Virtual Field Trips Toolkit

Special Needs

What is the Virtual Field Trip Toolkit for Special Needs?

The intention of this resource is to provide considerations that environmental educators, specifically, can integrate while developing and implementing virtual programs for groups with special needs. The goal is to bridge gaps in program offerings and encourage equitable learning experiences.

This toolkit has been developed in collaboration with parents, teachers, educators, and individuals who have disabilities.

This document is available in an alternative format for those who use screen readers and other assistive technology.

Created by Mel Sarmento 2021

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Terminology

The following terminology is found and referenced throughout this toolkit. We recommend you review the terms listed to ensure you are knowledgeable and prepared while working with your group, as well as inclusive while facilitating programs.

2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design (ADASAD) - Sets minimum requirements, both scoping and technical, for newly designed and constructed or altered state and local government facilities, public accommodations, and commercial facilities to be readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities (Hehir).

2015 Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) Accessibility Standards (ABA) - Provides scoping and technical requirements for accessibility to sites, facilities, buildings, trails, picnic, and camping facilities, and elements by individuals with disabilities. The requirements are to be applied during the design, construction, addition to, alteration, and lease of sites, facilities, buildings, and elements to the extent required by regulations issued by federal agencies under the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (ABA) (Hehir).

Accessible - A space (facility, building, etc.) that complies with ADA guidelines.

Accessible Path - A paved or dirt-packed flat trail that subscribes to ABA guidelines.

Adaptability - Facilities and elements that can be changed to accommodate both those with and without disabilities.

ADA Compliance - Design standards and guidelines that ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

Terminology

(continued)

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) - A civil rights law enacted in 1990 that prohibits discrimination based on disability. This law catalyzed several other protections such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making discrimination based on sex, religion, race, origin, and, later, sexual orientation illegal.

American Sign Language (ASL) – The primary language used by Deaf communities in the United States. This languages uses visual, manual, and non-manual movements to communicate, as well as its own grammar and vocabulary.

Augmentative/Alternative Communication (AAC)- A wide range of communication methods for those with spoken, written, or cognitive language impairments. These methods are used to assist with, support, or replace speech and/or writing to enable individuals to communicate with others.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - A developmental disability that impacts individuals socially, behaviorally, and communicatively.

Blind - An individual who is unable to see. Among other possibilities, this can be the result of an accident, genetics, or disease.

Communication Disorder – A disorder in which individuals have difficulty communicating with and/or understanding others. This can include difficulty understanding words, their sounds, and/or application.

deaf [lowercase 'd'] - A condition in which an individual is not able to hear.

Terminology

(continued)

Deaf [uppercase 'D'] - The group of individuals who experience deafness collectively, a language in which they communicate (ASL), as well as a specific culture.

Developmental Milestone - Skills acquired as one grows and develops. These are determined by age and are used as a preliminary indicator of developmental delays.

Disability - A condition, whether physical or mental, that limits one's ability to move, sense, or engage in activities.

Executive Functioning - Skills where individuals manage themselves and available resources in order to reach a goal. These skills include complex cognitive processes (e.g. memory, impulse-control, prioritization, etc.) that enable them to be independent.

Facilitator (or 'Instructor') - A person responsible for maintaining program flow, participant engagement, and integration of content - preferably through student-centered activities.

Guidelines - General principles and rules often outlined for purposes of consistency.

Hard of Hearing (HOH) - Someone who experiences mild to moderate hearing loss (rather than 'hearing-impaired,' which is not widely accepted in the Deaf/HOH community).

Instructional Practices - Methods put in place to increase learning outcomes and achievements.

Terminology

(continued)

Physical/Health Impairment- A condition that impacts an individual's general movement, coordination, and/or physical activities.

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) - A system originally developed by Pyramid Educational Consultants, Inc. that uses symbols to communicate. Typically PECS are used with non-verbal or semi-verbal individuals who use the symbols (either pointing or pushing a button) to convey thoughts and responses. PECS can be electronic and say the symbol aloud when pushed, or simply printed and pointed to.

Screen Reader - Assistive software technology that assesses text and images and converts it into speech and/or braille depending on the system. There are a wide range of screen readers available that range from desktop to mobile.

Signed Exact English (SEE) – A form of communication amongst groups who are deaf and hard of hearing that uses English wording and grammar rather than that of ASL (although visually similar to those who do not know either). There are several words that are "made up" in SEE to accommodate English language and grammar.

Slope - The angle of a path.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – A scientifically-based learning system that enhances and expands learning for all individuals, including those with disabilities. According to the UDL website, "UDL aims to change the design of the environment rather than to change the learner" (CAST, 2018).

Visually Impaired - A person experiencing any degree of vision loss.

Instructional Practices

These are recommendations. Of course, each group is unique, and what works for one group may not work for another. Enjoy your experience and the group you are working with - field trips can create long-lasting and impactful memories for your students (& self).

General

- **Individual first, disability second**. People are not defined by their disability. Have fun and get to know people! They may not communicate in a way that you fully understand and that is an opportunity for you to learn more about and from them, as well as strengthen your skills as a facilitator.

- **Encourage groups to experience nature in person**. Of course the goal is to get students outside as much as possible. It would be great to include a map of your space and note accessibility. Mark Hehir's resources, noted in the Annotated Bibliography at the end of this toolkit, provide excellent examples of accessible local parks.

Student "picking" apples in the orchard while learning about pollination.

- **Send a pre-program survey.** Learn about the group before they come. Ask specific questions of the group leaders about their group, including questions about triggers and fears, sound sensitivities, mobility, interpreters, aide to student ratio, allergies, student communication methods, attention span, and assistive technology.

- **Prepare the group leader.** Be sure to provide as much information to group leaders as possible – they know their group best! There may be special considerations you are unaware of, or ways the leader would like to prepare their group before participating.

Instructional Practices

General (continued)

- **Be visual!** In other words, "show" more often than you "tell." When possible have large photos available with large words, labels, or identifications below or printed on the back. Also consider having realia or physical items to highlight your content (Anido, 2021).

Students exploring with an educator.

- **Refrain from lecturing.**

- **Speak clearly and concisely.** Be clear with what you need and want, and refrain from using idioms or figures of speech which may cause confusion. For the best program experience, ask adults to limit side conversations and commentary during the program.

- **Allow processing time.** Some students need extra time to process content. Allow time during your program for students to process and formulate questions (Anido, 2021) by pausing often, allowing for quiet time, etc.

- **Provide a variety of ways for participants to engage.** For example, depending on the group, you can encourage usage of the chat feature, visual cues (e.g. 'Wave your hand if you can hear me,' or 'Touch your nose if you agree and touch your ear if you disagree.'), spoken responses, kinesthetic responses, songs, chants, dances, etc. While implementing the program, pay close attention to which methods have been effective and ineffective. If you notice participants respond well to one engagement strategy, you can try it again later.

- **Sensory activities are key.** Senses are how we engage with the world. Some people depend on or are more comfortable with particular senses, which provides wonderful opportunities for instruction. How can you make your programs more sensory-based?

- **Model Behavior.** Be sure to model specific behavior you would like to see. For example, if you ask the group to wave if they hear you, make sure you wave at them so they know exactly what you mean.

Instructional Practices

Groups with Autism

- **Send photos before the program takes place.** Whether in person or virtually, it is important to prime students with what to expect prior to the program. Examples of photos: photos of staff who will facilitate the program, photos of animals they might see, photos of the area they will "visit." The Guadalupe River Park Conservancy is located directly beneath the flight path of the San José airport which can get quite loud. As such, staff are sure to send photos of planes before the program as a way to prepare them for the sound.

- **Visual and concise.** When providing information to students, as often as possible, couple concise words with visuals. For example, if discussing pollination, consider having a puppet or cutout of a bee and flowers to model the movement of the bee from plant to plant. Concise does not mean using less complex language; it means focusing on the specific vocabulary you are looking for participants to understand.

Student using a hand lens for the first time.

- **Be flexible.** Recognize that participants simply might not want to do what you have planned – we've all been there, haven't we? Accept that even if you were excited about a particular lesson, you may need to move on. This is something environmental educators are accustomed to, as we are constantly surrounded by stimuli. Always have back up materials and activities with little to no set up so you can change the lesson's direction at any moment.

Instructional Practices

Groups with Autism (continued)
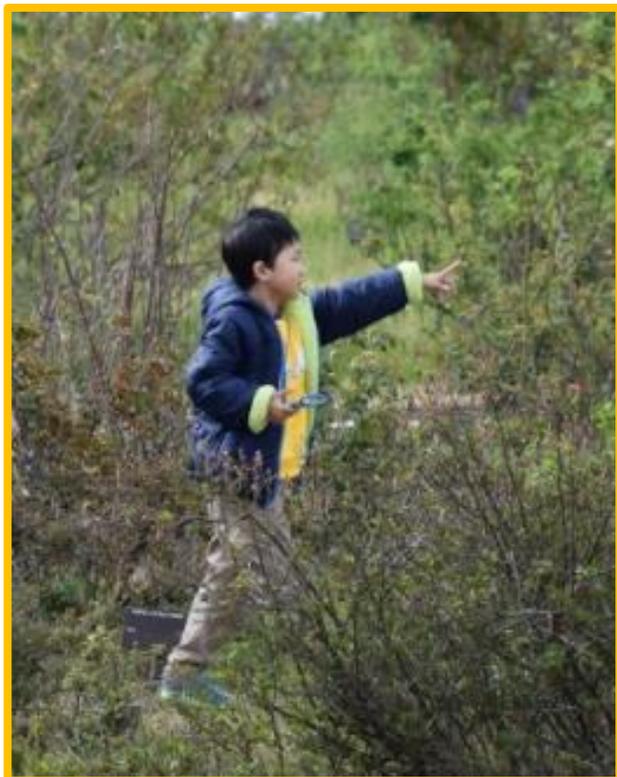
Student exploring nature during a scavenger hunt.

- **Some may not want to stop.** Some students may get very attached to a particular activity or experience and won't want to stop. We love these moments in learning! Check in with the group leader if this happens. Some teachers prefer to challenge students to move on, whereas others simply enjoy seeing their students engage and have fun. You can also consider letting the student have a little "piece" of the activity to bring with them (e.g. a leaf), that might help satisfy their connection with the activity whilst lessening disruption and continuing the flow of the program.

- **It might be too much for some students.** Each person has a particular level of comfort. Disruption to a familiar routine can be a very traumatic experience for some. Often, groups will have aides or teachers available who can recognize overstimulation and can work with them in that case.

- **Do not forget transitions.** Make sure to communicate transitions to your group (such as a pre-designated signal). Also be sure to communicate the schedule with your group ahead of time to prime them for future transitions.

- **Have backup activities, realia, manipulatives, photos, etc. readily available.** This could be as simple as having a bird book, samples of plant specimens, puppets, fruits/nuts, and large photos of what you might encounter. This provides you the opportunity to shift quickly to a new topic, without having to set up an entirely different activity.

Instructional Practices

Groups Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- **Check in with the leader about logistics.** Do you have a staff member who is fluent in American Sign Language? If not, that's usually fine. Typically, teachers and aides are comfortable translating, when needed. If the group does not have an interpreter, consider using closed captions. Also know, there may be specific needs at the request of the teacher. This can include technological needs, classroom setup, etc. Make sure there is a game plan for how the program will play out logistically. You may also want to ask the specific kind of sign language used in their classroom (e.g. ASL, SEE).

- **Monitor your pace.** If you are working with an interpreter, make sure to pause often to allow time for translations. That said, you also do not want to sound robotic – keep it natural.

- **Prepare to work with interpreters.** Make sure you are looking at students when you are talking to them, rather than the interpreter (unless you're speaking to the interpreter directly). Also, be sure to leave a clear line of sight so that all students can physically see the interpreter at all times. In a virtual setting, this may mean "pinning" or collaborating with the teacher to see what works best for them.

- **Have extended activities and/or challenges.** Be sure to have extra visuals, realia, and manipulatives. Groups who are deaf or hard of hearing have fewer auditory distractions and thus tend to finish activities quickly.

Student exploring the orchard.

- **Provide a vocabulary list for interpreters well before the program.** This is a helpful way to make sure interpreters know specific vocabulary that may not come up in everyday conversation. For example, environmental educators may say "arthropod" on a regular basis, though those from another field may not. Take off your educator hat for a moment, run through the program in your head, and ask yourself, "Is there a chance they may not know how to sign _____?" It doesn't hurt to include "extra" terms. This will save you time during the program and give interpreters confidence- plus, it allows them more time to enjoy the program, too!

Instructional Practices

Groups Who Have Visual Impairments

- **Documents that are sent to leaders should be easy to edit.** Leaders and teachers know their classroom best, including the way they understand written materials. Sending a PDF, or another non-revisable document, deprives the teacher of the opportunity to increase font size, put spaces between lines, etc., which are imperative for some groups to read. If your organization is uncomfortable sending documents in this format, consider having several options for how your document is presented. Focus on large print, spacing between lines, and high contrast between text color and background.

- **Be descriptive.** When you're sharing content with your group, commit to being as descriptive as possible. For example, rather than just saying, "the leaves on this maple leaf are soft," consider saying, "The leaves on this maple leaf are soft... when I feel it, it reminds me of the furriness on the outside of a peach." Think of something recognizable and relatable to students.

Student completing a science drawing.

Please note: It is recommended that you have your website evaluated to determine whether it is accessible to various audiences.

- **Think BIG.** If you're showing photos, have large ones printed. If you're printing words, make sure they are large and contrast well with the background (black text on a yellow background is great). If you are highlighting a small animal or plant, or if you expect to see one in the distance, make sure to have a photo available. It can be tricky and frustrating to see (or not see) something far away. Having photos with you enables you to retain attention and meet content goals. If you're using the same photos throughout the program, think of texturizing or embossing the important features of the animal (Anido, 2021).

Instructional Practices

Groups Who Have Physical and/or Medical Impairments

Student observing a crayfish found in the river.

- **Ensure access to assistive technology.** On the survey sent to the attending group ahead of time, check in regarding the assistive technology used by their students. There may be specific things needed from your organization to guarantee you are meeting participants' individual needs. Leaders and teachers can offer guidance about incorporating these technologies with your content.

- **Provide a variety of ways for participants to engage.** Depending on the group, you can encourage usage of the chat feature and/or visual cues and responses. You can also ask the classroom teacher ahead of time to describe ways that they have their students engage with them – every classroom is different!

- **Provide ways for students to extend learning by visiting accessible nature.** One of the best ways to have students apply content is through interaction with the natural world. Aside from the countless executive function, motor, cognitive, and social benefits, this also builds empathy and comfort with the outdoors, thus increasing the likelihood of engagement with nature in the future. If you are not sure about local, accessible parks, Mark Hehir, a local disability advocate, has a blog outlining specific recommendations. As an educator, if you are looking to expand your knowledge of accessible spaces, Hehir has also has written "ADA & ABA Illustrated Guides to Parks and Trails" which can be found in the annotated bibliography of this tool kit.

- **When in doubt, review Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines.** If you are ever unsure about whether you are providing an accessible experience for your participants, review UDL, which provides specific guidelines and recommendations for educators, parents, teachers, etc. It's a wonderful resource and can be found in the annotated bibliography of this document.

Recommended Activities

The following have been tested with various groups, and are examples of engaging activities that can be used to highlight your natural space.

Guided Nature Experience

Consider bringing students on trail virtually, as if you were in person. This can be a synchronous or asynchronous activity. Nature Experiences can still be a very exciting experience! Consider sending a sensory/tactile kit* to the classroom ahead of time to supplement your lesson and provide a tactile experience for your students to engage with while watching.

It can get frustrating when you're participating in a virtual program, and the facilitator points out something that's in the distance and difficult to see or hear. For example, a program instructor points out an egret in the distance during a synchronous session and students are unable to see it because it's quite small. Here are some things you can consider including:

- A large, color photo of the animal printed
- The name of the animal printed in large print on the reverse side of the photo (some groups have difficulties reading and seeing a photo at the same time.)
- A mechanism to play the bird calls (e.g. bird call device, cell phone, etc.) - Please note: it is discouraged and sometimes illegal to use bird playbacks in parks - please check park rules before doing this!
- If it's a plant, consider including a piece of it, or something similar, in the sensory kit (e.g. Big Leaf Maple leaves are soft on one side, is there something soft that feels similar that you can send?)

It is a good idea to get the group's permission to record the video so they can have access after the program takes place. This allows for the leader and/or families to re-watch at a later time, and/or enable those with longer processing times to experience the program to its fullest.

Skills Covered

- Observation
- Critical thinking
- Compare & contrast
- Application
- Sensory refinement
- Descriptors
- Vocabulary
- Identification
- Interpersonal

Recommended Activities

(continued)

Sensory Kits

Sensory kits are a resource for classrooms to bridge the computer-to-park gap. If you're guiding a group through a virtual nature experience, concepts are driven home by the sensory experience.

Consider including: smelly leaves, soft stems, and bumpy sticks – things you should be able to find quite easily. This does not need to be extensive – it can be as simple as two types of leaves or two types of bark. If you have snake skins on hand, this could be a fun way to discuss adaptations. Sensory kits allow students the opportunity to physically engage with content and the experience.

1. During COVID, it's important to note that ideally, enough items would be included for each student to keep.
2. Getting the kits to schools can be a bit cumbersome. Teachers have been willing to come to our site to retrieve materials. Depending on the weight, some of these sensory kits could be mailed at a reasonable cost.
3. Potential pivot: Have students/guardians get natural items (e.g. leaf, stick) from home/school, and have a moment during the program where students compare and contrast their item with yours.
4. If you aren't able to send realia, you can also send things that convey the same content. For example, if you're focusing on mountain lions and want to discuss the adaptation of their tongues, perhaps you can send a bit of sandpaper for students to feel and compare. It isn't the exact same thing, but it does provide a way for students to connect to content in a tactile way.
5. Scent identification can be included by placing a small plant in a film container or sanitized pill bottle with holes in the lid (Anido, 2021).

Skills Covered

- Observation
- Critical thinking
- Compare & contrast

- Application
- Sensory refinement
- Descriptors

- Curiosity
- Vocabulary
- Identification

Recommended Activities

(continued)

Scavenger Hunts

Scavenger hunts are well-accepted among many teachers for virtual learning. Take this as an opportunity to showcase and use your outdoor space in an exciting way. The scavenger hunt can be sent to the teacher ahead of time to print for their class – although this is something that needs to be confirmed. If printing is an option, you can have large photos of what you are looking for, and have students point to the screen if/when they see it.

Another added bonus of scavenger hunts is they can be modified according to the content you would like to cover. For example, perhaps you would like to do an adaptation scavenger hunt (an animal that has wings, a pokey plant, etc.), or a river ecology scavenger hunt (e.g. three different types of trees, rocks along the river, etc.).

Icons designed for picture communication boards and devices (e.g. PECS) can be used as learning and communication aids for ALL students including those with word retrieval or verbal responses.

Skills Covered

- Observation
- Matching
- Motor skills
- Application
- Vocabulary
- Identification
- Attention
- Focus

Recommended Activities

(continued)

Close Encounter

Do you have live animals on-site? Do you have a special plant or tree that's fun to look at up close? Give students the opportunity to make observations. It's normal for groups to get nervous sometimes; that's a natural response. Stay calm and refrain from raising your voice too loud (for the students AND wildlife).

Ask prompting questions with clear options (e.g. what do you notice about the toad?... is it SMOOTH? BUMPY?). It might be helpful to show photos, puppets, or stuffed animals to prime students before seeing the "real" thing and hopefully alleviate concerns/fears.

Skills covered

- Observation
- Patterns
- Vocabulary
- Descriptors
- Attention to detail
- Application of knowledge

Embrace Your Space

Part of the beauty of being an environmental educator is embracing what the outdoors offers us. No two programs are ever the same because nature is always changing. Even while hosting a virtual program, make time to acknowledge the dynamic outdoors and embrace exciting moments. If you're on the trail and see a gopher snake or red-shouldered hawk, you're encouraged to give students the chance to experience it as they would if the program was in person. Allow them to ask questions and be curious. You're facilitating this experience, but it's their learning that guides the way.

Skills covered

- Observation
- Identification
- Guided risk-taking
- Empathy
- Curiosity

Annotated Bibliography

The following resources are recommended for environmental educators to review before, while, and after developing programs for groups with special needs.

Access-Board.gov. (2013, September 23). *ADA Accessibility Terms and Definition*. Glossary of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessibility Terms and Guidelines. https://www.disabled-world.com/definitions/ada-glossary.php
This resource provides a synopsis of ADA Accessibility widely used terms, as well as terminology used throughout this toolkit.

CAST (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved from http://udlguidelines.cast.org
The guidelines outlined on this webpage are intended to support inclusive learning using science as a guiding principle. These guidelines are tools that assist educators with providing the most accessible learning to students and removing barriers for attaining this information.

CornellLab. (2021, April 9). *Online bird guide, bird ID help, life history, bird sounds from Cornell*. All About Birds. https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/
This interactive resource enables visitors to hear the sounds of the most common local birds. With a simple search, instructors, parents, students, and/or teachers are able to liven up a lesson with the integration of these vocalizations.

Hehir, Mark. ADA & ABA Illustrated Guide to Parks and Trails. Amazon, 2021.
This illustrated book references the Federal standards for accessibility at parks, including parking, restrooms, and park elements.

Hehir, M. (2016 - 2021). *Adventures From a Wheelchair* [Blog]. Blogspot. https://irishsea-mark-videos.blogspot.com/
This blog has reviews and Youtube videos of parks and accessible trails in the San Francisco Bay Area. This is an excellent resource for teachers, leaders, and families who are looking to visit local, accessible parks.

Annotated Bibliography (continued)

Annotated Bibliography (continued)

Hehir, M. (2020b, December 27). *Mark Hehir - Author. Photographer. Disability Advocate.* [Blog]. Markhwriter. https://www.markhwriter.com/my-blog
Through this blog, individuals can learn more about accessible resources post-pandemic. This includes information about books the author has written and looks to write in the future.

National Association of the Deaf - NAD. (2021). Community and Culture - Frequently Asked Questions. https://www.nad.org/resources/american-sign-language/community-and-culture-frequently-asked-questions/
This resource breaks down jargon used pertaining to the Deaf and hard of hearing community. It outlines the differences between specific terms, as well as reasoning behind particular vocabulary.

Newman, Graham, "Nature-Based-Learning for Students with Disabilities" (2020). Culminating Projects in Special Education. 93.
https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/sped_etds/93
This culminating project focuses on the benefits of Nature Based Learning (NBL) on groups with disabilities. This outlines executive function developments as well as how engagement with the outdoors positively impacts personal growth.

Otter.ai. (2016). [Transcription Service]. https://otter.ai
This transcription service has a variety of payment plans. Under the free "basic" plan, individuals can transcribe 600 minutes of audio.Otter.ai can provide live captioning, recorded video captioning, and live transcription. Non-profit organizations qualify to receive a 50% discount.

Rogoway, T. (2009). Park Interpretation for Special Needs.
https://www.proquest.com/docview/305149953/8355186E960C4560PQ/1
This dissertation contains research and studies used to better understand park interpretation practices for groups with special needs. Specifically, there are techniques, adaptations, and considerations for activities that can be used to provide the best possible educational experience to participants.

Annotated Bibliography (continued)

Annotated Bibliography (continued)

Sibley, D.A. (2016). How to Use Birdcall Apps. *Audubon*. Published
This resource provides an understanding for appropriate and inappropriate times to use birdcall apps. It is essential to review this document before showcasing birdcalls during a program - it is illegal in some parks. This article also provides a biological overview and understanding of why these restrictions exist.

Sutton, J. (2002b). *A Guide to Making Documents Accessible to People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired.* American Council of the Blind.
https://www.sabeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/A-Guide-to-Making-Doc ments-Accessible-to-People-Who-are-Blind-or-Visually-Impaired.pdf
This detailed resource provides an in-depth review of how to and how NOT to make documents accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired. This includes designing documents with accessibility in mind in terms of the amount of text used, images, tables, etc.

Understood. *Shaping the World For a Difference*. (2014–2021).
https://Understood.org
Understood, a non-profit organization, provides a variety of resources for families, educators, and students. They focus on empathy and creating inclusive environments for people who think differently. There are a variety of articles that have tips and tricks for working with groups, whether in-person or virtually, that are helpful to review before designing programs.

Webmaster, M. (2020, January 29). *Identifying Trees by Their Bark*. Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia. https://mgnv.org/2020/01/05/identifying-trees-by-their-bark/
This article focuses on ways individuals can use a tree's bark to learn more about the specific species. It outlines different types of bark, its function, and other important characteristics, including identification.

Acknowledgments

A Note About The Toolkit

As the pandemic evolved rapidly, we also expect this resource to evolve integrating specific resources and practices that have proven effective and beneficial for participants.

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The findings and recommendations included in this tool kit do not necessarily reflect the views of those listed, and the author claims ownership over any errors.

Project Partners
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Julie Miller, Karla Cortez, Celeste Royer

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More Information
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