

# 100+ NATURE PLAY IDEAS



**A collection of possibilities and fun**

**By**

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## Be a Playful Role Model<sup>1</sup>

- **Be curious.** Start spending time in the outside with your children. Get to know the greenspaces in your local area for potential visits. This can include woodland, leafy urban parks, moorland, beaches.
- **Get dirty.** Gardening and nature activities are hands-on. Soil, water and plants invariably end up on hands, clothing and shoes. Wear comfortable clothes that are up to the task and don't be afraid to get dirty.
- **Take time.** Spend as much or as little time on an activity as needed. You can always return to the task another day.
- **Use all your senses.** Let children experience the natural world with all their senses and explain when it's okay to touch or taste and when to check with an adult.
- **Handle with care.** Many nature and gardening activities involve touching plants and interacting with living creatures. Model how to handle living things with care and respect.
- **Be still.** Observing nature may require sitting quietly for a while. This does not come easily to every child. Start with a very short time period, such as one minute. Give the children some ideas, e.g. to see if they can see any insects in the grass, or watch the clouds passing by.
- **Garden anytime, anywhere.** If you do not have a garden, start with window boxes and bring nature indoors.
- **Encourage unstructured, spontaneous play.** Games are great, but time just for your children to "be" in nature on their own terms is also important.
- **Let your children play with natural materials as much as possible.** When playing outside, encourage your children to use the materials around them, such as sticks, stones, dead leaves and shells.
- **Be a positive role model.** Demonstrate through your words and actions that you care about nature and your local environment.
- **Nature play ideas** can also be found at:

The Nature Detectives website [www.naturedetectives.org.uk](http://www.naturedetectives.org.uk)  
The Wild Time app <http://wildtime.projectwildthing.com>  
Nature Play WA website

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<sup>1</sup> This section has been taken from The Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing website  
<http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/flourishing-lives.php?p=cGlkPTE3MyZpZD02NjQ>

# LEAF PLAY

Leaves are asking to be played with. Hours of fun can be had simply kicking leaves about and watching them float to the ground. Here's some other ideas...



## 1. Creep and Crunch

Have someone sit on a big bed of leaves with their eyes closed. Try and creep up on the person as quietly as possible without being heard. If you reach the person and touch him, then change places.

## 2. Guess the Leaf

Pick two leaves. Get a friend to close her eyes and feel one of the leaves. Then she can open her eyes and work out which leaf she felt.

## 3. Treasure Hunt

Make a pile of fallen leaves. Find some treasure to hide in it. This could be a conker, stick or even something man-made like a football. Then have fun burrowing into the leaf pile to find the treasure.

## 4. Sticky Leaves

Dampen a leaf and stick it on the bridge of your nose. See how long it can stay there without falling off. Experiment with different leaves to find out which works best.

## 5. Save a Leaf

Catch a leaf before it falls to the ground. It's a special job - only nature superheroes need try this. This is extra tough if villains chuck lots of leaves into the air. How will you catch them all?

## 6. The World's Strongest Leaf

Float a leaf on a puddle and see how many stones it can hold before it sinks or the stones slide off.

## 7. Leafy Wellies

On a wet day stick lots of leaves on your wellies. Which shape or leaf type works best?

## 8. Sew a Leaf

Use needles such as pine or spruce. Try sewing two leaves together. If it works, create a chain!

## 9. Leaf Twirling

Pick a leaf with a sturdy stem. Hold it between your thumb and index finger and rub them together to make the leaf twirl back and forth. This can be quite tricky to do with some leaves. Expert leaf twirlers can twirl two leaves in one hand at the same time!

## 10. Animal Impressions

How many different animals can you mimic using only leaves as props?

## 11. Colourful Leaves

Find the leaf with the most colours on it. Alternatively, look for as many different shades of colours, such as green.

## 12. Leaves in Boxes

How many leaves can fit into a match box? Make a note of which leaf species works best.

# STUCK ON STICKS

Sticks are possibly the most versatile play resource that nature ever invented...



## 1. Wishing Sticks

Find a small forked twig that is just the right size for you and a friend to grasp with your pinkies (little fingers). On the count of three start tugging until the twig snaps. Whoever gets the biggest piece of the twig gets to make a wish.

## 2. Stick Dogs

Tie a piece of string or twine to a short fat stick. This is now your dog to look after. Woof!

## 3. Pooh Sticks

Find a stick to drop over one side of a bridge. Go to the other side of the bridge and wait for it to appear. If you and a friend both do this, which stick appears first? Is it possible for both to arrive at the same time? Can you fix the results of this activity?

## 4. Stick Puppets

Draw a face on a flat stick. Put double-sided sticky tape on the back. Attach a leaf of your choice to make the hair and introduce yourself.

## 5. Nature Jigsaws

Find a twig. Break it into 3 pieces and give it to a friend to put back together. Try the same with a leaf. Stick the leaf pieces on a piece of paper. Create a funky mosaic.

## 6. Pick up Sticks

Everyone find a stick and put it into a pile in the middle of the circle. Take turns to remove a stick without disturbing any of the others.

## 7. Towers

Build a tower of sticks. Use only sticks lying on the ground. See how tall you can make the tower and estimate how many sticks you used. Then remove one stick at a time until it falls down. Remember to count as you go along.

## 8. Sticky Words

Use sticks to make your name or at least the first letter. What is the minimum number of sticks you can use? Add flowers and other objects to jazz up your stick name.

## 9. Build a mini den

If you make an animal or character then it will need a little den to live in. Will that be a teepee or a little house or a hole covered with sticks or something even better?

## 10. A walking stick

Find a stick that needs to go on a walk with you. Some sticks like to be used like a walking pole, others are quite happy to be carried along. Big sticks may need to be dragged along....

# SUNSHINE AND SHADOWS

The warmth of the sun can be welcome, particularly after a spell of cold weather. Remember to cover up or seek shade during the hottest parts of the day.



## 1. Shadow Boxing

No touch fighting! Your shadows do all the work. Add in stage effects such as reeling with a punch or faking a knockout. It's all about performance!

## 2. Shadow Jumpers

Stand behind a friend so that your shadow covers his. Stick a leg out. Your friend has to jump on that part of your shadow. If you stick your arm out and wiggle it your friend has to run and jump on it. Take turns and see who can react most quickly to each other's gestures.

## 3. Scare your Shadow

On a sunny day try and run away from your shadow. Is this possible? How can you make your shadow shrink to the smallest size possible or disappear altogether without hiding behind anything?

## 4. A Shadowy Alphabet

Try and make the different letters of the alphabet with your shadow. You may need another person to help you.

## 5. Shadow Tag

This is just like the real game except you have to make your shadow tag another person's shadow so it's a little more challenging.

## 6. Shadow Puppets

Find a stick. Add some other materials and turn it into a character for a shadow puppet show on the ground. Remember to include something gobbling up something else!

## 7. Synchronised Shadows

Stand where you and a friend can see your shadows with your backs to the sun. Do an action slowly such as raise your right arm. Your friend copies your action. Take it in turns to do different moves and try only to look at the shadows when you do this. Bring in more friends for synchronized shadow dancing as you get better

## 8. A Shadow Walk

Jump on every static shadow that you pass. A static shadow is one that does not move. Practice your landing pose.

## 9. Catch the Sun

Using a magnifying glass, capture the sun's rays. Try burning holes in a piece of paper. You may need to move the magnifying glass up and down a bit. Only do this if an adult is supervising and where you can't set anything else alight.

## 10. Shadow monsters

What monster shapes can you make with your shadow? Which Pokémon creature are you most like?

# BASKING ON BEACHES

## 1. Dig to Australia

Dig a hole. Dig some more. Keep digging until you reach Australia. Watch the tide doesn't come in when you are down under! If reach Australia then dig to China – apparently that's where their holes end up.



## 2. Sand Hills

Make a big hill of sand. Have fun jumping on and off it. Add water and create channels and waterfalls. Put a moat around the edge and fill it with water.

## 3. Another Place

Become an Anthony Gormley sculpture. Stand still. Look far out to sea and be very serious. Get a friend to take a photo of you. If you are really keen, bury your legs up to your knees before the photo is taken.

## 4. Beach Trails

Take your foot for a wander over the beach. Drag it along to make a trail in the sand for someone else to follow. Make waves, spirals and other interesting patterns. Make a squiggle in the sand. Put shells, stones or other flotsam and jetsam on top to make interesting beach art.

## 5. Plank the Beach

Planking is a craze. You lie face down, body straight, hands by your side and feet together. How many places can you safely plank? On a rock? The sand? Your picnic box?

## 6. Walk Like an Egyptian

Look at video clips about sand dancing and make up your own repertoire for the beach!

## 7. Hide and Seek

Hide or bury objects in sand. This can be shells, seaweed or twigs, etc. (NB Burying your mobile phone is not a good idea). Have fun finding the hidden objects.

## 8. Bottle a Beach

Collect some interesting objects from the shoreline that can be pushed into a bottle. Fill three-quarter full with dry sand. Try and spot every treasure hidden within the bottle – tip up, down, sideways to have a good look. Add a message on a piece of paper to read.

## 9. The Smallest Shell

Have a hunt for the smallest shell on the beach. Broken shells must not be counted as some sand is made up of lots of broken shells.

## 10. Big Word Art

Write the biggest word you can possibly make in the sand. Think about how you can make this stand out and be read by passengers in a plane.

## 11. Sand Dungeons

These are the opposite of sand castles. Instead of building up, dig down and create a dungeon with different rooms and other features, sunk into the sand. Put a dragon in the deepest pit! Watch out very carefully for the incoming tide – build your dungeon above the high tide line.

# SHELLS

Every shell can be an exciting discovery for a child.



## 1. Can You Work Out the Age of your Shells?

Like snails, the spiral-shaped shells give an indication of the age of the animal that lives inside. With bi-valve shellfish such as cockles, try counting the number of rings. This can be easier if you have a magnifying glass to look at the shell.

## 2. The Smallest Shell

Have a hunt for the smallest shell on the beach. Broken shells must not be counted as some sand is made up of lots of broken shells. This can be an ongoing challenge. Likewise invent other shell hunting challenges:

- The prettiest shell
- The shell that has the most interesting face
- The shell with the greatest range of colours
- Rather than sort shells by the usual attributes such as colour, size, species, see if anyone can invent other ways of classifying the shells found.

## 3. Shell Stacks and Arches

Shell stacking is similar to stone stacking but on a miniature scale. They are a little simpler to balance. The other challenge is to see how many shells can fit inside another shell – shells within shells. You can also try making shell arches, as the shells do have a natural tendency to lean over.

## 4. Listen to the Sea

If you hold a big shell to your ear you should be able to hear the sea. It works best with big whelks. As a child, my older sister and I would role play for hours going to the beach and this is how we pretended we were there.

## 5. See if it's Possible to Make a Shell Float

There may be a trick or knack to this that you learn and can share with others. For example does it matter which way up it is placed on a pool of water?

## 6. Make Pairs

Sometimes you are lucky enough to find shells that are still attached to make a pair. However another ongoing challenge is to find the matching half of shell. It's a nice way to illustrate the subtle differences between shells that may be the same species but still differ.

## 7. Silver Shells

One way to examine shell patterns is to rub tin foil over them or to wrap up shells in foil and rub them so that the pattern emerges. Very often children don't notice the texture because the shape and colours dominate. By pressing shells into sand, you can also examine the imprints they leave.

## 8. Don't drop the shell!

This is a nice beach race. Everyone who enters needs a spade. They have to dig and lift a spade full of dry sand. Then a shell is put on top of each spadeful of sand and everyone races to an agreed line or marker. If your shell becomes dislodged you must stop and put it back on.

# A WINTER WONDERLAND



## 1. A Headless Snowman

Make a snowman without a head. Then take turns to stand behind the snowman as if your head belongs to the snowman. Have a range of props such as wigs, hats, scarves, sunglasses to wear. Take photos of each other doing different poses.

## 2. Roll it up

Make the biggest snowball possible whilst creating a maze or interesting pattern of grass to follow afterwards. Does the size of the snowball relate to the length of the path created?

## 3. Guess the object

Look at different things covered with snow and guess what they are. Go back once the snow has melted and see if you recognise the feature.

## 4. Snow Sculptures

Most people just build snowmen. Make a snow dragon, or a monster instead. The possibilities are endless. Build a miniature yeti or just his giant pair of shoes to stand in.

## 5. White Hunter

Collect together and hide a range of white objects in the snow. Can your friends find what you have hidden? Are all the objects truly as white as snow?

## 6. Funny footprints

Think up new and different footprint tracks in the snow. Instead of walking along, try jumping with both feet together or hopping. Do the hop-scotch. Walk sideways. Skate along and try not to leave a gap between your footprints. Do a funny dance.

## 7. Track animals

Animal and birds leave trails and tracks. Find some tracks and follow them. Do this quietly to avoid frightening any thing or anyone.

## 8. Disappearing magic pictures

Draw a picture with felt-tipped pens onto a piece of white paper. Turn it face down and rub it hard onto freshly fallen snow. When you lift up the paper, see if the picture has disappeared.

## 9. Catch a snowflake

Snowflakes are incredibly beautiful. Black cardboard can work well for catching snowflakes when it is snowing. Have magnifying glasses ready to look up close at any which land on the card.

## 10. Snow angels

As demonstrated in the photo, lie on your backs and move your arms up and down and your legs in and out. These can be decorated with grass, berries and other found objects if you want.

# LET'S ROCK!

Everyone needs a rock. Enjoy endless hours of play in the forest, in your back garden, at park...



## 1. Find your Perfect Rock

It will be not too big and not too small. It will smell right and feel fine. It may be a life long quest.

## 2. Pebble Toss

Create a hole or circle. Each player needs 5 stones. Take it in turns to toss a pebble into the hole or circle. The person with the most stones in the hole wins.

## 3. Shades of Grey

How many different colours of rock can you find? Build up a rainbow of rocks, sorted according to colour. Is the colour related to size, hardness or any other property of a pebble?

## 4. Trails

Make a trail of stones that lead to something interesting. Put a little treasure or surprise to let others know they've found the spot!

## 5. Which Hand?

Hide a pebble in one of your hands. Hold out both fists. Let a friend guess which hand the pebble is in. Take turns and let your friend hide the pebble in one of her hands too.

## 6. Stone Stacks

Build a stack of stones. This can be extra interesting if they are built near the sea and the tide comes in around them. Will yours survive?

## 7. Returning Rocks

Go for a walk and collect stones. Then go back and try and remember where they all came from – can you put them back in the same place you found them?

## 8. Sound Keeper

Find two pebbles and tap them together to create a simple rhythm. Play hide 'n' seek but guide people to where you are hidden by your tap-tapping. People who find you should sit quietly beside you and wait for the others. They should tap the same rhythm too.

## 9. A Pebble Walk

Take a pebble for a walk. Photograph it hanging out in different locations. Where does it look most at home? On a wall? On the beach? Or some other place? Can you recognise it when hidden amongst other pebbles?

## 10. Make a Miniature Drystone Wall

This is a wall that is made without cement. The stones carefully laid together keep the wall stable. Experiment with small flat stones. Look at brickwork in houses and garden walls to see how to make a strong wall. Put those jigsaw skills to work!

# WET, WONDERFUL WATER

There can never be enough time to spend near water – a puddle, stream, bath, the sea or lake. Enjoy these activities...



## 1. Whirlpools

Swirl a stick around very quickly to make a whirlpool. Add a Lego man and see what happens...

## 2. Pan for Gold

Scoop up a handful of sand in a shallow dish and swirl it around submerged beneath the water. The lighter grains will tip out and wash away leaving the heavier particles in the dish. Use a finger to sift through the material to see if gold is there! Add fool's gold if you really want to surprise your friends.

## 3. Build a Little Boat

Find material which floats, such as bark. Leaves threaded onto twigs make good sails. Make the boat move in still water by poking it with a stick.

## 4. Shrinking Puddle Art

On a hot day, draw a line around the edge of a puddle with a stick or a piece of chalk. Go back a while later and see if the puddle has shrunk. If you do this every hour you can keep drawing around the puddles. Draw funky lines and patterns between the rings.

## 5. Sing a Song of Puddles

Invent a puddle song and dance to do around a puddle. For example "The Hokey Cokey" song where you put your right foot in, your right foot out, etc.

## 6. Puddle Splash

Try and splash all the water out of a puddle. How long does it take?

## 7. Stone Drops

Drop a flat stone or 2p coin into a clear puddle or small pond. Watch it sink. Now find some smaller stones and see if you can get one to land perfectly on top.

## 8. Dam a Stream

If there is a small stream or creek then see if you can block or divert the flow. If you are particularly successful you may have to remove the dam before you leave. It's worth finding out tips and tricks from beavers – find out online how they build dams.

## 9. The Music of the Rain

Put a plastic or tin bowl on top of your head and listen to the raindrops landing on it. Compare this to the sound of rain landing on an umbrella. Try and tap dance in time to the rhythm of the raindrops.

## 10. Rain Dancers

Chose a wet day. Dress up in waterproof clothing. Grab an umbrella and get those rain dance routines perfected. Remember puddles make great wet stages for a good rain stomp.

# MESSING WITH MUD



## 1. Mud Mapping

Find all the muddy places nearby. Look for hidden nooks and crannies between rocks. Check near puddles. Test each mud patch and rate in terms of squelch, ooze and stickiness. Mark each spot on a map.

## 2. Dinosaur Swamp

If you have a pocketful of dinosaurs then let them hang out in the mud for a while. Like hippos, they enjoy wallowing in mud. Put little twigs, ferns and big leaves sticking upright. This creates a miniature “Jurassic Park”.

## 3. Missing Mud

How can you make a patch of mud go away?

## 4. Muddy Feet

On hot days it can be very cooling to let your feet have a mud bath. Watch them dry and crack in the sun before washing off in a stream or under water. Make muddy footprints.

## 5. Mud Pie Masterchef

Some make pies. Others make soup. Lots like stew. Whatever you like to eat, it can be made in a mud kitchen. Hot chocolate anyone?

## 6. Drippy Castles

Scoop up a handful of wet, dripping mud. Turn your hand upside down. Let the mud drip through your fingers and thumb to the ground. Soon little mound will form which will grow in size as you add more drippy mud. Real mud experts will be able to create little mud spires and peaks. Make a line or circle of drippy castles.

## 7. Flat as a Pancake

Make your mud patch as smooth as a skating rink. Then decide how you are going to mess it up...

## 8. Mud Between the Toes

Find a patch of mud to walk through in your bare feet. How can you make the mud ooze between your toes? Is it possible to leave no trace of where you have been?

## 9. Mud Cracking

Smear mud on some rocks, on a hot day. Leave it to dry and watch the cracks appear.

## 10. Muddy printing

On old pieces of plain cotton, have fun creating pictures. These could be handprints, footprints, stick prints, leaf prints. If you put masking tape on the cotton first, then remove after they have been covered in mud you get interesting line work.

# DARK TIMES

## 1. Shiny, Happy People

Decorate yourself with lots of reflective material, glow sticks, freebie wrist bands and dangly reflectors. Make sure that you really light up the streets when cars pass or you walk under a lamp.



## 2. Become Invisible

Is it true that if you close your eyes you become invisible? Does it depend upon whether it's night or day? Experiment with a friend.

## 3. Light Trails

Along a path or in your outdoor space, hide reflective bands and discs. Let your friends see if they can find the exact amount by searching for them with torches.

## 4. Free the Light

Torches and candles stop our eyes from adjusting to the dark. Go for a light free walk and see the world of darkness.

## 5. Catch a Moth

In the summer months, catch a moth by shining a torch into a bright white container. Release the moths once you've had a good look.

## 6. Watch the Sunset or the Sunrise

There is something very exciting about watching the sun come up or go down. Is it possible to find a place in your area where you get a good view of both the sun rising and the sun setting? Have a picnic and hot drink to keep warm.

## 7. See the Stars Appear

The best way to learn about the stars is to watch them appear on a clear night just after the sun sets. Get a comfy insulation mat, lie down on your back and watch the show! Look out for man-made flying objects and UFOs too. Bring a swag bag or sleeping bag to keep warm!

## 8. Nocturnal Minibeasts

Use a torch and lift up logs and stones. Look underneath. There may be lots of minibeast activity happening.

## 9. Moonlight Shadows

On a bright clear winter's night when there is a full moon or thereabouts, go for a walk in a park or other place where you can look at the shadows made by the moon.

## 10. Experience the Silence

Is it quieter at night than during the day? Go to a favourite place. Find a comfy spot to sit and listen for a few minutes.

# A MOTTLEY COLLECTION

This is a random collection of other ideas gathered over the years.

## 1. Nature Colours

Find an object in nature that matches each colour on your clothes. Next time you go outside, think about which colours would work best for this challenge.

## 2. How Much Blue?

How much blue is in the sky? Enough to make a sailor's suit? Or just his buttons? Or perhaps enough for a hat?

## 3. And this Season's Colours are...

Which is the most popular colour of flower? Go for a walk and take photos or count the number of different species of different colours. What range of flower colours exist? Try and find a rainbow of flowers where you find one that is red, another that is orange, another that is yellow, etc.

## 4. Memory Games

Collect some interesting natural objects with a friend and put them in a line. Close your eyes whilst your friend removes an object. Open your eyes and guess which object is missing. Then swap roles.

## 5. Nature Rattles

Pop an object like an acorn into a toilet tube. Staple one end together. Staple the other end at a right angle. Give it a shake. See if others can guess what's inside.

## 6. Hunt the Hat

If you have a hat, take it in turns to hide the hat for each other to find. The hat can be put on the ground, in a tree, up on a wall, or even on someone's head.

## 7. Sow a Seed

If you find some seeds when outside, push them into the ground wherever you are. Go back in a few months and to the same spot and see if anything has grown.

## 8. Human Spinning Tops

Find a space where the ground is nice and soft. Stretch out your arms and spin around at least ten times or until you are nice and dizzy. Then try walking in a straight line.

## 9. Magnifying Nature

Take photos of different objects close up and far away. Print them out and get a friend to match them up.

## 10. Forest Faces

Look for faces in the forest. Each tree will have a face hidden on it somewhere. For example, the eyes might be where two branches have broken off. The mouth might be a hole in the trunk just below. Are trees generally friendly or fierce?

## 11. Being followed

Sometimes objects have eyes that follow you... look for things around you that look like a pair of eyes watching you.

## **12. Make Grass Whistle**

Find a wide blade of grass. Stretch the blade between the bone joints of your thumbs. Kiss both top knuckles and as you do so, blow gently through the small gap where the blade of grass is fixed.

## **13. Mini Tug-of-War**

You and a friend each need a blade of grass, the longer the better. Each person makes a loop with their blade, giving the ends to the other person to hold between their thumb and index finger. Loop each person's blade together. On the count of three start tugging. See whose blade breaks first.

## **14. Ambush**

Run ahead of your group or family and hide near the path. When the adults or your friends pass by, jump out and say "Boo!" Try to avoid being seen before you do this.

## **15. Follow your Nose**

Go for a walk and move wherever you point your nose. If you are worried about getting lost, take a map or GPS and trace your path as you go.

## **16. A Penny Walk**

Every time you come to a junction, flip a coin. Heads you turn right. Tails you turn left. If there is a choice of more than two directions then take turns to flip the coin between the choices. It can be interesting to see if you end up in a dead end or find a place you have never visited.

## **17. Walking Footie**

Kick an object along the path or pavement as you walk. Just watch out for busy cars and pedestrians. They may get upset if you kick something at them. See how far you can kick yet keep the object on the path

## **18. Foggy String**

On a really foggy day, tie a piece of string to a place you know. Unravel the string as you move to a place where you can't see anyone and are alone. What does this feel like?

## **19. Get Blown about by Wind!**

On a windy day find an open space like a park. Have fun running into and away from the wind. What can you do to make both more fun? Some people enjoy using an umbrella. Others open up their jackets as wings...

## **20. Noisy Wind**

On a really windy day stand or sit directly facing the wind. Listen to the noise it makes as it rushes by. Then turn your head to one side. The windy noise should disappear. Turn your face back into the wind and the noise increases. Can you work out why this happens?

**For many more ideas, visit Juliet's blog:**

**I'm a teacher, get me OUTSIDE here!**

<http://creativestarning.co.uk/blog>

**Over 700 posts all about outdoor play and learning**