Many teachers may have concerns about taking their students outside:

- What if the children don’t listen to me?
- What if one runs away or gets lost?
- How do I keep them in one area?
- What if the students go crazy and there is no real learning going on?
- How do I get them back inside on time?
- What if the principal or parents object or question the educational validity of my actions?

For most teachers, these are legitimate concerns. But with some forethought and organization, many of these potential problems can be avoided or minimized. The following suggestions can help you, as a teacher, think more clearly about some of the issues and concerns involved with taking students outside, and so help ensure a more positive and educationally valuable experience for all.
1. Teach appropriate outdoor behaviour gradually, allow students time to practice, and give positive reinforcement for appropriate behaviour.

Think of teaching your students about appropriate outdoor classroom behaviour as similar to how we teach them about appropriate library behaviour when they are in the primary years: it is gradual, scaffolded, and reinforced with lots of practice. Most teachers would not simply give kindergarten students a list of library rules to follow and expect them to implement those expectations successfully from then one. Rather, before we go to the library the first time, we may talk about quiet voices and bodies. In that visit we may introduce them to sections of the library and the staff. Before the second visit, we would review the quiet voices and bodies expectations, and might discuss the proper procedure for taking out and returning books; our library visit would allow children the opportunity to practice. The third visit might include a reading time with a librarian or visiting author; the fourth visit might focus on using additional library resources. As teachers, we would understand that the children need numerous opportunities, alone, with peers, and with their class, to practice appropriate library behavior before we expect them to have internalized these expectations.

Teach your children about how to behave in an outdoor classroom in much the same way. Make time for this in your schedule. You may need several introductory sessions before you feel comfortable embarking on a larger curricular goal with the class outside. Before each introductory session, focus on a small number of expectations. Model them for the children (or get students to model them). Review previous expectations. Make your first outdoor experience a very simple one: perhaps you simply go on a 5-10 minute walk around the schoolyard. Allow the students to become familiar with your expectations and the environment before you add any degree of complexity.

2. Know your students.

It is easier to predict which of your students may cause challenges, and what those particular challenges may be, as well as to troubleshoot how you may deal with those individuals, once you know your students and have established both individual relationships with them and a good working dynamic as a group. If you want to take your students outside as early in the school year as possible, then consider devoting some time in those first few days to getting to know them and sharing the kinds of experiences with them that will help produce trusting relationships—which you will need once you get outside. Depending on your approach as a teacher, and the particular group of students you have, this could take several days or weeks to establish.
3. Go outside first.

Don’t assume you actually know your school’s soccer field, bit of forest, or local stream before you take your class there. Visit it, and revisit it again, with your particular students and anticipated outdoor experience in mind. You will be amazed by the things you notice about the particular environment—especially when you view it as an outdoor learning tool for your students—once you spend time in it with your upcoming teaching and student learning in mind. What is likely to distract the students? How long is it likely to take them to move locations? To settle in one spot? Are there noises that might interfere with students’ ability to hear instructions, or each other, or to focus on their tasks? What complications, obstacles or dangers should you alert your students to before they head outside? How should they dress? What should they bring?

4. Create an outdoor classroom.

One of the challenges of taking students outside is that the environment is so dramatically different than that of their classroom. Through years of practice and cultural reinforcement, students learn appropriate school behaviour—sitting at desks, raising their hands to ask questions, using their school supplies for particular tasks, etc. Often, children’s experience of the outdoors is much more on their own terms—in playgrounds, backyards, and camping trips, children are often allowed to move much more freely, speak loudly, explore, even roam, and play organically, as they wish. So it is perhaps not so surprising that teachers find it difficult to get students to follow “classroom rules” while they are outside. As a teacher, it is important that you recognize and communicate to students your behavioural expectations of them when they are outside. Certainly, you will need to have firm boundaries about particular rules, such as out-of-bounds areas, destroying nature, gathering together at a particular signal. But try not to take children outside and expect them to behave as quietly and compliantly as they do inside the classroom. Expect and allow a little more freedom and flexibility—from the students and yourself. Welcome the sense of adventure and the accompanying spontaneity that emerges.

This being said, it can also be helpful for teachers to establish a place that the class returns to again and again: a comfortable spot, where the students can listen to instruction, debrief an activity, work quietly alone or in partners, etc. Consider this your “outdoor classroom.” Choose it with your students in mind. Is it sheltered? Are there comfortable places to sit? Will all the students be able to see you and each other when they need to? Is it beautiful? Does it promote relaxation and focus? Model your outdoor classroom on your indoor one. Ask each student to find their own special spot (their
desk), allow them to keep or bring natural treasures (school supplies) that they are allowed to hold or fiddle with while they are there. Establish routines in the outdoor classroom similar to those used inside (e.g. every time the students goes to their spot, they must perform a silent task to help still the body and improve focus). Use the skills and habits the students use successfully indoors to your advantage outside.

5. **Bring the experience indoors first.**

If you think students doing the activity you have planned outside might be overwhelming for them—and so less than ideal—consider doing a similar activity inside first. Once students are familiar with the process and your expectations for the activity inside, they may be more successful doing a similar activity in a novel environment—outside. In other words, minimize the novelty. The first time the novelty is the activity; the second time the novelty is the location. For example, a popular activity to orient students in a natural environment involves one student “introducing” her or his partner to various elements of the environment, such as bark, pine cones, rocks, moss, etc., while the partner wears a blindfold. This activity can be done where the blindfolded student is carefully led around by the seeing student, or the blindfolded student is seated, while the seeing student finds a variety of pieces of nature and invites the blindfolded partner to describe what she or he feels, smells, etc. Such an activity becomes much less intimidating for teachers to do outside if they can first do a similar activity in a more familiar environment, such as their classroom, where they can easily monitor their students’ ability to perform the activity successfully.

6. **Elicit support.**

Consider using as many helpers as you can in outdoor experiences, especially initial ones that set the tone and expectation of future forays, but also for those that are more complex in design. Consider which other staff members might be available—your principal, another teacher, support staff, a teacher-librarian. Also consider asking parents for their assistance. For younger children, older “buddies” from another class can be helpful in keeping students focused on the educational activity at hand. If possible, put your helpers in charge of small groups of students. If the helper does not already know the students, consider having your students wear name-tags to assist the helpers. If you are inviting others into your outdoor experience, be respectful of their perspective. Give them as much information as possible about the class dynamics, particular challenges they may encounter, your educational goal for the experience, and their responsibilities. If possible, give this well in advance of the activity, ideally by explaining it to them orally and also giving them a written description. Some people can digest a lot of information all at once; others need time to reflect upon it to understand its application. Well-prepared helpers are
much more likely to be successful, and in this way help ensure a positive experience for all. Volunteers are also much more likely to offer to help out again if they feel valued: don’t take their time and efforts for granted. Consider ways you can show your appreciation or support: a card, a small gift, thank you letters written by students, a positive comment about how they enhanced the learning experience for the students, etc.

7. Be ready to feel like a beginning teacher again.

If outdoor experiences are a new tool in your pedagogical toolbox, give yourself the same patience, flexibility and time to reflect and make changes that you would afford a student teacher. If you have an outdoor experience that is less than wholly successful, do not throw in the towel on the whole endeavour. If you are an experienced teacher, you may feel like you are great at what you do—inside. But if you go outside and you can’t get the students to listen to you or to follow instructions, try to give yourself the same time for reflection and adjustments that you needed when you were first beginning to teach. If you worry about what your colleagues or administrators will think of you, it might be helpful to let them know your goals ahead of time, and to reassure them that you are trying out new things that might include some bumps along the way. Emphasize to your self and others that you are also a learner: you don’t want to be complacent about your students’ learning or your own teaching practice. You are modeling life long learning for your students. Some failure is an expected part of the process of learning through experimentation. If, however, you continuously feel like you have no clue what you are doing, and that all the world can see, you may need to revisit some of the earlier suggestions and make adjustments with your particular context in mind.

8. Remember your roots.

You may have noble goals about what you hope your students will get from educational experiences that take place outside, in nature. There is no doubt that thinking beforehand about how to best create the kinds of rich experiences you want for your students will make it more likely that they occur. But besides all the focused effort you may direct towards meeting your goals, remember what draws you to this purpose in the first place: Does nature help you feel more calm and grounded? Does it help you connect with your greater self? Are you moved by the beauty and wonder of the natural world? Do you feel a deep sense of connection with the world in which you live? Foster your own connection with the natural world, both alone and with your students. This will keep you on the right track, replenish you, and model for your students the effects of the magnificence, power and wonder of nature.