

Discovering nature

These are a few activities designed to get children out exploring their natural environment.

Ant's Eye View

Lay out a 70cm piece of string and ask the child to imagine he or she is an ant going for a walk along it. The child should move along slowly and describe what an ant would see. To help focus on a very small area at a time, use a magnifying glass or a cardboard tube as the ant's eye.

Blindfold Trail

Lay out a trail through woods and other habitats using a securely attached rope. Ask children to grope their way along the rope, assisted if necessary by a sighted guide, and to describe their experiences.

Box of Delights

Give each of the children a tiny box and ask them to search for the smallest, loveliest natural object they can find.

Can You Find.....?

Discuss with the children some picture cards showing plants and animals (Chain Game cards would be ideal): what they eat; what eats them; where they live etc. When you call out one of the plants or animals, the children have to find a natural object associated with it.

Colours

Explore the variety of colours in nature by collecting fragments of leaves, petals, wood etc. and fixing them to a sticky surface (double-sided carpet tape is ideal). Possible themes might include: colours of the rainbow; a rainbow of greens from dark to light; shades of any other colour; colours representing each season. Images can also be produced by rubbing leaves, flowers, berries, bark, soil etc. onto paper. Children might also be challenged to collect natural objects which match with a reference collection or with a paint colour chart.

Diary of a Nature Walk

Devise a number of routes for walks within an area. Ask children to walk a route with you, noting directions, landmarks and interesting features as they go. Ask others to follow the same route using the notes made. Repeat the walk regularly and keep a diary of daily and seasonal changes in nature.

Feely Box

Seal a large cardboard box and cut out a hand hole (or two hand holes). Place natural objects in the box, unobserved, and ask a child to feel them. Encourage

the children to describe the sensations they are feeling rather than just try to guess the object's identity immediately.

Getting to Know a Leaf

Ask children each to find a leaf they particularly like. Help them to examine their own leaves in fine detail by asking questions about, for example, the leaf's shape, the leaf edge (sharp, serrated, smooth etc.), the colours and colour patterns, the pattern of veins (hold it up to the light), what the leaf feels like and whether both surfaces feel the same, and whether anything has been eating it. Then mix up the leaves, spread them out and see if each child can find his or her own leaf.

Getting to Know a Tree

Ask a blindfolded pupil to explore a tree without using the sense of sight. Returning to the area without a blindfold, ask the pupil to identify his or her tree. Get children to examine the tree in fine detail using lenses, make bark rubbings, lie under the tree and describe what they see looking up, mark out a trail around its roots (see HABITATS: Mini Nature Reserve) and keep a diary of seasonal changes.

Pond Water Changes

Observe and record the changes in water level in a pond - or even something like a sunken basin. Use this as a basis for discussing where the extra water comes from and what becomes of the water lost. Consider, or observe if possible, the freezing and thawing of the water. Discuss the implications of all of these things for life in the pond.

Scavenger Hunt

This is particularly useful when working in an area where the diversity of nature is not obvious. The scavenger list can be tailored to lead to discussions on whatever issues you wish to highlight. Some examples follow: a piece of rubbish, something round, something fuzzy, something sharp, exactly 25 of something, something perfectly straight, something moist, something beautiful, a leaf, a stem, a seed, a piece of bark, a nut shell, a thorn, a snail shell, a feather, a bone, something plants need to live, something white, a chewed leaf, a dropping, three different leaves, leaves from sunny and shady places, something which rots quickly, something which doesn't, something which has never been alive, something important in nature, something of no use to nature, something else which is interesting.

Smelly Cocktails

Ask each child to collect natural substances in a pot, e.g. grass, moss, earth, petals. Add a little water, then stir and crush the contents to release their scents. Ask the children to invent names for the fragrances they have created.

Sound Map

Ask the children to choose a spot and sit quietly with their eyes closed for a few minutes. Then discuss what they have heard. In another exercise, ask them to show the directions and relative distances from which each sound is coming on a simple map (just a plain sheet or card) on which their own position is marked as a cross in the centre. Ask them to invent an appropriate symbol for each sound. Once the children find they are able to present sounds with symbols, you might ask them to record (as in musical notation) the patterns of sounds they hear over a given period.

Touch and Tell

Written underneath an egg box are two secret words which are opposite or contrasting tactile sensations - e.g. prickly/tickly, jagged/smooth, shiny/dry, hard/soft. Ask the child or group to find objects corresponding to each word and arrange them on opposite sides of the box. Ask the other children to feel the contents and guess the secret words.

Leaf Variations

Ask children to collect and mount a variety of leaves from the same and different tree species. Set some targets such as a certain number of points to the leaf, the biggest / smallest, most colourful / least colourful, most / fewest holes, lightest / darkest green.