



Nature-Based Learning Ideas Guide

What can I do outside today?



SOCIAL STUDIES

Preschool - Grade 2



What Can I Do Outside Today?

Introduction

Children are naturally curious about the people, places, and environments around them. Through everyday experiences, they begin asking questions, noticing patterns, building relationships, and making sense of how they fit within families, classrooms, communities, and the world. Outdoor learning provides meaningful opportunities to nurture this curiosity and support the development of social studies skills, knowledge, and dispositions from an early age.

This guide is designed to help educators explore how nature-based and outdoor learning can support authentic social studies content and skills learning from preschool through second grade. It builds on the Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Ideas Guide and aligns with the [Early Childhood Indicators of Progress \(ECIPs\)](#) and the 2021 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies.

The activities in this guide are organized around the Inquiry Design Model, the instructional framework that supports the 2021 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies. The Inquiry Design Model connects children's natural curiosity with the practices of historians, geographers, economists, political scientists, and other social scientists by centering learning around three key components: questions, tasks, and sources. Children investigate compelling questions about the world around them, explore supporting questions that deepen their understanding, engage in developmentally appropriate tasks, and use observations, experiences, stories, maps, images, and other sources to build knowledge and communicate their thinking.

Inquiry recognizes that knowledge and skills in the social sciences are best developed in the context of meaningful questions. Instead of treating social studies as a collection of background information children need to learn before they can think critically, the Inquiry Design Model invites learners to engage like social scientists, who construct knowledge by asking questions, gathering evidence, considering multiple perspectives and communicating their conclusions. The outdoor environment is a great place to engage in questioning and exploration about the world in which we live.

Lifelong learning begins with play, and outdoor play is a powerful, research-backed practice for all learning environments, including kindergarten and beyond. Play engages children in exploration, imagination, and inquiry, helping them build cognitive and social-emotional skills along with the confidence to try new experiences. Outdoor play also provides important physical activity and helps children refine both large and small motor skills.



What Can I Do Outside Today?

Compelling Questions: These frame learning around a meaningful idea or issue that children can explore over time. They encourage curiosity, discussion, and investigation, and have more than one reasonable answer. The compelling questions included in this guide are drawn from the kindergarten through second grade standards. **Supporting Questions:** These are smaller, guiding questions that build student understanding over time. They ask students to explain or describe settled ideas and concepts. Suggested activities are meant to help students begin to build skills or content knowledge they will need to answer the compelling and supporting questions. [The Minnesota Humanities Center](#) is a great resource that supports educators in implementing state Social Studies Standards using an Inquiry Design Model approach.

Find More Outdoor and Nature Learning Resources:

- [Minnesota Department of Education, Early Education Outdoor Learning](#)
- [Department of Children, Youth, and Families, Early Childhood Outdoor Learning](#)

Happy exploring!

"I feel like with so much technology children are losing touch with nature and when you let them play outside and play in the mud and the leaves and let them explore they learn so much more about the world around them, rather than just being told about it, they can experience it!"

~ Preschool teacher

Outdoor education

Education that occurs mostly in the outdoors and is focused on engagement with the outdoor environment

Nature-based education

Nature as the central organizing feature of the curriculum and a focus is made on children forming a connection with the natural world and how the natural world supports children's development. It can be conducted indoors or outdoors

Draw maps of playground or other outdoor spaces.

ECIPS

- **Soc6: Physical Environment**

Child identifies important physical features in their environment.

- **M12: Location, Spatial Relationships and Landmark Use**

Child recognizes where a person or object is in relation to other people or objects.

- **P6: Dexterity**

Child coordinates and controls movement of hands and fingers to grasp (hold with fist), hold (pinch finger and thumb), and manipulate objects.

K-2 Benchmarks

- **K.3.13.1**

Explain or show routes between locations using both fixed and dynamic maps from local to global scales.

- **1.3.13.1**

Create sketch maps and describe the location of items and places shown using positional words or addresses. Ask spatial questions about the map.

- **2.3.13.1**

Create sketch maps and use these, as well as fixed and dynamic maps, to locate places. Describe locations on these maps in relation to other places.

Example Compelling Questions

- How do we make our outdoor environment a place where we all belong?

Example Supporting Questions

- What is this place like?
- How do people connect to each other in this place?
- How do people connect to nature in this place?



Outdoor Cleanup (School Grounds or Neighborhood)

ECIPS Alignment

- **Soc5: Conservation**

Child understands the responsibility of belonging to a community and that some environmental resources are limited.

- **P6: Dexterity**

Child coordinates and controls movement of hands and fingers to grasp (hold with fist), hold (pinch finger and thumb), and manipulate objects.

Example Compelling Questions

- How can a community care for the environment?

K-2 Benchmarks

- **K.1.4.1**

Identify examples of rules in the school and neighborhood community and explain why they exist. Describe incentives for following rules and consequences for breaking rules.

- **1.1.4.1**

Identify characteristics of effective rules and participate in a process to establish classroom rules.

- **2.1.4.1**

Identify a level of government and describe the role it serves in the lives of community members.

Example Supporting Questions

- How do we care for our community's resources?
- How can a community and/or local government care for the environment?





Find examples of needs and wants during an outdoor walk.

ECIPS Alignment

- **Soc7: Economic Reasoning**

Child begins to have an understanding of wants, needs, choice, costs, incentives, rules, trade, and future outcomes.

Example Compelling Questions

- How do communities get what they need- both today and in the past?

K-2 Benchmarks

- **K.2.9.1**

Distinguish between individual needs (conditions necessary to survive) and individual wants (conditions desired to be happy).

- **1.2.8.1**

Define scarcity as not having enough of something to satisfy everyone's wants and give examples.

- **2.2.8.1**

Provide an example of an opportunity cost, which is the next best alternative when a choice is made.

Example Supporting Questions

- What do people need?
- What do people want?
- What do people get, and what do they give up?





Students explore and draw an outdoor location and discuss past events connected to it.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC2: Social Conversation**
Child communicates with others to express feelings, wants, and ideas to caregivers.
- **ST1. Observe and Question**
Child demonstrates awareness of and engagement with materials and environment.

Example Compelling Questions

- Why do we learn about the past?

K-2 Benchmarks

- **K.4.18.1**
Ask historical questions about a past event in an individual's family, school or local community.
- **1.4.18.1**
Ask historical questions about an event or rule in the past and identify one way that things have changed or stayed the same.
- **2.4.18.1**
Describe daily life for Minnesota Dakota or Anishinaabe peoples in different times, including before European contact and today.

Example Supporting Questions

- What was different in the past?
- What is the same as now?





After forming two teams for a beanbag tossing game outside, have each team vote for a team name.

ECIPS Alignment

- **Soc1: Self-Identity in the Community**
 - Develops a sense of self-identity and belonging, and an understanding of how people and communities vary.

Example Compelling Questions

- How do communities organize themselves?

K-2 Benchmarks

- **K.1.2.1**
Consider and describe ways group members show they belong to the group.
- **1.1.2.1**
Identify a symbol, song, pledge or tradition that is important to the student and explain why. Describe ways people show patriotism.
- **2.1.2.1**
Describe how voting and elections exemplify democratic principles, including, but not limited to, equality, freedom, fairness, respect for individual rights, citizen participation, majority rule and accepting the results of an election.

Example Supporting Questions

- How do people make a change?
- What is each person's role?





Students build a nature self-portrait and explain the choices they included to represent their identity.

ECIPS Alignment

- **Soc1: Self-Identity in the Community**
Develops a sense of self-identity and belonging, and an understanding of how people and communities vary.
- **SE2: Self-Awareness**
Child demonstrates a positive sense of self-identity and self-awareness in family, community, culture, and the world.

Example Compelling Questions

- What makes me special?

K-2 Benchmarks

- **K.5.23.1**
Create a personal representation of themselves, including their family and/or ancestors. Discuss the choices made, describing what is special and important, including strengths and assets.
- **1.5.23.1**
Identify examples of ethnicity, equality, liberation and systems of power. Use those examples to construct meanings for those terms.
- **2.5.23.1**
Compare and contrast different ways of knowing, seeing, and understanding land use, rights, and ownership over time.

Example Supporting Questions

- What makes us the same and different?
- What are people's roles in our community?

