

Setting Up An Outdoor Classroom

Outdoor classroom is a wonderful opportunity to get your class outside and in touch with nature. With planning, modeling of expected outdoor behaviors, and guidance, outdoor classroom encourages student inquiry, exploration, and discovery of their natural environment around them.

1. First, identify areas outside of school that could be used as outdoor classroom. Find a spot that has some shade for warmer months and a place to sit. This area should be relatively quiet and free from distractions.
2. Next, before heading out the door, we create 2 Y-charts (looks like, sounds like, feels like). The first Y-chart kid's make is about what outdoor recess looks like, sounds like and feels like. Then brainstorm and create the second Y-chart about what they think outdoor classroom looks like, sounds like and feels like. This class developed outdoor classroom Y-chart listing expectations can be posted and reviewed before outdoor experiences.
3. Construct activities to take kids outside and practice outdoor classroom behaviors. Begin with short, brief periods of time outdoors. Some experiences younger students might enjoy are: going to your outdoor classroom area to read a favorite book; using five senses to learn about their new classroom; looking up, looking eye-high and looking down to discover what makes up the habitat of the outdoor classroom; mapping the classroom; adopting a tree, bush, etc. within the habitat and watch it change through the seasons; learning to look-and-leave things as we found them; and learning to use basic equipment such as hand lens, binoculars, observation tubes, and nature journals.
4. Last, reflect with students on their outdoor classroom experience using a rubric.

Did I: use my senses to investigate and observe?
respect nature and leave things the way I found them?
listen to members of my group?
share my ideas with my group?
have the tools I need to complete my work?
record and document my findings?
complete the tasks given to my group?

With expectations set and practicing those expectations, students are ready to experience outdoor classroom in a variety of settings.

Resources: Responsive Classroom <http://www.responsiveclassroom.org>

A Head Start on Science, Encouraging a Sense of Wonder William C Ritz

Discovering Nature with Young Children Ingrid Chalufour and Karen Worth