

Into the Field

Environmental Education

Distance Learning Resources

Issue 2: At Home and Family Activities



As schools are developing their distance learning plans, it will be important to continue to encourage students to get outside. While the opportunity to get outside will vary from student to student, research consistently points to time outside as having positive benefits for physical and mental health. If we are encouraging students to get outside for recess or a brain break, why not connect with the natural world at the same time? We know that focusing on the amazing natural world that surrounds us helps build students' environmental literacy, even without them knowing it is happening!

How distance learning evolves will vary from school to school, and you may not know if students can go outside by themselves or require an adult to join them. The activities presented here are starting points for teachers to incorporate in their lessons -- either as defined activities or encouraged family time. Regardless of the mode of implementation, the goal is to get outside and explore/discover!

We've grouped activities by age, but in general these are suggested guidelines. Many of the activities could be easily adjusted to work with a different age-group, so double-check before you skip a section!

All Ages or Family Activities

Become a member of [Families in Nature](#) to gain access to ideas and guides for getting your family outside. Join one of their communities to learn about events and programs to get involved with. The website can be viewed in English or Spanish.

Wild Weather

This website details simple activities to better track or understand the weather. A daily routine of observation builds scientific skills, and most of the tools offered here can be made without many supplies. These projects are a great way to engage the whole family in conversation and curiosity about the weather and climate.

Backyard Safari

As a family, find any animal toys or figurines you might have (if you don't have many, you can always illustrate or make some out of found objects). Take turns hiding the items in your backyard. This could be a simple hide-and-seek activity, or it could be leveled up with fun clues or specific challenges to make it more exciting. To wrap it up, you could look for evidence of actual animals living in your backyard.



Early Learners

Spot It: Tracks and Signs

This activity could be adapted for any region or any age. Students can look for items on the card wherever they reside: whether that's outside the home, at a park, or on a nature reserve.

Nature's Palette

Ask your students to randomly pick 5-10 crayons out of their crayon box. Then, ask them to go outside and find items in the built or natural environment around them that match the crayons they picked. You can ask them to draw a picture of the object with the crayon it matches...or if technology is present, they can take a picture of the match to share with you or their class.

Window Drawings

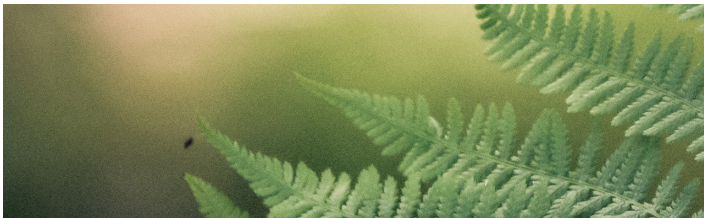
If you have some students who can't get outside without an adult supervisor, but may have a window to the outdoor world, ask them to observe cloud patterns several times a day...or count the number of birds they can see in a 15 minute period. There is a lot of data that can be collected from looking out the window. You could even graph the class's collective number of birds seen (or whatever other creative things you have them look for)!



Grades 3-5

Pass the Plants, Please

Project Learning Tree's Family Activity encourages students to track and analyze their lunch for a week. The activity can be downloaded in English or Spanish, and it includes information about a related app families can use for further exploration of food and nutrition.



Weather Journal

Students can practice observing nature first-hand by keeping track of the weather on a daily basis. While learning about different weather conditions, they will also be looking for patterns and seasonal changes. Here's an elementary [video overview](#) of keeping a weather journal from Science Kids. This activity could be one part of a daily routine for students and/or their families. Students can track weather conditions in a [simple chart](#), or using a nature journal. Consider building more into the practice over time by asking additional or interdisciplinary questions.

Grades 6-8

Winter Birds

This activity from The Old Naturalist offers options for learning about the birds in your neighborhood. Suggestions for a nature journal are offered alongside helpful information about common winter birds. Resources include several information pdfs, a questionnaire, and a link to a photo essay.

Make a Map

One way to navigate the balance of social distancing with outdoor learning might be through mapping. Encouraging students to explore with a purpose can provide motivation and structure in spending time outside. Consider how a mapping activity might connect to learning in other subjects, and incorporate those skills. Some suggestions: a map of trees on their block, a map of green spaces in walking distance from their home, or even a map of Pokémon Go gyms in walking distance of where they stay.

High School

Fungi Bingo Cards

Using one of these bingo card templates, students can hunt for varieties of fungi in and around the places they live or visit. The activity can be downloaded or printed (with 8 different bingo cards), or it can be played online. Scale this activity up or down by having students record their observations in detail, or research a particular fungus. For an additional extension, have students create their own Spring bingo cards with species of plants or animals that would be common to your region.



Nature Journaling

In this time of uncertainty and intense change, nature journaling can be a therapeutic way to engage your students in learning. According to [one educator's](#) blog: "Nature journaling means seeing and noticing nature—clouds, weather, trees, change, seasons; birds, bugs, mammals, tracks, twigs, leaves, details—whatever is happening around you. And then recording what you see—in words or pictures or both. It can mean recording data: numbers, temperature, measurement, symbols. Or quotes and poetry and thoughts. It is not all drawing." Asking your students to make a practice of nature journaling not only encourages skills like observation and inquiry, but it can present opportunities for mindfulness and [decrease anxiety](#). Check out the blog for examples of prompts to get students going. Students can always take this activity to another level, creating their own [Phenology Wheel](#), botanical sketches, or creative writing pieces.

You can reach us with your comments and questions at
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