

6-3 Experiencing the outside world

Children directly approach the environment through various outdoor activities. Several outdoor activities can be planned in kindergarten, such as a daily walk or a field trip. By walking, children are exposed to a natural environment that is larger than a kindergarten's playground. Children also use the public facilities outside, or meet people in the community working and living outside. Outdoor activities enable children to learn social rules and manners that respect other people, who they may not know.

Teachers can also invite outsiders into the kindergarten to talk to and work with the children, for example a local police officer or nurse. This activity expands children's relationships to adults other than teachers and parents, and stimulates their interests in new skills and cultures. Now, let us look at some of these activities.

Field trip

Visiting a park

Teachers can do educational activities in the park with natural plants and forests. Nature does not always provide a comfortable environment for children, in relation to their physical capacities. An unknown environment triggers several feelings for children: “it is strange”, “why is it like this?”, “let me take risks”, “it must be dangerous”, or “I am frightened.”

These outdoor experiences deepen children's perceptions of nature and the urban environment. Sometimes, children face problems that go beyond their knowledge, or they experience frustrations. However, all these experiences increase children's capacities to challenge and overcome daily problems.

Visiting zoo

Sometimes, teachers take children to the zoo. At a zoo, children see animals, which they have never met real in their daily lives and have known only through books and television. They learn about the ecology of animals (eating, excretion, birth and death, roaring) and feel that they are also the living creatures like human beings.

After this exposure, some children try to reproduce their experiences. They draw the animals in zoo, imitate their noises and movements, and create animals with cardboard. We can learn about their interests and understandings from what they draw, which moves they imitate, and what other aspects they focus on. Through the shared experiences of visits, children might develop the play with others based on what they saw and heard.

Walking

Walking in the community

Children may observe adults working in shops or constructing buildings when they take a walk from the kindergarten. For example, they may meet a shop owner when they visit a shop to purchase their learning materials. There, children learn how to buy products and to understand the process of selling. From seeing construction work, children can see different ways of working, the use of different tools, and different responsibilities. Some children imitate the way of working and enjoy this pretend play.

Visiting elementary school

As part of outdoor activities, teachers can take children to the local primary school. They can observe the facilities and classrooms, or sometimes interact with primary school children. Compared with kindergarten, the primary school has different sizes and types of facilities. The way of teaching, and what is taught are also different. Unlike kindergarten, many rules and conditions exist:



chairs and tables are provided, activities are run according to a timetable, all students learn same subject at the same time etc. Through observation and some interaction with students, children can be aware of these differences before they enroll at the school. They can also get an image of their future at the school, and they can ask questions and address possible fears.

Experiences such as “I have been here before”, “I came in this classroom”, and “I have talked with that teacher” will give children the confidence to adapt to their new environment at school.

Meeting new people

Exposure to the different cultures

Not only the outdoor activities, but also inviting people from the community into the kindergarten can help to expose children to the outside world. In some cases, teachers ask people from the community to help out at events. Through their help at events, people from the community will also learn about the kindergarten activities.

In other cases, teachers might invite a professional performer or a foreigner to the kindergarten and ask them to perform for the children. For example, “SHISHIMAI”, the traditional New Year celebration performance that is rarely found in the urban area now, can be introduced to children. A person from other country can introduce a picture book that is familiar to children and read a little of it in his/her native language. Seeing a performance on a musical instrument may also expose children to a new skill. These unusual experiences cultivate children's interest about new things. Exposure to outsiders and different cultures will develop children's understanding and sensitivity towards others.

Through various outdoor activities and experiences, children expand their knowledge and perceptions of the natural, urban and social environment. They will learn that the world consists of “people” “objects” and “matters” through these experiences.

Important considerations for outdoor activities

1 Safety of children

During any outdoor activities, the greatest attention should be given to the children's safety. To prevent the accidents, teachers should visit and check the place for the visit beforehand. Some points to check are as follows:

- The shade of a tree: is a good place for taking a rest, but the tree may also create a ‘blind spot’ for teachers.
- The condition of ponds and marshes: check the location and depth of any water. Water provides a good place to observe interesting new forms of life, but can cause accidents through slipping or falling.
- Toxic plants and insects: pay attention to bees or certain toxic plants. Children might react to these toxic plants while they are playing.
- Tap water and toilets: check the number and location of drinking-water and toilets, and whether they are properly functioning properly and can accommodate boys and girls safely.

- Road and traffic: check the amount of traffic, pedestrian crossings, the duration of traffic lights, and the condition of sidewalks.
- Reservation of facility: if there is a superintendent at the public facility? If so, make an appointment and check the condition and availability of facilities.

2 Manners in public places

Many rules exist in the public places, so that everyone can comfortably share the facilities and space with other people. It is important for children to learn how to share the same place without disturbing other people.

Tips for outdoor activities and visitors

- When you utilize the outdoor environment, give children information about the place of the visit, or the background of the person visiting, before the event. The teacher explains the issues in a manner that fits the children's ages, so that they can expand their images and interests. It is desirable to share the experiences and impressions that the children have gained by discussion, drawing, craftwork and play after the event. To assist children effectively, a teacher should carefully observe each child's interests and interaction to the outside environment or visitor.
- Any activities and experiences outside the kindergarten can be meaningful for children. For example, the people children meet on the way to the kindergarten, grass and flowers on sidewalk, plants in a garden, or even pet animals, draw children's attention. Some children also might be interested in the items of in a shop, or a shop owner when they visit there with their families. In other cases, children who visited their relatives might be exposed to different festivals or annual events. Children are also exposed to a different world through television and family conversations. Those individual experiences can be brought into kindergarten life, be reproduced in their play, and be shared by other children. Teachers can make the best use of these chances, directly support them, and make them appealing for other children. In this way, the effects of outdoor activities and experiences can be maximized in the early childhood education.