Going on a field trip is fun! Students get excited and look forward with anticipation. It is important to prepare for the trip so everyone has a good time and your educational goals are met.

Know your students: The first thing you want to do when preparing a field trip is to understand your students' needs.

What subjects are they most interested in?

What locations have they shown interest in?

Do they have any specific challenges which might present themselves during the trip?

Know your educational goals: Take some time to write down what you want to achieve by going on this field trip. Keep in mind that simple exposure to the world around them is incredibly educational!

What are your educational goals?

What subjects do you want to cover?

How are you going to cover these subjects?

What will you need to bring from home to facilitate your activities?

How much time do you want to spend doing learning activities?

How do you want to record your activities?

Know your location: Once you have a good handle on your students' needs and your educational goals, you will want to focus on the location itself. Choose a location that is both engaging and facilitating to your goals. Any location can be educational if you are properly prepared.

What are the innately educational features of your chosen location?

How can you use the features of your location to meet your goals?

Are there any features which should be avoided during your trip?

Are there any location-specific rules which might hinder your activities?

How long can you be at your location?

What staff or docents are available to you and your students?

Planning the Trip

When you are planning a field trip with children, it is important to plan all of the details, while also remaining totally flexible. It is practically guaranteed that your trip will not go exactly the way you planned it, and you don't want that to ruin your experience.

Make sure you have thought through the following items:

1. Location hours, directions, basic layout
2. Entrance fees and/or parking fees
3. Special rules at your location for groups or children
4. Weather and its influence on your dress and activities
5. Food and water for that day
6. How to pack any materials you need, and rules regarding them
7. Who will carry what
8. Children with special needs
9. Extra adult help needs
10. End of the day plans specifically for potentially tired and cranky children

Don't forget that each child is having their own experience. While most will be having fun, one might feel left out, extra tired, or just be having an off day. You'll want to make sure you plan for this. Know which children might need extra help and pack for the trip with them in mind. Does anyone have food, light, or temperature sensitivities? Will anyone need some quiet time or relaxing time, or can they all go all day?

Letting the children carry their own supplies, food, and water can work well if you have a small group, or a group of older children, but larger groups of small children have a tendency to put their things down and forget about them. You can carry everyone's things yourself, enlist the help of another adult, store their things in the vehicle or a locker, or utilize a wagon or stroller.

What kind of help you can enlist if you need it? Know where the first aid stations are. What adults are available at your location to help with a specific child's needs or the needs of the group? Where are the bathrooms and how will you handle bathroom breaks? Always have a contingency plan in case your plans get derailed. Remember that even just getting exposure to new places and people is a fantastic education, and it's okay if you have to set aside your activities to make sure everyone has a positive experience.

Tips for Teaching

Teaching a lot of children at once can be difficult. You need to keep their attention, deal with conflicts, and prevent destruction of property while also helping them learn. It can be very rewarding when you see their minds engage and their faces beam with the excitement of learning something new!

Here are some tips to help keep your students engaged while promoting learning:

- 1. Ask lots of questions!** This is probably the most important thing you can do when teaching in the field. Telling children things might work well in a classroom, but in the field there are too many competing forces. Their minds want to absorb everything around them, and the only way to keep them focused on the direction you want them to go in is by asking them lots of questions and fully engaging them. In fact, the only non-question speaking you do might be short one-liner informational directives, or only slightly longer answers to questions. Employ the socratic method and answer questions with questions. While that drives adults crazy, children love it. You can even pretend you don't know something to motivate them. Let the children think and guess about everything!
- 2. Take breaks as needed.** If you start to notice that you've lost the attention of more than a third of your group, immediately stop what you are doing and redirect them to something else by asking another question. Once you get them engaged in your new line of questioning, you can gently steer them back to the learning activity you were doing. Do not try to fight the awesomeness of your location. You will lose. :)
- 3. Don't stop everyone for small misbehaviors.** This can be really hard to do, but resist the urge to stop the lesson for a couple of children misbehaving. Of course, if these misbehaviors are overly distracting or dangerous, do what you need to do, but field trips are generally not the best place to discipline with timeouts or embarrassing scolding. Every child can learn something on your field trip if you make sure it stays positive. If a child or two are acting out, redirect them. Because you are in a new and exciting place, you can usually get their attention again simply by using a louder more exciting voice and being more animated for a few minutes. Ultimately, they all just want to have fun, and if you can be that fun you can redirect them back to your learning activity without creating negative energy in the group. If this fails, take a break as directed in #2.

Above all else, if you're having fun learning, your students will too!