



Nature Play

Rediscovering Play in Natural Spaces



What is Nature Play?

Nature Play is “play that is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, and personally directed” in natural environments (*Adapted definition, Hughes 2012*).

Interest in rejuvenating Nature Play opportunities for children is increasing, but our plugged-in culture struggles to support it. We all have a role to play in shifting this culture and creating spaces that foster Nature Play. Spaces where we can let children be children and learn how to play in nature again.

We are all in this together.

For more information on the research that informed the creation of this resource please view the “*In this together: Rediscovering the potential of play in natural spaces*” document on our website at arpaonline.ca/program/children-in-nature. An electronic version of these flash cards is also available on our website.

This resource is the product of a partnership between the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association and research partners in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation of the University of Alberta.



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
FACULTY OF PHYSICAL
EDUCATION AND RECREATION

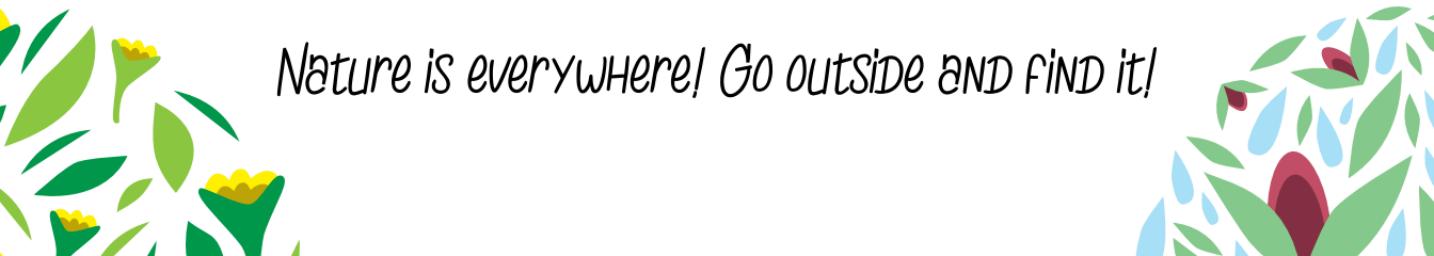


This project was funded by Alberta Culture's Community Initiatives Program.



How can you incorporate Nature Play into your programs?

1. **Start small** – You don't need to go for a hike to be in nature! Take advantage of the changing seasons, explore outside the front door, or take a closer look at what's familiar; you and your participants will be surprised at what you find!
2. **You don't have to be a "nature expert"** – Start with what you know and use play as an opportunity to learn with children; be co-explorers!
3. **Kids will be kids** – Trust children to explore at their own pace, challenge themselves, interact and be masters of their own experience.
4. **Return what you find** – If you're using natural materials, be sure to put them back where you found them for the next person to enjoy!
5. **Get messy!** – Some of the most enriching play experiences for children are the messy ones!
6. **Prepare parents** – Have parents send extra clothes with their children and warn them that they will be coming home wet, dirty, and exhausted!



Nature is everywhere! Go outside AND FIND it!

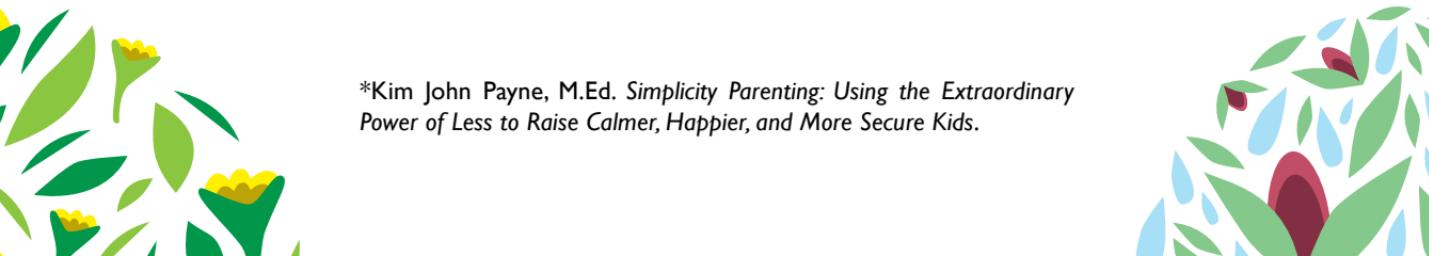


Encourage unstructured play opportunities in nature!

**“Children’s play flourishes when we ‘let it’
rather than ‘make it’ happen.” ***

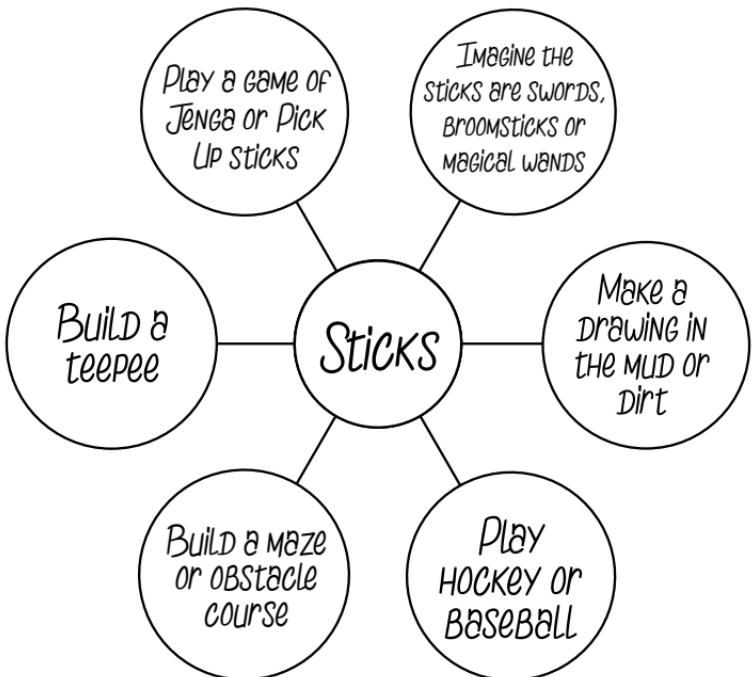
- **Build** a nature playground using logs, stones, dirt piles, etc.
- **Paint** rocks as animals, dominos, or characters in a storyline.
- **Watch** the birds and imitate what you see.
- **Create** a marching band with natural instruments.
- **Pretend** to be stealthy foxes and sneak up on birds.
- **Have** a rolling contest down a small hill.

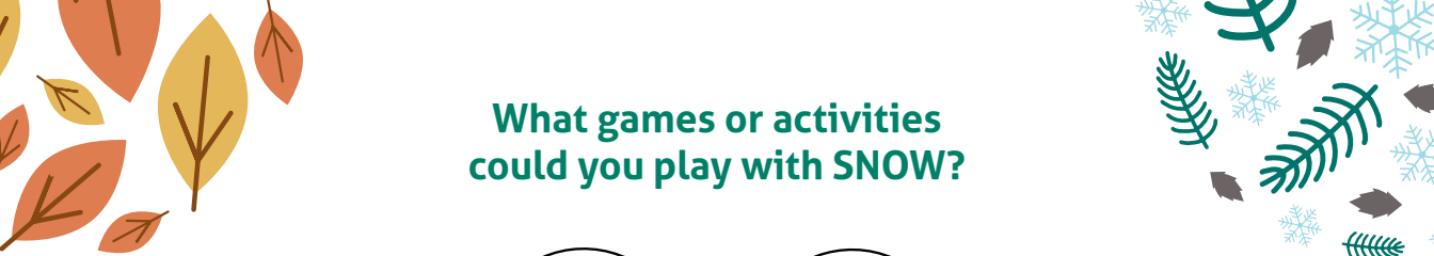
*Kim John Payne, M.Ed. *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids.*



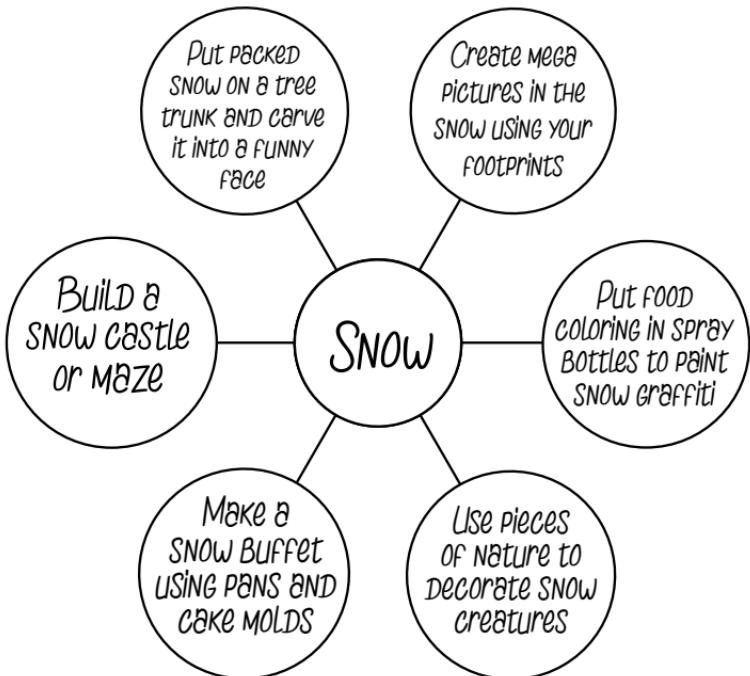


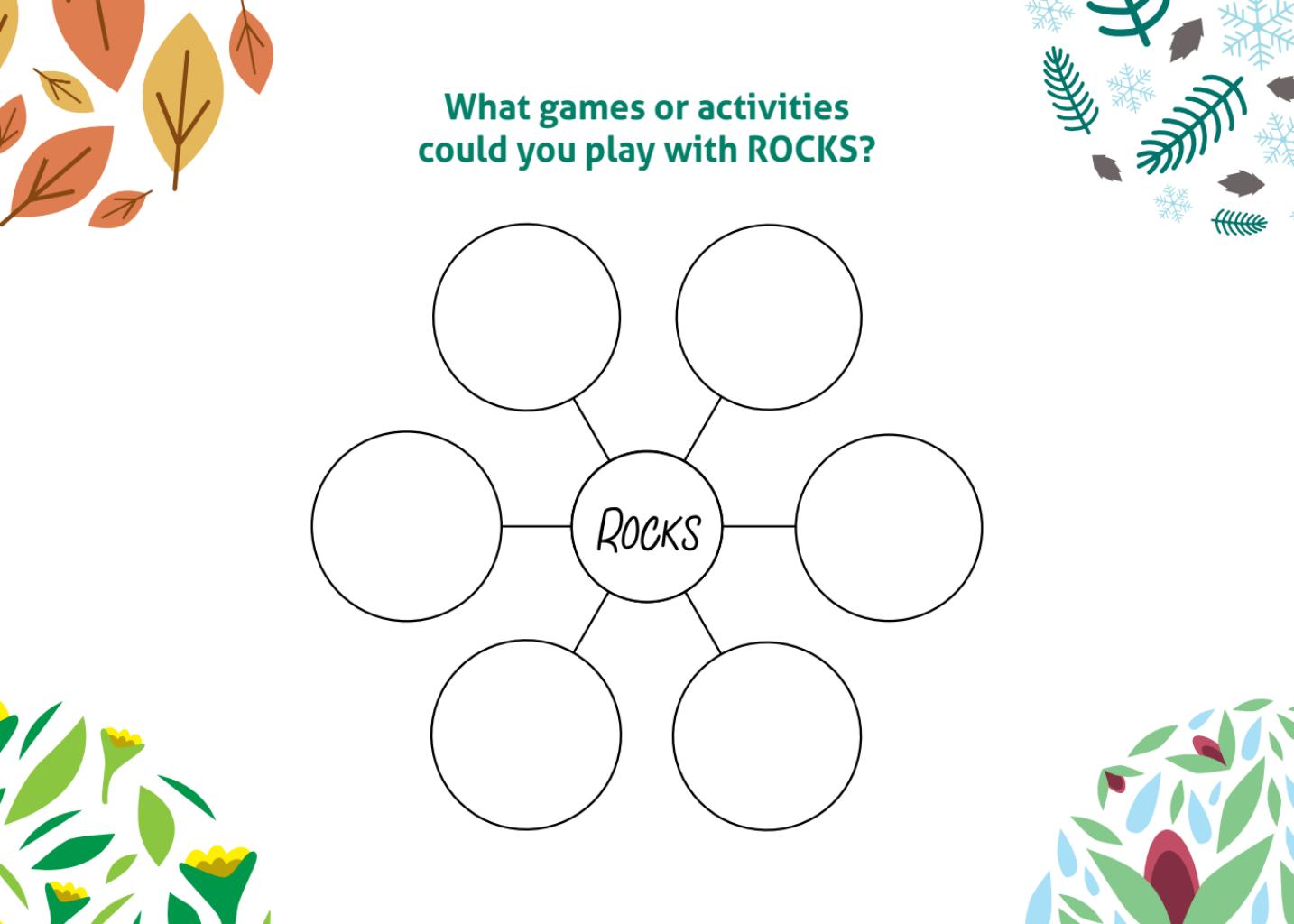
What games or activities could you play with STICKS?



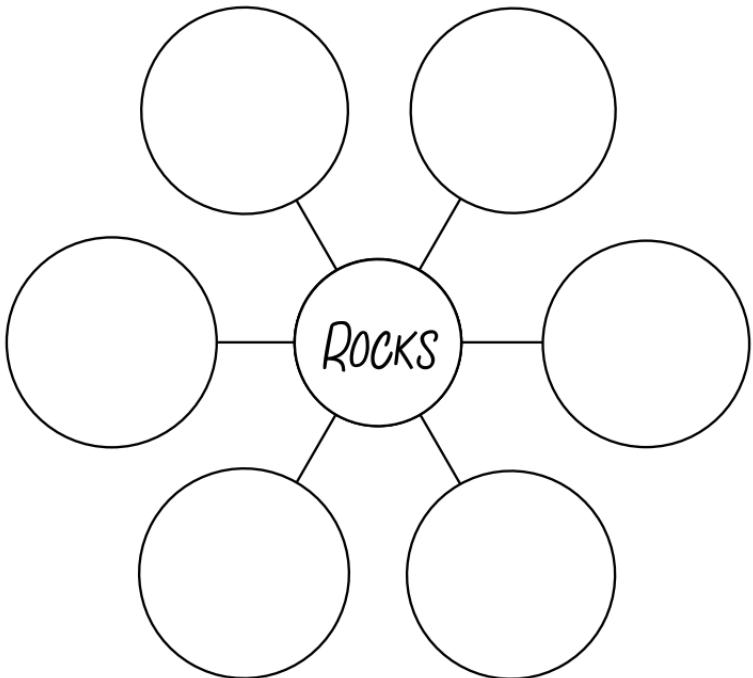


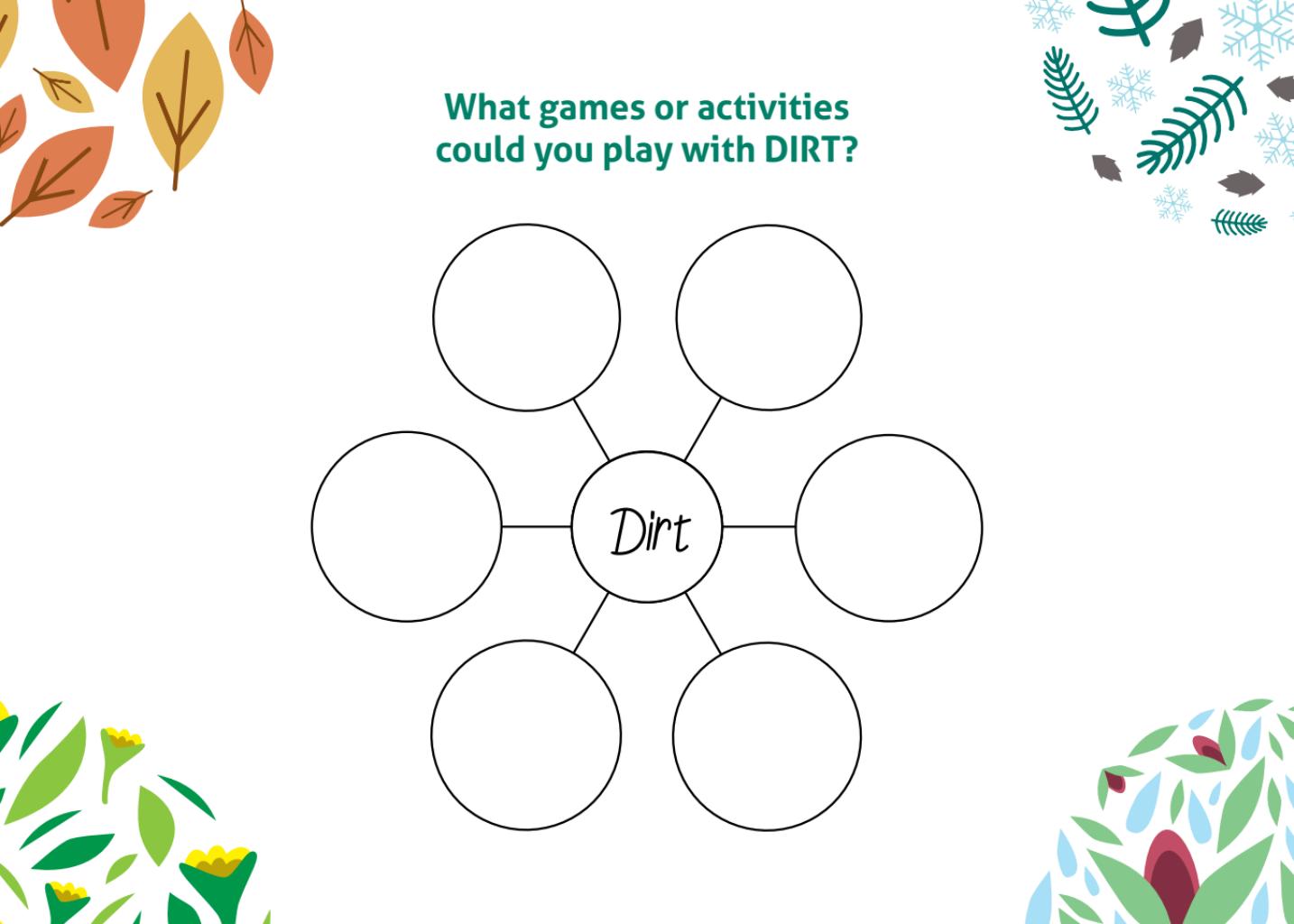
What games or activities could you play with SNOW?



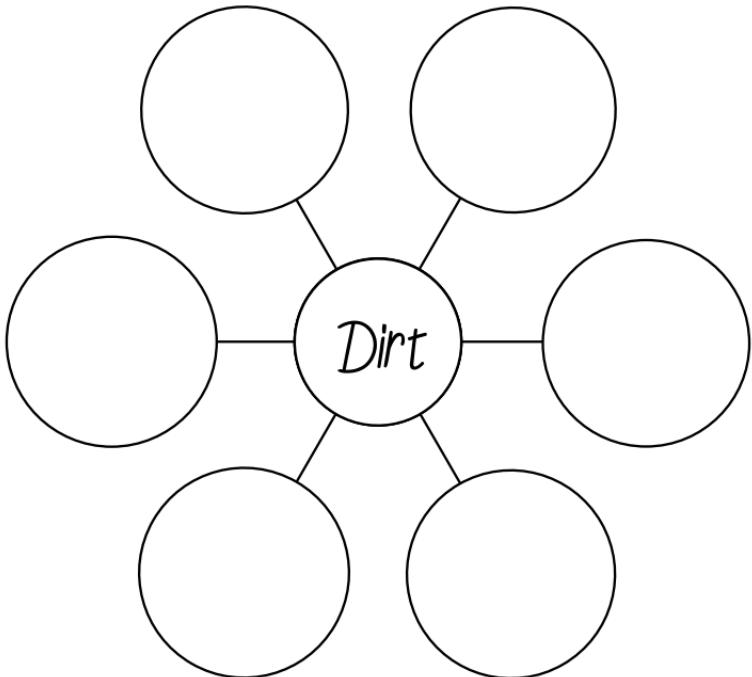


What games or activities could you play with ROCKS?





What games or activities
could you play with DIRT?





Activity: Bird Café

Supplies

Popped popcorn
Thread
Needle
Pine cones
String
Lard
Bird seed

Season

Fall/Winter

Time

60 minutes

Age

5 + years

Directions

1. Using a needle and thread, string the popcorn together.
2. Tie a string around the top of a large pinecone.
3. Mix lard and bird seed in a bowl (2 parts lard to 1 part seeds).
4. Cover the pinecones with the lard and seed mixture, making sure to get in all the small spaces.
5. Hang your Bird Café in front of a window and watch the birds stop for a snack!

Discussion

- What types of birds do you see?
- Do some birds prefer the popcorn string to the pinecone?



Activity: Super Smelly Play Dough

Supplies

½ cup All-Purpose flour

½ cup of water

2 tbs. of salt

1 tsp. Cream of Tartar

Choose one of the ingredients below and add 1 – 2 tsp. per batch of play dough: Turmeric, Paprika, Cinnamon, Cocoa, Rosemary, Thyme, etc.

Season

All Seasons

Time

30 minutes

Age

5 + years

Directions

1. Mix flour, water, salt, cream of tartar and ONE spice in a large bowl until well combined.
2. Make a batch of play dough for each additional spice or herb.
3. Store in a tightly sealed container for up to one week.
Before you begin, make sure you are aware of any participant allergies

Discussion

- What do you smell? Do these smells remind you of anything?
- What are the differences between herbs and spices?



Activity: Play DOUGH Nature Walk

Supplies

Play dough
(See previous card
for recipe)

Season

All Seasons

Time

30 minutes

Age

5 + years

Directions

1. Take a walk outside and use the play dough to take imprints of what you find. Maybe it's a leaf, a rock, or tree bark!
2. Have them share and compare their prints with a friend.

Discussion

- What interesting things did you take imprints of?
- What details can be seen on the play dough?

Activity: Pinecone Weather Station

Supplies

Pinecones

Sticky Tac or clay

Season

Spring

Time

5 minutes

Age

8 + years

Directions

1. Put Sticky Tac or clay on the bottom of a pinecone.
2. Place it in a windowsill and be sure to watch when the weather changes!

Pinecones open and close depending on the amount of humidity in the air. When it's dry out, pinecones will open so that the wind catches their seeds and carries them far away to germinate.

Discussion

- Are you able to notice a change in the weather using the pinecone weather station?
- How do other trees ensure that their seeds are able to grow, far away from the "parent" tree?



Activity: Nature Paintbrushes

Supplies

Paper
Paint
A leaf, a stick, a blade
of grass, etc.

Season

All Seasons

Time

30 minutes

Age

3 + years

Directions

1. Find natural objects that will make great paintbrushes, perhaps a leaf, a stick, or a blade of grass.
2. Dip it in paint and use it as a paintbrush!

Discussion

- What types of materials make the best paintbrushes?
- How does each paintbrush differ in the way that it paints?



Activity: Ice Sun Catchers

Supplies

Round foil pans
Food coloring
Twine
leafs, pine needles,
berries, etc.

Season

Winter

Time

60 minutes

Age

6 + years

Directions

1. Fill round foil pans with water, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way to the top.
2. Add 3 – 5 drops of food coloring to each pan along with leafs, pine needles, berries, etc. and then put it in the freezer.
3. When frozen, make a loop with twine, place it on the ice and fill the pan to the top with water.
4. Place the pans back in the freezer.
5. Once the pans are completely frozen, pop the ice sun catchers out of the pans and hang them outside.

Discussion

- What did you find to fill each of the ice sun catchers with?
- What nature items could be used in a different season?
- What colors catch sunlight the best?



Activity: Frozen Gems

Supplies

Ice cube tray
Food coloring

Season

Winter

Time

30 minutes

Age

5 + years

Directions

1. Pour colored water into ice cube trays and freeze.
2. Once frozen, pop them out of the tray and use as frozen gems to play in the snow!

Discussion

- What games can be created using frozen gems?



Activity: MUD KITCHEN

Supplies

Recycled materials
i.e. pots, pans, plastic containers, spoons, etc.

Season

Spring

Time

60 minutes

Age

5 + years

Directions

Build a mud kitchen and use recycled materials to cook up a feast!

Discussion

- What types of materials worked best in your kitchen?
- What did you “cook”?

Activity: Bug Pooter

Supplies

Large straws
Pantyhose
Rubber bands
Containers

Season

Spring/Summer

Time

60 minutes

Age

3 + years

Directions

1. Cut out a small piece of pantyhose (3 x 3 cm) for each participant.
2. Using a rubber band, secure it to the bottom of each straw (this will make the “pooter” filter).
3. Get some plastic containers and have participants use their “pooter” to “suck up” small bugs they find hiding in the grass.
4. Have them collect their bugs in a container.

Discussion

- What types of creatures did you find? Were there any unique ones?
- What does the world look like from a bug’s perspective?



Activity: LIGHT AND SHADOW

Supplies

Paper

Pencil or paint

Season

Fall/Spring/Summer

Time

30 minutes

Age

6 + years

Directions

Find a shadow from a tree and trace the shadow on the paper using a pencil or paint.

Discussion

- How big is the shadow?
- Are there any patterns or interesting shapes that can be found in the shadow drawings?





Activity: Bug Motel

Supplies

Boxes
Mesh
Different sized containers

Season

Fall/Spring/Summer

Time

60+ minutes

Age

6 + years

Directions

1. Staple the mesh on the backside of the box.
2. Fill the box with different sized containers and add natural items - think grass, sticks, etc.
3. Place your bug motel outside and see who comes for a visit!

Variation: Take a piece of cardboard and leave it on the grass overnight. See which creatures are under the cardboard the next day.

Discussion

- What natural items did the bugs like best?
- How many different bugs can be found in the motel?



Activity: Tree Hugger

Supplies

Blindfold

Season

All Seasons

Time

5 minutes

Age

6 + years

Directions

1. In pairs, have one partner lead the blindfolded participant to a nearby tree.
2. Blindfolded participants have two minutes to use their senses to “remember” their tree.
3. Still blindfolded, they must return to the starting point with the help of their partner.
4. Once the blindfold is removed, the participant must figure out which tree was “theirs”.

Discussion

- What senses did you use to “remember” your tree?





Activity: High Five

Supplies

Objects found outside

Season

All Seasons

Time

10 minutes

Age

6 + years

Directions

Participants pick a nature category and find five matching items outside, i.e. five types of flowers.

Additional Activity: Have the groups race to see who can be the first to find the items.

Discussion

- Was it easy or challenging to find five things for each category?
- How can this activity be changed to fit each season?



Activity: Rainy Day

Supplies

Raincoat
Rubber boots

Season

Spring/Summer

Time

30 minutes

Age

3 + years

Directions

Instead of staying inside, grab some rubber boots and take a walk in the rain to see what you find!

- Catch some raindrops on your tongue
- See who can make the biggest splash
- Pretend to be birds....how do they shake water off their feathers?

Discussion

- What kinds of things can be found when the sun is not out?
- How do trees handle the rain? Do different leaves collect or repel water? Find an example of each.



Activity: Secret Writer

Supplies

Paper

Season

Summer

Time

5 minutes

Age

6 + years

Directions

1. Grab some dandelions and break the stems apart.
2. Using the “dandelion ink”, write a secret message on paper.
3. As it dries, it will reveal what was written.

Additional activity: Create an outdoor treasure hunt or game using secret messages.

Discussion

- What other ways can natural things be used to create secret messages, i.e. using sticks to create arrows?



Activity: Animal Game

Supplies

A large space

Season

All Seasons

Time

5 minutes

Age

3 + years

Directions

Each participant chooses an animal and imitates its movements, taking turns to lead the group through a large play space – running through the grass, balancing on rocks, rolling down hills, etc.

Discussion

- What animals did you pretend to be?
- How do they move differently in your play space?





Activity: SOCK Sprouts

Supplies

Old socks

Season

Spring/Summer

Time

60+ minutes

Age

6 + years

Directions

1. Have participants put a pair of old socks over their shoes.
2. Take a walk around a field, grassy space or wooded area, getting the socks as dirty as possible.
3. Take the socks off and put each pair in a zip top bag.
4. Add a sprinkle of water.
5. Tape each bag to a bright window and watch what grows!

Discussion

- How many different things can be found growing?
- How might the “sprouts” from your socks look different if you were to walk in a forest vs. a grassy field?



Activity: Bug Rest Stop

Supplies

Foil container
Rocks
Dirt
Water

Season

Summer

Time

30 minutes

Age

3 + years

Directions

1. Place some rocks in a foil container.
2. Fill the container with water just below the tops of the rocks.
3. Place in a warm place, outside.

To attract butterflies, add some dirt to the bottom of the pan before placing the rocks and filling the container.

Discussion

- How many different types of bugs stopped by for a rest?
- What do you think would happen if the tray were placed in a cool place?