

Making Field Trips Count!

Lincoln Park Zoo Education Department, 2009

Field trips are a great way for students to experience science beyond the classroom walls. They offer the opportunity to hear the roar of a lion, feel the scaly skin of a snake or watch a flamingo balance on one leg. With a little planning, you'll not only be better prepared to take advantage of all the zoo has to offer, but you'll also be able to help students make connections between zoo animals and the classroom science curriculum.

What the experts say...

Researchers all over the world study the effect of field trips on students as well as how to make them as successful as possible. We already know...

- children remember childhood field trips for years
- students learn new information from field trips
- field trips can get students excited about topics like science
- open-ended, learner-centered explorations are the most successful
- preparation is key to a great day

Getting ready...

In addition to logistical planning, preparing students with a few key activities will help make the field trip more meaningful to them and link more effectively to classroom objectives.

Prepare Students for the Experience

It's important to prepare students for what they might see. Many researchers have discovered that when a field trip offers a new location for students, they can be overwhelmed. These feelings can sometimes take away from the learning and excitement of the visit itself. Telling students a little about what they might see, showing them images from the zoo web site and going over the day's schedule in advance can build excitement and cut down on nervousness on the day of the visit.

Explore the Zoo Map

Lincoln Park Zoo has more than 1,100 animals across approximately 200 different species, so it's likely you will not have time to see every animal in a single visit. In the classroom, provide students with zoo maps from the web site and decide as a class which animals and exhibits to prioritize during the visit. Students may want to plan the most efficient path to take or break into groups with different areas of interest. By adding this element of student choice, you're likely to make students more invested in the day's activities.

Plan an In-Class Exploration

It's not necessary for students to know everything about animals before a visit to the zoo. However, providing a little information about some of the animals they may encounter can be helpful. For example, a classroom activity investigating feathers can make observation of the zoo birds more relevant. Learning a little about predator-prey relationships can help students understand why certain animals can be housed together but others cannot.

At the Zoo...

There is so much to see and do at the zoo that it can be a little overwhelming. We suggest you have a general plan of what you'd like to see and what you'd like to do but also be willing to take advantage of "teachable moments" that might pop up!

Take Your Time

With many schools only receiving one field trip a year, we know it can be tempting to try and squeeze everything into a single visit. Research tells us that an overly packed day does not help with learning and can leave students with negative feelings about the field trip and science in general. Encourage students to slow down and carefully observe the animals and their behavior.

- Can they distinguish males from females?
- What types of behaviors do they see most often?
- Can they explain the behaviors they see?

Not only are open-ended questions like these a great way to stimulate critical thinking, they offer an important reminder that educators don't need to be experts to encourage student exploration.

Use Worksheets with Care

It can be nice to have a focus for your visit. Teachers often find activity sheets or scavenger hunts a great way to keep students on task. Many studies have taught us, however, that it's important to design these to take advantage of the unique experiences a zoo provides. Successful activity sheets and scavenger hunts are...

- open-ended, with many possible correct responses
Can you locate an animal that would be a good predator?
- learner-centered so students can focus on areas of personal interest
Which exhibit do you think is the most naturalistic? Why?
- limited in scope so students don't feel frazzled or rushed
Five open-ended questions are better than 25 multiple-choice questions
- focused on the unique elements of the exhibit itself rather than text on a label.
How do the gorillas interact with each other? Which one seems to be the most active?
- structured to be data sheets for student explorations and discoveries.
How many mammals did you see? How many reptiles?

Be Flexible

It's great to have a plan for the day. However, zoos are comprised of living animals that can be unpredictable. An animal you planned on observing may be off-exhibit for the day. A new animal may have joined the collection that you didn't know about. There may be a special presentation or unique event you didn't anticipate, such as the addition of a new baby or a special talk at one of the exhibitions. Sometimes these unplanned elements lead to the strongest memories and learning experiences.

Back in the Classroom

Students are likely to spend the next few days talking about their zoo experience. Planning for some follow-up activities and additional learning opportunities will help ensure that your field trip experience has a lasting impact on students.

Plan for New Explorations

It's likely students will come away from their field trip with some new knowledge—and also some new questions. Identify areas students can explore on their own—perhaps by reviewing the zoo web site, exploring nature in the schoolyard or locating relevant books in the school library—and guide these explorations. Encouraging students to pursue their own investigations parallels the work of practicing researchers and supports an inquiry-based approach to science instruction.

Share Memories of the Experience

Provide students with the opportunity to share their experience with others. You may want to create a class book to be placed in the library or design a class newsletter to share the experience with parents. Creating a class web page or multi-media presentation can summarize data students collected during their trip and may offer an opportunity to share information with schools in other areas of the nation.

Encourage Repeat Visits

Many students only experience places like zoos through a single visit with a class field trip. However, research indicates that repeat visits can have a great impact on learners. Provide support for students to return with their families in order to extend the learning experience and create a strong home-school-community connection. Many parents look to their child's teacher for suggestions on enjoyable outings that will support learning. Students and families alike will appreciate receiving a note after your field trip providing basic information on making a free family outing to Lincoln Park Zoo.

Stay Tuned...

We are in the process of creating new curriculum guides and educational offerings to support your classroom instruction and field trip experiences. Check back with the Education section of the Lincoln Park Zoo web site regularly to learn more about new opportunities and resources you may find helpful.

www.lpzoo.org/education