

Sensory Discovery Walk

Connecting with Your Place

Summary

Students “open their eyes” to nature by exploring their surroundings without sight. Then they map and retrace the path they traveled.

Grade Level

K-6

Skills

cooperation, trust, sensory awareness, mapmaking

Materials

- Blindfolds
- Notebooks
- Pencils

Location

Outdoors in the schoolyard, a neighborhood park, or other natural area

Time

30-45 minutes



Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Perform the role of both leader and follower.
- Use their five senses to explore their surroundings.
- Create a map showing the sources of their sensory impressions.

Background and Preparation

Our five senses provide us with a direct connection to the natural world. Choose an outdoor area with a variety of sensory stimuli such as trees to touch, evergreen needles and flowers to smell, running water, and bird songs. Check the area for any safety concerns (poisonous plants, broken glass, steep hills) so you can caution leaders to avoid these areas with their blindfolded partners. Try the activity yourself by having someone guide you through the area and then making a sample map as a model for students.

Procedure

1. Outdoors, divide students into pairs and distribute blindfolds. Explain that one partner will start as the leader and the other will be blindfolded. With the leader guiding, the blindfolded student should use his or her other senses to create a mental picture of the path traveled.
2. Model good guiding techniques, such as taking the blindfolded partner's hand or elbow or putting a hand on his or her shoulder. Remind leaders to walk slowly and keep their partners from bumping into things or touching anything unsafe. Suggest that they keep spoken directions to a minimum (or even don't speak at all) and stop frequently to let their partners explore interesting objects.
3. Provide suggestions for the blindfolded partner such as these: Listen to the sounds of the wind and the birds. Try to feel on your skin when you are walking through sun or shade. Notice what the ground feels like under your feet. Is it soft or hard? Wet or dry? What can you smell? Explore with your sense of touch. For instance, if you encounter a tree, feel its bark. Is it rough or smooth? Can you reach all the way around it? Does it have any branches low enough to reach?
4. After 10-15 minutes of exploring, students should take off their blindfolds and, in their notebooks, create a map of the walk from memory. Encourage them to include as many details as they can recall about each of the things they encountered along the way.

5. When students think they have recorded all the landmarks on their maps (in the right order), they can try to retrace their steps - this time with their eyes open. Remind students to use their other senses too. For example, if they are not sure if they found the same tree, why not touch it and see if it feels right!
6. After they retrace the whole route, exploring with their eyes what they first experienced with their other senses, they can ask their leaders if they missed anything. Have them look again at their maps to see how well the maps reflect the actual path traveled.
7. Partners should then switch roles and repeat the activity. Remind the new leaders to be sure to choose different routes.
8. When everyone has finished, gather the group together and discuss the experience. How much of the walk were they able to remember when they made their maps? Were they surprised by anything that looked different from what they were picturing in their minds? Did the path seem longer when they were blindfolded or when they could see? Did objects seem bigger or smaller? How many signs of animals did they see or hear? How many different plants did they touch?
9. Conclude the experience by having students discuss their favorite sensory impressions from this activity. If time allows, give them a few minutes to return to a favorite spot to write or draw more about what they experienced there.

Assessment Ideas

- Have each student write a paragraph or a poem describing his or her walk. Encourage students to use rich descriptive vocabulary and include all of their senses to create a vivid picture of the places and things they experienced.
- Discuss how students felt as both leaders and followers. Give each pair a few minutes to evaluate their performance. What did leaders do to help their partners trust them? What could they improve? Why might it be important to have the skills of both a good leader *and* a good follower?

Alternatives and Extensions

- Have younger students simply draw pictures of all the sensory impressions they can remember instead of making maps.
- If time or space is limited, leaders could guide their partners to just one tree and then back to the starting place. Afterward, the blindfolded partners should remove their blindfolds and first draw and then try to locate “their” tree.
- As a class, agree on a series of 8-10 favorite locations encountered in this activity. Draw a map of the path from one to the next. Name each stop and add a few prompts to help others explore it, such as “Kneel down and touch the spongy moss” or “Smell the lilac bush.” Make copies of the map and give it to another class or students’ parents to follow.