5 Short Nature-Focused Activities for Young Students

Opportunities for outdoor learning don’t require special materials, and you can get started by dedicating just 10 minutes to the experience.

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The beginning of the school year is the perfect time for preschool and primary grade educators to get in the habit of taking the class outside for experiential learning in nature. While you are establishing routines for yearlong learning, start a simple one that increases engagement, supports academic achievement, and reduces your prep time.

A 2020 study of Canadian kindergartners shows that children with 30 minutes of outdoor learning a day or three hours per week show significant increases in their ability to self-regulate. Since self-regulation is associated with long-term academic success and social and emotional well-being, the benefits that students derive from outdoor nature-based learning argue for making it a regular routine. Young children learn through experience by touching, manipulating, and observing natural objects like leaves, acorns, and flowers. Nature invites children’s interest and curiosity and encourages them to ask questions and seek answers about what they notice.

Fall, with its interesting seasonal changes, is the perfect time to introduce outdoor learning on a weekly or even daily basis. You don’t need to spend loads of precious time planning and prepping because nature provides everything you need. You don’t need a big block of time, a special occasion, or a field trip. Just walk outside the classroom door to whatever “outside” is in your location.

Preschool students, kindergartners, and first graders don’t necessarily need long teacher-directed lessons in order to learn. The following five targeted mini-lesson ideas will get your students learning and exploring nature in as little as 10 minutes.

1. Go on a Hunt

Nature provides real-life examples of almost any topic your class studies. *Cubes, Cones, Cylinders, and Spheres*, written and illustrated by Tana Hoban, can inspire students to search nature for the three-dimensional shapes depicted in the book. In addition to shapes, you can search for hidden letters, things in nature that begin with a particular letter sound, places where water is hiding, evidence that animals have visited, or different shades of a particular color. Children can conduct field surveys—for example, counting how many trees have sprouted new buds in spring or how many different colors of flowers they can find.

Hunts can also reinforce mathematical, literacy, or science concepts that you’ve been discussing, or they can be used to introduce something new. For example, you may ask students to find two green objects to bring back to the group. They can work together to line them up from the darkest to lightest

shades, and then label each object with new vocabulary words for shades of green, like emerald or chartreuse.

2. Sharpen the Senses

Small outdoor spaces are the perfect places to hone observational skills. Ask children to focus on just one sense during their outdoor session. What can they see from their spots? How many different textures can they feel? Can they categorize different smells? Can they identify the origins of different sounds?

These observations provide children with a chance to practice mapmaking as they note the locations of various sights, sounds, or smells. Returning to the same spot on a different occasion gives children the opportunity to observe and record seasonal changes in the environment.

3. Create Place-Based Art

Courtesy of Nicole Dravillas Fravel
An example of student-created land art.

Land art, like that made by sculptor Andy Goldsworthy, can be made with whatever natural materials are available in your location. Children can design for artistic expression, or the designs can be used in service of a curricular goal—they can demonstrate understanding of a particular theme or reflect on a picture book. Children can be challenged to explore math concepts like symmetry, patterning, and shape through their designs.

You can have your students create individually, or the class can work together to create one artwork, discussing and negotiating aesthetics and math concepts as they go.

4. Harness Any Type of Weather

Observing the weather allows students to practice oral or written storytelling and explore science concepts. On cloudy days, ask the class to find shapes in clouds. Name the different kinds of clouds, or make up a group story about the cloud shapes.

On sunny days, take some time to observe and play with shadows—either ones made by various objects outside or ones that children make with their own bodies. On rainy days, listen to the drops as they hit different objects. Encourage children to compare and contrast the sounds that rain makes when it hits things like leaves, the ground, or jackets, or the sounds that wind makes as it strikes different objects.

Courtesy of Nicole Dravillas Fravel
A student adds leaves to a group project, using materials from the surrounding location.

Snowy days present an opportunity to experiment with printmaking. Children can use their boots or classroom objects to create tracks in the snow. You could ask them to predict the shapes (or footprints) that different objects will make or use them to stamp patterns in the snow. Once the prints are created, discuss relative size and note which prints are the longest or widest.

5. Compare and Contrast

In fact, nature provides many ways for children to learn about relative size using their own bodies to measure, compare, and contrast objects. Challenge them to find things in nature that are taller than they are, or one thing that is smaller than their finger, or something that is wider than their leg.

No Materials Necessary

These activities are all designed to be material-free, using nothing but the human body and the nature available in any location. However, additional classroom supplies can certainly enhance the experiences. For example, you can make the hunts more formal with lists of items to circle or clipboards to tally the finds.

You could also introduce technology and science tools like cameras, binoculars, or magnifying glasses. Even homemade tools that simply focus attention, like a cardboard tube held up to the ear or a napkin ring to frame a view, can enhance sensory observations. Any oral storytelling activity can also be an opportunity for writing if children bring journals outside.

As you and your students make nature-based learning a part of your regular routine, you may find that you’re learning so much, in such an enjoyable way, that 10 minutes stretches into longer and longer periods of time outside