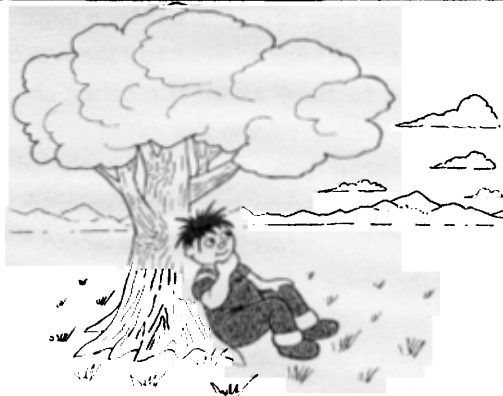


# Field Trips for All



Field trips and excursions are an important (and fun) part of the learning process in early care and education programs. Children's curiosity and interest can be stimulated and questions better answered when they interact meaningfully with people, materials, equipment, and environments in their local neighborhood and community. The places you visit become extensions of your learning environment. As a result, field trips require the same careful planning to insure quality learning experiences are accessible to each child.

Selecting the place or event to visit is the first step. Most of us have favorites based on our knowledge of child development and past experience. However, observation of children's interests is a better place to start selecting meaningful experiences for the current group. What are children talking about as they arrive each day? What kinds of themes are emerging in their play? These observations alert you to their interests and to neighborhood events like a new home being built or a street being resurfaced—indicating that a timely excursion would be appropriate.

As you consider possible destinations, think about how they fit with your program's curriculum and philosophy. Sometimes children's interests do match your goals. You might *not* follow-up on children's interest in a new movie because of the aggressiveness that has emerged in their play based on the characters. Other times, your commitment to meeting the needs of *each* child is the deciding factor. For instance, you may choose to pass over an emerging interest in bugs and a possible trip to the local entomology lab because a child in the group is dreadfully frightened of insects.

Visiting a potential field trip site beforehand helps you explore important realities. Is the walking distance reasonable for young children? Are restrooms readily available? Will there be enough for children to see and do? Does the space accommodate the size of your group? If there will be a guide, ask for details of the tour. Suggest focus areas that are of particular interest to children in your group. Describe the developmental level and attention span of the children; brainstorm ways to promote hands-on experiences. This conversation will help you in your planning, and increase community awareness of quality early childhood practices.

Once you have visited a field trip site, define your list of key experiences—what do you want children to explore and learn during the excursion? What do you have planned for meaningful experiences in the classroom to follow-up on children's questions, interests, and enthusiasm?

In the process of making sure the field trip experience is suitable for the children in your group, you have probably started considering individual appropriateness. Begin picturing individual children after the pre-visit—notice areas which may be of particular interest, consider supervision and safety issues and walk through the logistics of the trip with each child in mind. It is important to capture these thoughts on paper as soon as possible for your planning purposes.

Using your key learning goals and knowledge of the site, you can continue "trying on" the appropriateness of the trip for each child and considering adaptations that will allow you to better meet individual strengths, needs, and interests. This might mean planning to spend time preparing for the trip with a child who has difficulty making transitions, bring some topic-related manipulatives for a child who has a limited attention span, invite a child with a strong interest in the topic to co-host the trip and share some of her knowledge, or change the actual site to make the trip physically accessible for a child. The bottom line here is that field trips are for everyone—it is your responsibility to plan excursions that meet the needs of each child—just as you plan activities within your program.

## A Parent's Story

Last spring our child care program sent home a permission slip for an upcoming field trip to a local bottling plant. My child has severe disabilities and uses a wheelchair, and I could not imagine that the staff would want to take him along nor could I understand how he would benefit from such a trip. It made me sad to think of all the other children enjoying this trip knowing that my son was not aware enough of his surroundings to benefit from the experience. And it made me more than a little angry that the teachers were insensitive enough to send home a permission slip as if it were possible for Adam to go along. I sent it back the next day with a note saying that Adam would not be joining the group. The director of the program called me that afternoon to say they were disappointed that Adam would not be going on the field trip. I thought she was joking, but she was serious. Apparently, the staff had already made special arrangements with the local bus company to accommodate the wheelchair and were convinced that Adam would enjoy the trip—especially since he is so tuned in to sounds. She even invited me to join the group.

Adam did go to the bottling plant, and I went, too. It was quite an experience. No one knew exactly how to use the chair tie-down in the bus, and it took all hands (including the bus driver) to get Adam onto the bus. No one counted on the extra time it took to get everyone else buckled in, and I certainly could not have predicted the joy and excitement as all twenty-two kids screamed and laughed throughout the tour. Adam may not have been aware of everything that was going on, but he was clearly delighted with the loud clanging noises and loved it when the children got "accidentally" sprayed with a hose. It wasn't easy to include Adam in this field trip, and I know that it took time and planning on the part of the staff and the director, but it was worth it!

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *Each year, we plan a family hike on the mountain near our program. The children feel a sense of accomplishment, and we have fun exploring the view of our community—finding road patterns, identifying buildings, and locating our school. This usually leads to activities afterwards as children explore the idea of building their own towns, etc. This year, one of the children in my group uses a walker and is unable to make the hike. I don't want to cancel the hike, and I certainly don't want to exclude her. How do I make this work for everyone?*

**ANSWER:** You've already begun to find the answer when you ask, "How do I make this work for *everyone*?" Field trips are an extension of your program and you already recognize the importance of including each child. In addition, you display a positive, "can do" attitude about finding a way to make it work!

You described your key goals as involving families, promoting a sense of accomplishment in the children, and exploring your community. If you look at these goals rather than at "hiking," you can develop plans that provide access for each child. Start by exploring small adaptations for the traditional hike based on the child's strengths and needs. If this child can successfully make part of the hike, you might establish your picnic site at the base of the hill and allow each child to set his or her goal for hiking distance. Or, explore other ways for the child to make the climb, such as an all-terrain wheelchair. Your awareness of the child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive strengths and needs will help you decide if these or other modifications would be appropriate.

You could also investigate alternative locations that meet the same goals and still allow everyone to fully participate. For example, the children and families could plan a bus route to "tour" your community. Or, you might look for an another hiking location. Many communities have created accessible trails, and there may be one that offers a similar vantage point as your traditional trail.

The *spirit* in which changes are made is just as critical as meeting children's individual needs. It is important to ensure that field trip traditions have grown with you in their ability to respond to the uniqueness of each group of children you experience. This process can help you discover exciting opportunities for providing every child and family with new learning experiences—as well as leading you to explore new territory! In addition, you are modeling the *spirit and practice* of inclusion for families and other members of your community.

