

Tips for Managing Kids in a Garden Setting

The school garden is a unique learning environment, with activities that are more structured than recess, but also more physical and open-ended than those done in the classroom. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to clarify for themselves and their students what type of behaviors are appropriate to this environment, and then to design learning opportunities that encourage appropriate behaviors.

Helpful Tips

1. **Before leaving the classroom**, explain the special circumstances involved in visiting the school garden to the kids—they are outside but it's not recess, lunch, or PE. Use language to distinguish the garden from the play yard, such as a “garden classroom.”
2. Foster students' sense of ownership and buy in.
 - When choosing students' first garden activity for the year, start with something highly engaging, like harvesting and eating Six Plant Part Burritos or feeding the worms in the worm bin.
 - Provide plentiful opportunities for students to harvest and eat from the garden, and also to use tools they can manage.
 - Look for opportunities to provide students with choices. They may be able to choose, for example, which chore to work on or which seeds to plant.
3. Comfort is really important. For many children, this is a new and possibly strange environment.
 - For kids—provide a shaded area where students can gather for instruction. For garden work, provide kid-sized gloves available and hats if possible. Bring drinking water if possible.
 - For adults—try wearing knee pads, gloves, aprons, hats, sunglasses to stay comfortable in the garden setting.
 - For parents – let them know to send kids in clothes they can get dirty on garden days.
 - Reassure students that most plants and critters in a garden are friendly, and point out the ones to be avoided.
4. Establish clear rules and consequences, and review them regularly. Discuss the following:
 - Proper tool use and ways to avoid danger with tools
 - Running in the garden
 - The difference between “people places” and “plant places”
 - Keeping voices at a reasonable level
 - Care with plants and how to avoid damage to garden spaces
 - Picking and eating only with clear permission from an adult

5. Use team building activities to encourage teamwork and cooperation between students. Revisit this theme regularly with quick ice breakers or team building activities.
 - Work in small groups. Having ten or fewer kids per group is extremely helpful.
 - Develop a series of activities or stations that groups can rotate through.
 - Pair focused individual quiet tasks with more active group garden tasks.
 - A class set of clipboards for individual activities helps keep students focused on the task at hand.
 - Recruit volunteers to reduce the student-to-adult ratio when possible.
 - Design the garden so that it is easy for kids to be successful and abide by the rules.
 - Create and maintain clear and wide paths.
 - Label tools and store them neatly and safely.
 - Make sure the tools are the appropriate size for kids.
 - Label plants or plant areas (such as themed areas, e.g., natives, herbs, the Principal's Corner, etc.).