

14 Ways to Play and Learn in Nature with Young Children

A Special Place

Select a special place or a special tree and make a photograph or drawing of this place in each season of the year.

Record the dates in your journal along with the photographs or drawings. Describe the changes you notice throughout the year.

Finding Firsts

Watch for seasonal firsts:

- The first swollen green or red buds on trees.
- The first dandelion in the lawn or blooming flower in the garden.
- The first crocus, loon call, frog songs, butterfly, or buzzing bee.

Mark the dates on your calendar.

Check your Minnesota Weatherguide Environment Calendar™ for phenology information.

Tremendous Fun

In March, the maple sap is rising. Visit a nature center that has collection classes or demonstrations.

Celebrate maple trees with a pancake breakfast.

Play “I Spy.” How many items in your home come from trees? Did you eat any “tree food” today (nuts, fruit, chocolate, coffee)?

Color Hikes

To increase observational skills, look for colors in nature that are an exact match to a color in your clothing.

Find a really small or large, soft or hard, smooth or rough thing that exactly matches your clothing color.

Green colors are varied in spring and a challenge to match to a paint chip. Give it a try!

Are there still colors to find in winter? Yes!

Hide Out

Pretend you are a rabbit and find a good, safe hiding spot to spend the night.

Build a tree house or fort made of sticks piled against a big tree trunk.

Read a book about your hideout.

Read a book about animal homes.

Digging in Dirt

Plant a tree. Trees provide many gifts for us: beauty, shade, food, wood, oxygen, rubber, homes, and so much more. Thank a tree.

Use photos or drawings in your journal to record growth of your tree. Talk about the importance of good stewardship.

Evergreens, Silver Maple, Aspen, and Birch are fast-growing varieties to consider.

Fall Flavors

Visit an orchard to pick apples. What kind of apples are grown there? How do varieties differ? Then, do a taste test.

Visit a farm to pick pumpkins. Talk about the various shapes you see.

Make a pie from the fruit you gathered.

Fall Color Fling

Visit your local park to enjoy the fall leaf color.

Carefully collect different colors and shapes of leaves; dry them between pages of a heavy book; paste into your journal. Can you identify the types of trees?

Note in your journal the date of the brightest colors so you remember next year.

Rake the yard, then jump in the leaves. Compost them when you're finished jumping.

Visit [DNR Website](#) for Fall Color Finder

Draw a Tree

Suggested Grade Level: K – 2

Objective: Recognize that trees have different parts.

Directions: Draw a tree; label the parts you drew. Discuss the drawing with your students.

Discussion: Do all trees look the same? Do all trees have the same parts? What are the functions (jobs) of the different parts?

More Than Just Shade

Suggested Grade Level: 3 – 5

Objective: Categorize and brainstorm products that we get from trees.

Directions; Make tree product cards. Explain the products pictured come from trees and can be categorized into three groups (wood, paper, food). Sit with their group. On chart paper, create a chart that displays the three groups without labeling them. For each group, have them identify their category and list the products in their group. Brainstorm other products in their category.

Discussion: Why are trees important to our lives? Were you surprised by any of the products that came from trees? Which ones? Why? What can we do to be sure that we always have trees to create new products?

Branch Puzzles

Suggested Grade Level: K – 2

Objective: Assemble pieces of branches together to make whole branches.

Directions: Two – five 1-foot lengths of as many branches from different trees cut into multiple pieces. Allow for one piece per child. Use straight and angled cuts. Show pieces to students; discuss what they notice about the branches. Explain you have to cut pieces from # branches, pass out one piece per child. Instruct them to find the matching branch pieces and make groups according to branch type, then reassemble their branch.

Discussion: How could they tell their pieces belonged to the same tree? Which end was thicker and which was thinner? Which part of the branch do they think was connected to the tree? Why?

Parts of a Tree

Suggested Grade Level: K – 2

Objective: Act out a part of a tree.

Directions: Each child decides which part of a tree they will be: trunk stands tall; branch puts both arms out to the side or straight up, leaf will flutter fingers on both hands. While standing in a circle, choose one child to start the greeting. That child will turn to the child next to him/her and say, “Good morning, Tree Trunk/Branch/Leaf.” The greeted child will return the greeting and turn to the next child in the circle continuing the greeting. Continue around the circle until all children have been greeted.

Discussion: What are the parts of trees? What functions (jobs) do the different parts of trees have? Why?

Matching Leaves

Suggested Grade Level: K – 5

Objective: Determine leaf types.

Directions: Children stand in a circle and are given a real or cut-out leaf. Each must find a partner who has the same leaf type. After showing each other their matching leaf type (simple, lobed, or compound), they will greet each other and say, “Good morning, Simple Leaf! /Lobed Leaf! /Compound Leaf!”

Discussion: What are some differences between simple, lobed, and compound leaves? Do all lobed leaves look the same? What types of leaves do you have in your yard?

Great Growing Greeting

Suggested Grade Level: 3 – 5

Objective: Review five components of plant survival.

Directions: Explain there are five main components to survive. They will show an action representing one of the five components. Water: Pretend to drink a glass of water. Light: Raise arms overhead to show sun. Optimum temperature: hold arms in front of body and rub hands on arms. Nutrients: Rub stomach to show full belly. Space: Wave elbows around at their side to show elbow room. Each child chooses one component. On count of three, all do their chosen action. Then each child must find at least two other children doing the same action and say, “Good morning, (component)!”

Discussion: What component do you think is most important in helping a plant survive? How can we help plants that might not be getting all five survival components to grow?

Seedling Song (tune of “I’m a Little Teapot”)

I’m a little seedling in the ground.

Here are my roots and here is my crown.

Soon I will be grown up straight and tall.

Showering my leaves o’er one and all.

I will share my branches with the squirrels,
Birds, insects, bugs, and you as well.

When you take good care of me I will
Share of my fruits and nuts for your fill.

Lyrics by Deb Colling, PLT facilitator (2014)