

Let's Stick Together!

ENRICHING THE EARLY YEARS CURRICULUM

OVERVIEW

Exciting outdoor play activities using **sticks** collected in the school grounds. These purposeful, simple ideas can be undertaken with little prep and with no funding required, but will allow children who are motivated by working with natural materials to extend their learning in a range of ways.

The value in these activities will be in how you integrate them into your existing curriculum plans; learning beyond the classroom is a route through which the curriculum can be enriched and made more meaningful – it is not a curriculum in itself.

Observing and recording outdoor activities is vital in order to share children's learning journeys with them, their parents and your other colleagues; use similar techniques to the ones you'd use indoors, but consider quick and weatherproof written records (i.e. post it notes and felt tips).

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS - SUMMARY

- Physical development - gross and fine motor skills
- Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy – working together to solve problems; patterns
- Creative development – ephemeral art with natural materials
- Communication, language and literacy – speaking and listening, new vocab
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World – seasonal change
- PSE – sharing stories and feelings around the campfire

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Five, six, pick up sticks

- Discuss autumn – what happens to the leaves on the trees in autumn? When the leaves drop, what can we see on the bare trees?
- Wrap up warmly for a walk around the perimeter of the field – and other places where there are trees. Walk around looking for sticks, leaves and fungi. Sniff the air under the trees – what does it smell like? What colours can you see?
- Decide on a place to deposit your stick collection (for the sake of a bit more problem solving I'd suggest choosing a halfway spot rather than taking them straight back to your playground) – how will you transport your sticks to this place? What will you do if the stick is especially long or heavy?
- Collect all the sticks you can find on the ground – or at least, all the sticks that aren't rotten or slimy! Pile them up in your halfway spot. Any sticks will do, but ones with relatively few 'sub branches' will make some of the later activities a bit easier.
- Fostering a 'problem solving' approach, encourage children to
 - use their whole bodies to transport the sticks
 - collect large and tiny sticks
 - collaborate with one another to carry awkward or large sticks
 - decide when they have 'enough' sticks
 - discuss and agree the best way of transporting a large stick collection back to the playground (e.g. wheelbarrows, trailer, bags, one by one...)



Using your sticks

Allow children to experiment freely with the stick collection; record their explorations with cameras, post-it notes and video if possible. These activities will appeal to children in different ways – some will play on their own, others will want to collaborate; some will see patterns and shapes in the sticks and others will use them to generate stories and imaginative play scenarios. These are all important lines of enquiry and the play can be built on in future as children's fascinations evolve. The list of possible activities below could happen naturally as children explore, or you could plan them to suit curriculum plans.

- Sorting
 - by length, width or colour / shades; arrange the sticks to show how they've been sorted
- Patterns
 - create mazes and abstract or regular patterns by organising the sticks on the playground; draw round them with chalks to record the patterns; fill in the gaps and spaces with other natural materials such as leaves, flowers, conkers, corks, etc.
 - Lay the sticks along the playground markings; encourage children to choose the correct length of stick to ensure accurate replication of the lines.
- Mud hedgehogs
 - Use mud or clay to create hedgehog bodies, then use the sticks to represent the spikes on the hedgehog's back. Allow to dry completely then place the hedgehogs in spaces around the grounds where children think hedgehogs would live or forage.
- Mark making
 - Burn or char the ends of the sticks to make 'charcoal'.
 - Make marks in mud or puddles.
 - Create imaginary words and shapes in the air – can children guess what their friends are drawing or writing in the air?
- Stick picture frames
 - Lay them on the floor to make pictures using natural materials or chalks
 - Connect the corners with string, masking tape or garden twist ties then hang them from the trees, eaves, fence etc. to create natural 'panoramas' and 'landscapes'.
- Journey sticks
 - Place 6 or 7 thick elastic bands (found everywhere the postman has been) to each stick. As the children 'journey' around the grounds, they collect found objects and attach them to the stick using the elastic bands – great for practicing fine motor skills and hand eye co-ordination. I also use this activity to encourage vocab development and speaking and listening skills.
- Clearing up
 - At the end of each play session, encourage children to clear up the sticks and store them somewhere handy for use the next day. A huge brush used by a caretaker or cleaner can add some fun and laughter to this task.
- Measuring sticks
 - If you are lucky enough to find long, straight sticks, slice them up into regular lengths, to use for measuring and estimating. If you can, create a metre long stick and then a series of 10, 20 and 50cm sticks. Remember to gently chamfer or sand the cut ends to avoid splintering.
- Windchimes
 - Make a circle from a wire coat hanger, string different lengths of sticks to the wire circle and hang from trees or eaves – add feathers and conkers for added interest.

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Sticky fingers – saying goodbye to the stick collection

By now you probably have quite a mess in your playground, and a depleted stick collection! There are several ways of disposing of the left over sticks.

- A member of the school community (or another local school) may have a mulcher; if so, ask if they'll come into school to demonstrate how it works to the children. This in itself is a wonderful learning opportunity – a mulcher is a large, loud, smelly machine that will 'eat' the sticks and create wood chips at the other end, which are fantastic for mulching around your plants to keep the weeds down. You'll also have another useful 'transporting' problem for the children to solve once the sticks have become mulch.
 - If you use the mulch on your plants, retain some in a small pile somewhere sheltered; children will be interested to watch it start to break down over time and can also experience the raised temperature inside the pile by putting their hands into it.
- Take the sticks back to the places you found them; they will eventually break down or be used by animals, as they would have if they'd never been moved.
- Use some of the sticks to build a fire pit, to burn the remainder. Choose a sheltered spot where children can safely sit around the fire and enjoy its colours, sounds and warmth. Choose sticks or logs with a wide diameter and make a fire pit by laying them end to end in a circle or square – a metre square is a good size to begin with. You could remove the turf before lighting the fire, and replace it afterwards, or keep the space as an informal fire pit.
 - Use the remainder of the sticks as fuel on the fire, remembering to retain a few to toast marshmallows on.

Risk assessing outdoor learning and play

A common sense approach to health and safety is now advocated by the HSE and by the Coalition Government¹ and whilst it is important to understand and record risks, a dynamic approach, based on risk / benefit analysis is likely to offer the flexibility needed to really deliver a creative, inspiring early years curriculum. Dynamic risk assessment and risk benefit analysis materials are freely available on the web: try www.playlink.org and www.forestry.gov.uk for starters.

Other equipment and materials

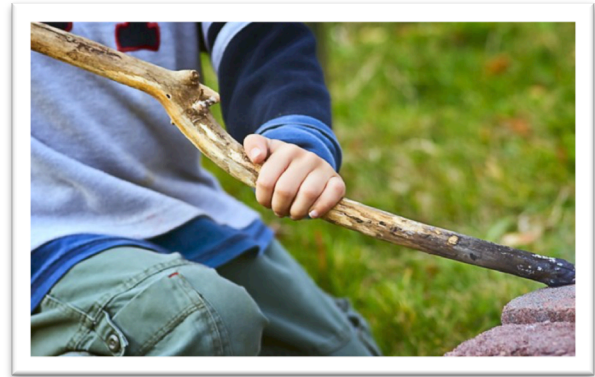
- Bottles of antibacterial handrub are a good idea outdoors. A few germs are no bad thing, but neither is instilling a sensible hygiene routine outdoors.
- A 'go anywhere' outdoor play resource box could usefully contain string, scissors, 10m measuring tape, felt tips, masking tape, baby wipes, nappy sacks (aka treasure bags), an A4 magnifying sheet, garden twist ties...
- Children love cameras and recording equipment; the Tuff-Cam, available from various educational suppliers is great for stubby little fingers; for children with more developed motor skills or a desire to use 'grown up' equipment, the FlipCam video recorders are ideal – both of these cameras are relatively inexpensive.

¹ Tickell Review Recommendations, p6: "To reduce the burden that paperwork introduces, I am also recommending practitioners should not have to undertake written risk assessments when they take children out, but instead be able to demonstrate, if asked, the ways that they are managing outings to minimise risk."

The Five Best Toys of All Time

By Jonathan Lui, January 2011; article is copyright Wired.com

Written by GeekDad Jonathan Liu, this article has done the rounds many times on the internet but is standing the test of time. Click [here](#) to see it in full (with the other four 'best toys') at the Wired website.



Here at GeekDad we review a lot of products — books, toys, gadgets, software — and I know it's impossible for most parents to actually afford all of the cool stuff that gets written up. Heck, most of us can't afford it either, and we're envious of the person who scored a review copy of a cool board game or awesome gizmo. (Disclosure: that person is probably me.) So while we love telling you about all the cool stuff that's out there, I understand that as parents we all have limited budgets and we sometimes need help narrowing down our wishlists.

So to help you out, I've worked really hard to narrow down this list to five items that no kid should be without. All five should fit easily within any budget, and are appropriate for a wide age range so you get the most play out of each one. These are time-tested and kid-approved! And as a bonus, these five can be combined for extra-super-happy-fun-time.

1. Stick

What's brown and sticky? A Stick.

This versatile toy is a real classic — chances are your great-great-grandparents played with one, and your kids have probably discovered it for themselves as well. It's a required ingredient for Stickball, of course, but it's so much more. Stick works really well as a poker, digger and reach-extender. It can also be combined with many other toys (both from this list and otherwise) to perform even more functions.

Stick comes in an almost bewildering variety of sizes and shapes, but you can amass a whole collection without too much of an investment. You may want to avoid the smallest sizes — I've found that they break easily and are impossible to repair. Talk about planned obsolescence. But at least the classic wooden version is biodegradable so you don't have to feel so bad about pitching them into your yard waste or just using them for kindling. Larger, multi-tipped Sticks are particularly useful as snowman arms. (Note: requires Snow, which is not included and may not be available in Florida.)

As with most things these days, there are higher-end models of Sticks if you're a big spender, from the smoothly-sanded wooden models (which are more uniformly straight than the classic model) to more durable materials such as plastic or even metal. But for most kids the classic model should do fine. My own kids have several Sticks (but are always eager to pick up a couple more when we find them).

One warning: the Stick can also be used as a sword or club, so parents who avoid toy weapons might want to steer clear of the larger models. (On the other hand, many experts agree that creative children will just find something else to substitute for Stick, so this may be somewhat unavoidable.)

Although she is not generally known as a toy expert, Antoinette Portis has written this [helpful user manual](#) for those needing some assistance in using their Stick.

Wired: Finally, something that *does* grow on trees.

Tired: You could put someone's eye out.

Disclosure: I have received several samples of Sticks from one manufacturer for review.