

Earth Day Nature Play: Connecting with Trees

Trees play an important part in our world. Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day by helping your child learn about and connect with nature's lungs through the guided Nature Play activity.

Age: Families with children 8 years old or under

Gather your Gear

Optional materials:

- Paper and crayons
- Sidewalk chalk
- Binoculars
- Magnifying glass
- Spray bottle full of water

Get Ready *Get your child thinking about the activity before you head outside; this will help create connections during and after your exploration time.*

Close your eyes and picture a tree. Draw the tree from memory.

Briefly discuss the drawing and what parts of the tree were drawn.

Does your child not want to draw? Just discuss what image came to mind when he/she was imagining the tree.

Explore *Go outside in your yard or your local park and explore.*

Go on a walk through your neighborhood, nearby park or woods, or in your own backyard. Take the picture of the tree with you on the walk and use it to compare to the trees you see around you.

- Discuss the differences observed between the trees?
- Keep count of how many trees you find on your walk? Are they all the same species or different?

Choose a tree, preferably one in your own yard or somewhere you feel comfortable staying near for a while.

- Observe the tree. If you have binoculars, use them to see up to the top of the tree. If you have a magnifying glass, use that to get an up-close view of the bark and leaves.
- How does the tree compare and contrast to the tree drawn from memory?
- What type of tree is it? Do you think it is a young or old tree? Why?
- Do you see anything living in or on the tree?

Me and the tree. Encourage your child to compare his/her body parts to the tree. Ask what different parts of the tree are most like different parts of the human body.

- Roots —> Feet

- Do you see the roots? If so, place your own feet near the roots.
- Roots keep the tree sturdy and keep it in place in the ground. They also help keep the tree hydrated by soaking up water.
- Branches —> Arms
 - Hold your arms out like the branches.
- Bark —> Skin
 - Bark covers the tree and keeps it protected, just like your skin.
 - Touch the bark and get an up-close look at it. Next, feel your skin. Describe how each one feels.

Be the tree. Have your child stand like a tree. Make strong, sturdy roots with your feet. The torso will be the run of the tree. Stretch out the arms to be the branches. Fingers and hair can be the leaves.

- Stand like a tree while slowly breathing in and out.
 - Discuss that the leaves of trees and plants breathe in what you are breathing out. Humans and other animals breathe in oxygen and out carbon dioxide. Leaves breathe in the carbon dioxide and out the oxygen. We each give each other what the other needs!
- Move like a tree in the wind. While still pretending to be a tree, imagine a slight breeze is blowing through and move accordingly. What happens when the wind gets stronger?
- Pretend that it is raining. How does the tree react and move in the rain? What parts of the tree get the most rain?
 - Optional: use a spray bottle full of water and spray the child during this part!

Get crafty. While interacting and observing the tree, connect through arts and crafts.

- Make bark or tree rubbings.
 - Hold a piece of paper up to the bark or leaf. On the top of the paper, place a crayon horizontally on the and gentle rub up and down. Observe the pattern that is created.
 - Use different sections of the tree or different leaves to get different patterns.
- Leaf tracing.
 - Pick a fallen leaf and trace it on a sheet of paper. Draw in the details.
 - If you don't have crayons or paper, you can use sidewalk chalk or draw in the dirt.
- Shadow tracing.
 - Find the different shadows cast by the tree and trace them. You can use crayons and paper, sidewalk chalk, or just draw in the dirt.
 - Bonus: Come back to the same tree at a different time of day and see how the shadows have changed and where they have moved.

Recap *Have a conversation about what you saw and questions your child may have.*

- How many different trees did we find?
- What types of trees did we see? If you don't know, use an online nature guide to identify the trees.
- How do you think the bark/leaf/and shadow tracings would have been different if we used another tree?

- Why are trees important?

Relate *Create connections to the idea through activities.*

Grab your materials: Paper, construction paper, markers, crayons, or paint

Have your child create an artifact that they can share with others

- Write a poem or a letter about what your child saw and did while interacting with the tree. Get creative, decorate it, or draw an illustration to go with it.
- For younger children, have them draw a new picture of a tree incorporating the new things they learned and observed. Compare the before and after picture.