

Explorers Curriculum for
Toddlers and Twos

Neighborhood Creatures



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Let's Explore Neighborhood Creatures

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Let's Explore Neighborhood Creatures

No matter where you live, it's likely that there are some familiar animals to learn about. Children might spot dog walkers on the move or cats sleeping in house windows on walks or buggy rides. Wilder creatures like songbirds and squirrels may visit feeders or nest in nearby trees. Butterflies and other insects are neighborhood creatures, too.

Many young children are fascinated by living things that are part of their immediate world. They notice the sounds they make and how they move and behave. They seem curious about animal features, like eyes, noses, paws, wings, and tails. As children tune in to animals around them, they hone observation skills and construct knowledge. They learn about kindness and empathy as they notice how people care for and connect with animals, too.

This topic might be a fit for your group if -

- You've noticed that children are eager to spot neighborhood creatures through the window or the playground fence.
- You've heard children asking questions or talking about creatures that they often see.
- Children pretend to be cats, dogs, or other creatures as part of their play.

Let's Talk About Neighborhood Creatures

Use words like these during everyday conversations with children.

pet
leash
collar
nest
shelter
paws
fur
wings
feathers

Names for specific types of animals: toad, pigeon, chipmunk, cricket, and so on

Familiar animal sounds: meow, woof, chirp, buzz, and so on



Getting Ready to Explore Neighborhood Creatures

With your teaching team, think about, and discuss the following questions.

- **What experiences have children had so far? And, what new experiences seem most possible?**

Neighborhood Creatures is a broad topic, but that doesn't mean you should plan to focus on all of the creatures. Instead, focus mostly on creatures that are a significant part of daily life where you are.

Many children may have pets at home, and pets may be visible in the neighborhood around your program. Birdfeeders or flowering plants can attract birds and insects for children to see. If your program is in an urban area, you might spot pigeons or squirrels. On the other hand, if your program is located near a wooded area, you might see rabbits, woodpeckers, or even deer. Some programs may even have farm animals to visit and view.

- **What do children seem most curious about?**

Consider zooming in on creatures of special interest. For example, you might focus on pets, songbirds, or insects.

Once you've decided which kinds of creatures your group is most interested in, notice what questions they seem to have. For example, children in your group might be especially curious about how animals move, what they eat, or how they care for their young. Let your observations and conversations with children be your guide as you choose experiences to share.

- **What are our learning goals for individual children and the group as a whole?**

As you plan, consider the words, skills, and concepts that children can learn and strengthen through their play. Choose experiences that support specific objectives for learning. Strive to create well-rounded plans that support all domains of development.



Let families know the group seems interested in certain neighborhood creatures. Invite them to tell about their child's experiences at home.

Invitations to Explore Neighborhood Creatures

Use the ideas on the following pages to set the stage for open-ended exploration through play. These unhurried play invitations will follow a simple cycle.

- 1. Adults gather and offer interesting materials for children to explore.**
We make space for the materials and schedule ample time for exploration. We ensure that children have access to each play invitation many times over days or weeks.
- 2. Children take the lead as they experiment and explore.**
Supervision and guidance are provided to protect safety, but children are welcome to follow their own interests and use materials in their own ways.
- 3. Adults notice when children want to interact with them.**
A child might point to something, offer a play object, ask a question, or invite us to play. As we talk with children, we often pause to give them time to think and respond. We make time for meaningful, back-and-forth interactions with each child.
- 4. Over time, adults make subtle changes to enhance and extend play.**
We might add a few more materials or change how the materials are arranged in the space. These choices are guided by observations of children and are intended to help children satisfy play urges, construct knowledge, and deepen their understanding.



Seed for Birds

Let's investigate birdseed and then offer it to our neighborhood creatures. Will birds and squirrels come to eat?

Materials

- Tube-style bird feeder
- Scoops and cups, such as empty playdough canisters, laundry detergent scoops and caps, and/or small cups
- Plastic dish tubs or other wide, shallow containers
- Wild bird seed
- Hand brooms and dustpans

Safety Spotlight

Although birdseed is non-toxic, direct supervision is needed to redirect children who try to eat the seed and/or respond to slippery spills.

Fill the bottom of each container with birdseed. Provide containers that children can fill and empty as they investigate the seed. This experience begins with an unhurried opportunity to scoop and pour, fill and empty. Later, you'll introduce the bird feeder and invite children to help you fill it.

Play and Investigation Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children explore the birdseed. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Run their fingers through the seed or bury their hands in the seed.

Lift and scatter handfuls of seed.

Fill containers with seed, empty them, and fill them again.

Shake or stir seed-filled containers to make noise.

Experiment with pouring seed from one container to another.

Look very closely at the tiny seeds and smell or taste them.

Helpful Hint

Rinse laundry detergent scoops and lids thoroughly before you use them. This helps remove traces of soap that can irritate children's skin or eyes.

Seed for Birds (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their investigation, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Describe what you see children doing using words like *scooping* and *pouring*.
- Describe the color, shape, size, and texture of the birdseed. Notice the size and shape of scoops.
- Talk about *empty* and *full*. Count how many small scoops it takes to fill a larger container.
- Offer new tools to explore, such as funnels, spoons, small storage canisters with twist-off lids, and/or handheld sand rakes.
- Plan ahead to share your seed with birds. Together, think about what kinds of birds might eat the seed.
- If spills occur, invite children to use hand brooms and dustpans to help clean up. Remind children that cleaning up spills helps keep every safe. Celebrate teamwork.

Next Steps

After children have had plenty of time to play with the birdseed, place the empty bird feeder in one of the containers. Invite interested children to use scoops to help you fill it. The feeder can be hung outside your window or in a location where it can be seen from your outdoor play area. Invite children to notice animals that visit the feeder.

Scattering seed is fun, too! Children can scatter handfuls of leftover seed for ground-feeding birds. This may even become a new daily tradition.

Including Every Explorer

Remove discarded scoops and set them near (but not in) the seed. This helps create an uncluttered play area and encourages children to choose tools intentionally. Provide extra supervision for more impulsive children so that you can redirect unsafe behaviors right away.

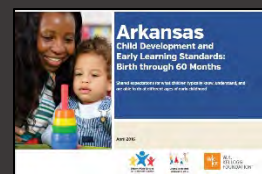
This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Cognitive Development – CD 1.1, CD1.2, CD2.1, CD 2.3

Physical Development and Health – PH2.1, PH2.2, PH3.2

Mathematical Thinking – MT 1.2, MT 3.1

Scientific and Technology - ST1.1, ST3.1



Window Watching Area

Let's create a comfortable place where children can look out the window. What will they see?

Materials

Your physical space will determine your choice of materials. Here are some possibilities.

- Covered crib mattress, soft bath mats, or vinyl-covered tumbling mat placed in front of floor-level windows
- A low, sturdy step stool placed in front of traditional windows (To reduce the risk of accidents, a stool should only raise the child's head and shoulders above the windowsill.)
- Flowering plants, hummingbird or songbird feeders, birdbath, or other engaging things to look at, placed just outside the window
- A basket of board books and/or realistic photos that show things children can see through the window
- For older two-year-olds, child-safe binoculars and/or camera

Get down on the floor to consider the window from the children's level. What can they see? How can this space be made more comfortable and more conducive to looking through the window? Arrange and equip a window watching space that children can choose and use freely during play.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children use the window watching area. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Touch and pat on the glass. Press their foreheads or cheeks to the glass.
Slow down to gaze quietly out the window.
Point to, or talk about, things they see outside.
Wave to people or animals outside.
Make connections between books or photos and things they see outside.

Window Watching Area (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their investigation, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Talk about things that children notice outside the window. When neighborhood creatures are spotted, name them and describe what they are doing. “The squirrel is swishing her big, bushy tail. She’s looking right at us.”
- Wonder aloud. “I see a man walking his dog. I wonder what that dog’s name is?” Pause to give children time to think and respond.
- Notice the weather and signs of changing seasons. Talk about what this means for neighborhood creatures.
- Notice how the sun shines through the window. Experiment with shadows.
- Invite interested children to look at books or photos with you. Read informally with just one or two children, inviting them to turn the pages and point to things in the book that interest them.
- Occasionally add something new to the area for children to discover. For example, try placing a halved orange or a spoonful of jam on a plate to feed ants and butterflies. Or, hang a nesting ball with fibers that birds can gather as they build nests.

Including Every Explorer

Think about whether the window watching area can be used by all of the children. If needed, find an alternative location where windows are at floor level. For example, you might use tumbling mats to create a window watching area in a gym. You might take small groups of interested children to a window watching area in a hallway or lobby. You might even consider building a low platform with ramps to make a window accessible to children with limited mobility.

This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Cognitive Development – CD 2.1, CD2.4

Language Development – LD1.1, LD2.1, LD3.1

Emergent Literacy – EL1.1, EL1.2, EL3.1

Science and Technology - ST1.1, ST3.1

Social Studies - SS1.1, SS2.2



Toy Insect Hunt

Let's search for toy insects. Where can they be?

Materials

- Large, plastic insects
- Small nets, pails, or other containers for collecting (optional)

This play experience can take place indoors or outdoors. Before children arrive, put toy insects in unexpected places around your play space. For example, you might place one on a low windowsill and another next to a basket of blocks. Toy insects might peek out from under cushions, perch on the backs of chairs, or nestle next to potted plants.

You can either invite children to help you find the insects or let them discover them on their own.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children explore the toy insects. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Notice toy insects and seem surprised.
Point to the toy insects or show them to someone.
Investigate and talk about features of toy insects, such as wings, legs, and mandibles.
Gather toy insects and carry them around. Collect toy insects in nets or other containers.
Arrange toy insects in piles or lines.
Pretend that toy insects are real by making buzzing sounds, pretending that they bite or sting, pretending to feed them, and so on.
Hide toy insects for someone else to find.

Helpful Hint

This experience is not appropriate if any child in your group is afraid of toy insects. Instead, you might substitute another kind of toy animal. Or, try a less frightening prop, such as laminated paper butterflies.

Toy Insect Hunt (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their investigation, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Use specific names for insects, such as *grasshopper*, *ladybug*, and *beetle*.
- Invite a child to tell where they found an insect. Emphasize spatial relationships. “Oh! You found the bumblebee *next to our cubbies!*”
- Encourage children to look closely. Use interesting words like *hidden* and *search*.
- With an interested child, count insects that have been collected in piles or lines.
- Point out insects’ colors, patterns, and features. Notice how insects are the same and different. “The dragonfly and the butterfly both have wings.”
- Follow the child’s lead in pretend play. Toddlers and twos often like to repeat simple play actions over and over.
- Invite a child to hide an insect for you to find. Think out loud as you search: “Is the caterpillar behind the bookshelf? No, it’s not behind the bookshelf. Where else could it be?”
- Invite children to look for similar insects in photos or books.
- Older two-year-olds may want to sort insects. Notice and talk with them about their work.

Including Every Explorer

Adjust the complexity of the experience to suit the abilities of your group. Announcing a bug hunt can generate enthusiasm, but the oldest and fastest children may find all the toys. Allowing children to discover insects gradually over time may be a better fit for groups with varying ages and abilities.

This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Cognitive Development - CD1.2, CD2.1, CD3.2

Language Development - LD1.1, LD2.1

Mathematical Thinking – MT1.2, MT2.1, MT4.1

Science and Technology - ST3.1

Creativity and Aesthetics – CA3.1



Real Insect Hunt

Let's look for real insects. Are there any insects that we can keep and care for, just for a little while?

Materials

- A fenced area where children can safely search for insects.
- A bug box and cotton balls (optional)
- Magnifying glasses (optional)
- Realistic books about insects (optional)

Before inviting children to look for insects, visit the outdoor space on your own. What possibilities do you see? Insects can often be spotted in the grass along walls, around the trunks of trees and flowering plants, and under rocks or stepping stones.

Invite interested children to search for insects with you. Some children may prefer to run and play in other ways, and that's OK.

Safety Spotlight

Teach young children to first look without touching when they find an insect. This protects children from bites and stings and also protects insects from rough treatment. An adult can help children learn which insects are safe and show them how to handle them very gently. "Touch with just one finger" is one way to encourage gentle touch.

Investigation Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children explore insect habitats. You may see children investigate in some of these ways.

Lean in for a closer look.
Use their fingers to move grass or to search in other ways.
Point to or talk about insects they find. Name or describe insects.
Wonder about insects, asking questions, or showing curiosity in other ways.
Remember where an insect was found before and return to look there again.
Talk to insects to say hello, provide reassurance, and so on.

Real Insect Hunt (cont.)

More to Do with Older Two's

Older two-year-olds can help gently collect an insect to place in a bug box. Invite children to gather leaves, twigs, and other natural materials to create a comfortable home for their insect. Cotton balls can be soaked in water and squeezed out so that they are damp but not drippy. This allows insects to drink safely. Insects in bug boxes can be brought in for observation but should be released where you found them at the end of each day.

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their investigation, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Use specific names for insects, such as *ant*, *caterpillar*, and *cricket*.
- Talk about where insects are found, emphasizing spatial relationships. “There’s a tiny beetle on the stem of this sunflower. It’s crawling up the stem.”
- Encourage children to look closely. Point out insects’ colors, patterns, and features.
- Think together about what insects are doing. “These roly-poly bugs are nestled in the cool, damp soil by the wall. Do you think they’re trying to stay out of the hot sun?”
- Model and teach children to treat insects gently and kindly.
- Talk with children about safety as needed. “Praying mantises bite. We can look without touching.”
- Look for insects you’ve found in books and photographs.
- Show two-year-olds how to use simple, child-safe magnifying glasses. Invite them to draw pictures to tell about finding insects. Write children’s comments on their drawings. “You said, ‘This is a little bug with wings.’”

Including Every Explorer

Look for spontaneous opportunities to investigate real insects with the youngest toddlers. A buggy ride is one way to look for insects with very young toddlers and children with limited mobility.

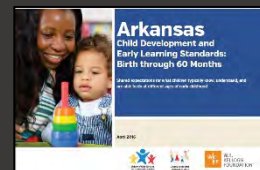
This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Cognitive Development - CD1.1, CD2.2, CD2.3, CD2.4

Physical Development and Health - PH3.2

Language Development - LD1.1, LD2.1, LD3.1

Science and Technology - ST2.1, ST3.1



Creature Cards

Let's look at photos of Arkansas wildlife. How will we use these in our play?

Materials

- Creature Cards from this curriculum, laminated or covered with clear Contact Paper
- Velcro strips (optional)

Place the Creature Cards in a basket where children can reach and use them. You could also use Velcro to attach the cards to a wall or the side of a low shelf. This invites children to pull the cards off, carry them around, and place them back again.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children explore the creature cards. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Pull all of the cards out of the basket or off of the wall.
Explore cards by mouthing, sliding, or shaking them.
Gather cards in piles.
Carry cards around.
Place cards in other containers - such as a toddler purse or shoebox.
Arrange cards in stacks or lines.
Show cards to someone. Tell or ask about animal names.
Make animal noises or mimic animal actions.
Notice animal features such as eyes and tails. Some two-year-olds may sort cards.

Helpful Hints

If children show intense interest in these cards, look for similar sets in the [Explorers Preschool Curriculum](#). There, you'll find insect, bird, leaf, and flower cards to expand your collection! You can also use pictures cut from magazines and old catalogs to make laminated photos of pets or other neighborhood creatures.

Creature Cards (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their investigation, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Allow children to use the cards any way they want. Some children will focus on the photos. Others may be more interested in exploring the physical properties of the cards by tossing them, tapping them together, or using them in other ways.
- Listen and respond to children’s comments. Lean in, nod, and show you’re listening in other ways.
- Point out and talk about animal colors, patterns, and features. “It looks like this raccoon has a mask around her eyes.”
- Make connections between photos. “A fox has fur. Do you see any other animals with fur?”
- Think together about what animals might be doing in the photos. “Spider has spun a web. Now she’s waiting. What do you think will happen next?”
- Model running your finger under the words on the cards as you read the animal names.
- Make a second set of cards to use for matching.
- Invite children to help find and return the cards at the end of playtime.

Including Every Explorer

Photo cards can be enlarged to make them easier to handle. Long, wide strips of Velcro can be used to enable children with limited use of hands to reattach photos without having to line them up precisely. Or, add long strips of magnetic tape to the photo cards to attach them to a large sheet pan. Sturdy tape tabs can also be added to the photo edges to make them easier to pull off the display.

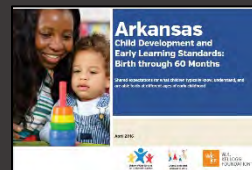
This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Physical Development and Health – PH2.1

Emergent Literacy – EL1.1, EL3.1, EL3.2

Mathematical Thinking - MT1.1, MT1.2, MT2.1

Science and Technology - ST3.1





rabbit



toad



squirrel



fox



deer



lizard



turtle



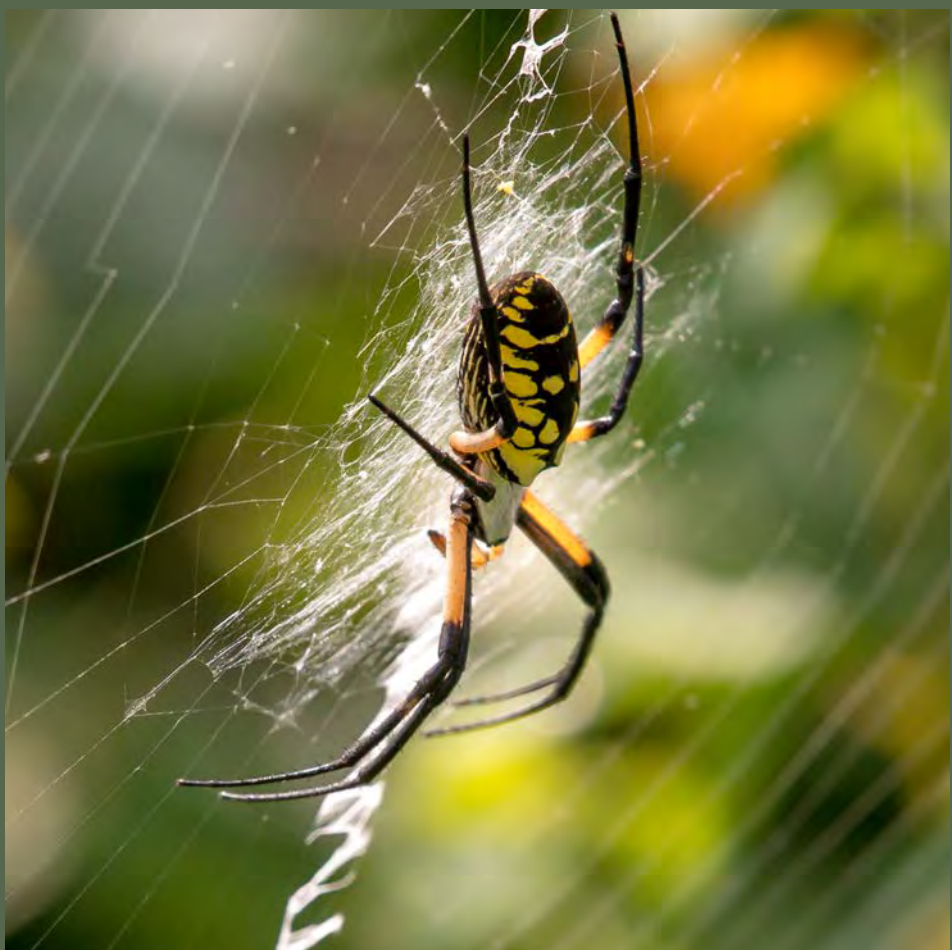
frog



raccoon



opossum



spider



skunk

Pet Care Prop Box

Cats and dogs are familiar neighborhood creatures for many children. What do they know about caring for pets?

Materials

- Soft stuffed toy cats and dogs
- Pet food bowls
- Beds and blankets for pets
- Other toddler-safe props such as soft brushes, small pet carriers, and clean dog toys

Arrange the pets and props in a space that children use for dramatic play.

Safety Spotlight

Leashes are not recommended as a play prop for toddlers and twos. If collars are used, they should be too small to fit around a child's neck and free of any small pieces that can be removed.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children explore pets and props. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Look closely at features of animals, such as eyes, ears, paws, and tails.

Wrap toy animals in blankets and carry them around.

Cuddle, pet, and talk to toy animals.

Use senses to investigate shiny metal food bowls.

Pretend to feed and care for pets.

Fill pet bowls with toys or other play objects. Empty and repeat.

Pretend to be cats and dogs by curling in a pet bed, pretending to eat from bowls, making animal sounds, or in other ways.

Depict familiar, real-life experiences with pets in their play.

Helpful Hints

Trade with - or borrow from - other groups to build a larger collection of soft toy cats and dogs.

Pet Care Prop Box (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their investigation, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Use words to describe what children are doing. “You’re covering your kitten with the blue blanket.”
- Engage in child-initiated pretend play, following the child’s lead.
- Model kindness and gentle touches as you handle toy animals.
- Point out features of toy animals, such as whiskers, paws, and fur.
- Use less-familiar words for things (*treat* and *carrier*) and actions (*groom*, *wag*, and *cuddle*).
- Invite children to notice the properties of shiny metal bowls. They’re cool to the touch and reflective, like mirrors.
- Invite children to help you decide which animals are cats and which are dogs. How can you tell?
- Take soft toy pets outdoors. Children can transport them in wagons or doll strollers.

Including Every Explorer

If the room includes a defined dramatic play area, consider whether it can be used comfortably by all children in the group, including children with limited mobility. Widen the play area to leave more space around furniture for a child who uses a gait trainer or other mobility equipment. Store materials in easy reach of a child who plays at ground level.

All toddlers and twos benefit when there are at least two ways to enter and exit defined play areas, such as a dramatic play area. Having more than one way in and out helps prevent crowding and conflicts caused by traffic jams.

This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Social and Emotional Development - SE1.2, SE2.1, SE2.2

Language Development – LD2.1, LD3.1

Social Studies - SS1.1

Creativity and Aesthetics - CA3.1



Pet Portraits

Let's collect photos of pets that children know well. How will they use them?

Materials

- Photos of children's family pets or other pets they know well
- Photos of teachers' pets
- Protective picture sleeves or acrylic (plastic) photo frames

Invite families to share photos of their family pets. Alternatively, they might also share a photo of another pet that their child knows well, such as a neighbor's dog or grandparent's cat.

Place the photos in protective sleeves or acrylic frames. Arrange them in an appealing way to invite children to see and reach them. Framed photos can be displayed on a low shelf top. Pictures in sleeves can be placed in a basket or mounted to a wall display with Velcro.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children interact with pet photos. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Carry photos around.
Show a photo to someone. Name and talk about their own pet. Ask questions about other children's pets.
Gaze at and talk to their own pet in a photo.
Arrange photos on the shelf or spread them out around a display basket.
Incorporate photos in imaginative play by pretending to pat or feed animals or in other ways.
Older two-year-olds may take a pet photo to look at while they draw or paint.

Helpful Hints

If families share printed photos, be sure to explain that these may be torn or damaged as they are handled by busy toddlers. Families should only share photos that they do not expect to have returned.

It may be preferable to ask families to share photos digitally. Digital (jpeg) image files can be printed inexpensively at any photography shop.

Pet Portraits (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their investigation, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Show interest in what children have to say about their pets.
- Describe and talk about pets in photos. “It looks like your cat has long fur. Is her fur soft?”
- Talk about the names of pets. Notice if any pets have the same names, rhyming names, or names that sound similar to children’s names.
- Notice pets that look similar. “You and Samuel both have pet birds!”
- Talk about sizes of pets. “My dog is teeny, tiny, and your dog is huge.” Use hands to show how big or tall pets are.
- Talk about how pets grow and change.
- Sort photos by type of pet. For example, you might look for all the cats.
- Use words to notice what children are doing. “You’ve built a block enclosure with your dog’s photo in the middle.” Children will sometimes respond by telling you the story of their work: “That’s the fence. Murphy’s yard.”

Including Every Explorer

Skip this activity entirely if any child in your group has recently lost a beloved pet or if any families feel uncomfortable about dogs or other pets. Explorers for Toddlers and Twos offers a menu of activities, inviting educators to choose those that feel like the best fit for their group.

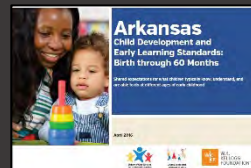
This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Social and Emotional Development – SE3.1

Cognitive Development - CD2.4, CD3.2

Language Development – LD2.1, LD3.1

Social Studies - SS1.1



Meet Me at the Fence

Let's visit with a friendly dog through a chain-link fence. What will we notice, and what questions will we have about real dogs?

Materials

- Mild-mannered volunteer dog, on a leash, with a responsible adult handler
- Chain-link-fenced play area

Safety Spotlight

Inviting a dog to visit with your group from the other side of a chain-link fence helps protect the children's safety and can keep the dog from feeling overwhelmed. Only calm, child-friendly, fully vaccinated dogs should be invited to visit. Dogs should remain on leash at all times.

Schedule a time for a friend of the group to bring a dog to visit. Dog and owner will come to the outside of the fenced play area while children are on the inside. Interested children can stand at the fence to get a close look at the dog, while children who feel less sure can watch from a distance.

Before the dog visits, talk with the children about what to expect. Build anticipation for the special visit, noticing what children seem most curious about.

Investigation Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children interact with their human and canine visitors. You may see children investigate in some of these ways.

Point to or wave at the dog.

Seek comfort and reassurance from a trusted adult if they feel timid or uncertain.

Talk to the visitor and their dog, saying hello or asking questions.

Watch the dog carefully. Show interest in things the dog can do.

Smile or laugh at dog behaviors that seem playful or silly.

Talk about the dog later, after the visit.

Meet Me at the Fence (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Talk with children before the visit. Think together about the upcoming visit and questions children have.
- Remain calm and composed as the visit begins. Children may crowd to see and need help to make/find space.
- Maintain a relaxed, informal, and unhurried tone throughout the visit. Some children may wander away (within the fenced play area) and then circle back again.
- Notice and quietly respond to any child who seems uncertain.
- Model saying hello to your guests and thanking them for visiting afterward. Invite children to join you in saying hello and goodbye.
- Notice what children seem curious about and help them articulate their questions.
- Describe what you see happening. “Kya is sniffing the ground. She must smell something interesting.”
- Take a photo of the visitors for children to look at later. Talk with children after the visit to find out what they remember.
- If children seem to enjoy the visit, schedule another visit with the same dog and/or visits with other dogs.

Including Every Explorer

Get to know children and families well before scheduling a visit like this one. This activity will not be appropriate if any child, parent, or guardian is fearful of dogs. Some families may not feel comfortable having their child near a dog even through the fence or may want their child to wash hands right away after being near a dog.

This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Social and Emotional Development – SE1.1, SE2.1, SE 2.2

Cognitive Development - CD1.1, CD2.1, CD2.3, CD2.4

Language Development - LD1.1, LD2.1, LD3.1

Science and Technology - ST1.1, ST3.1



Clay Creatures

Let's use familiar toy animals with clay or playdough. How will we combine them?

Materials

- Handheld toy animals - pets, insects, or woodland wildlife
- Playdough, homemade playdough, or moist clay
- Work trays or clay boards, art smocks, clay or dough tools (optional)

Prepare an invitation to play that includes clay or playdough and an assortment of animals and tools. Stay near and provide close supervision as children investigate these materials.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children interact with animals and clay or dough. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Smack, squeeze, pinch, stretch, and roll the clay or playdough.
Explore with the senses. Smell or try to taste the clay or playdough.
Press animals into the clay or playdough to make imprints or tracks.
Experiment with using clay or playdough to hold a tool or toy animal upright.
Press clay or playdough onto a toy animal. If using clay, use wet fingers to paint on animals with clay.
Pretend to feed an animal bites of playdough or clay, or pretend in another way.

Helpful Hint

Consider introducing materials gradually over time. On the first day or two, explore just the clay or playdough. Next, add animals. After a day or two of exploring animals with clay or playdough, add other materials and tools. Possibilities include small rolling pins, twigs, and toddler-safe cutting tools.

Clay Creatures (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their play, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Describe what you see children doing. “You’re using your finger to make round holes in the clay.”
- Ask, “How does the clay feel?”
- If you play alongside children, avoid the temptation to sculpt animals or make other sophisticated creations. Instead, use your clay or playdough in a way that is similar to how children are using theirs.
- Use self-talk as you play alongside children. “I’m using my whole hand to press my clay out flat!”
- Use describing words. “Our clay is *moist* and *smooth*. It smells *earthy*.” “Our playdough is *bright pink*, and it’s getting a little *crumbly*.”
- Later, invite children to use wet washcloths and/or bins with a little warm water and mild soap to help clean the animals. Direct supervision is always required for water play.

Including Every Explorer

Avoid playdough that is scented like food. Provide very close supervision to redirect children who may try to eat clay or playdough. Use natural clay or gluten-free playdough if your group includes children with wheat/gluten allergies. Some children don’t like to touch squishy materials like play dough or clay, and that’s OK. Invite, but do not force, participation and make sure there are other appealing play options available.

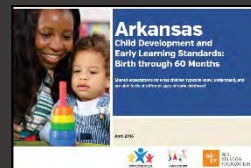
This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

Cognitive Development - CD1.1, CD 1.2, CD2.1, CD2.3, CD3.1

Physical Development and Health – PH2.1, PH2.2

Mathematical Thinking - MT1.2, MT4.1

Creativity and Aesthetics - CA2.1



Neighborhood Creatures Storytelling Basket

Let's use pictures to tell our own story. What will we imagine?

Materials

- Storytelling characters from this curriculum, cut out and laminated or covered with clear contact paper
- A basket or decorative box
- Wide craft sticks or adhesive Velcro (optional)
- Additional storytelling props (optional)

If desired, attach wide craft sticks to the characters to make simple puppets. Or, add Velcro to the back so that characters can be attached to a flannel board. Arrange the pieces in a basket and place the basket where children can reach it. You may also add other props to your storytelling basket, such as toy people or animals, a wooden stop sign toy, or natural loose parts.

Safety Spotlight

Avoid small pieces that are choking hazards. As you cut out the storytelling characters, leave some white space as needed to create larger pieces.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children interact with the storytelling characters. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

Empty the basket and fill it again.
Interact with laminated pieces by sliding, shaking, or bending them.
Spread out the characters and look at them. Point to and name familiar animals.
Make animal noises.
Use characters for pretend play. Make characters move or talk.
Make up imaginative stories or use the characters to retell familiar stories.

Neighborhood Creatures Storytelling Basket (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in their play, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Talk about the animals in the photos. Use specific animal names and look with children at features. “A turtle has a hard shell.”
- Model less-familiar words like *fur*, *antennae*, *wings*, and *whiskers*.
- Count the animals if a child seems interested in doing so.
- Make animal noises. “Meow!”
- Compare animals. How are they the same, and how are they different? Which is the largest? Which is the smallest?
- Ask interesting questions that children can think about and/or answer with words or gestures. “What can the bee do?”
- Listen attentively as a child tells stories with the pieces.
- Share a simple chant inspired by the book *I Went Walking* by Sue Williams.

*I went walking. What did I see?
I saw a **green lizard** looking at me!*

Invite a child to help name each color and animal in turn. Once children are familiar with the rhyme, notice whether they begin to chant it on their own.

Including Every Explorer

If needed, enlarge the photos and print them on heavy cardstock. Or, use glue to attach them to chipboard from cereal boxes before covering with contact paper. Larger, thicker pieces are easier to grasp.

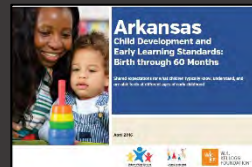
This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

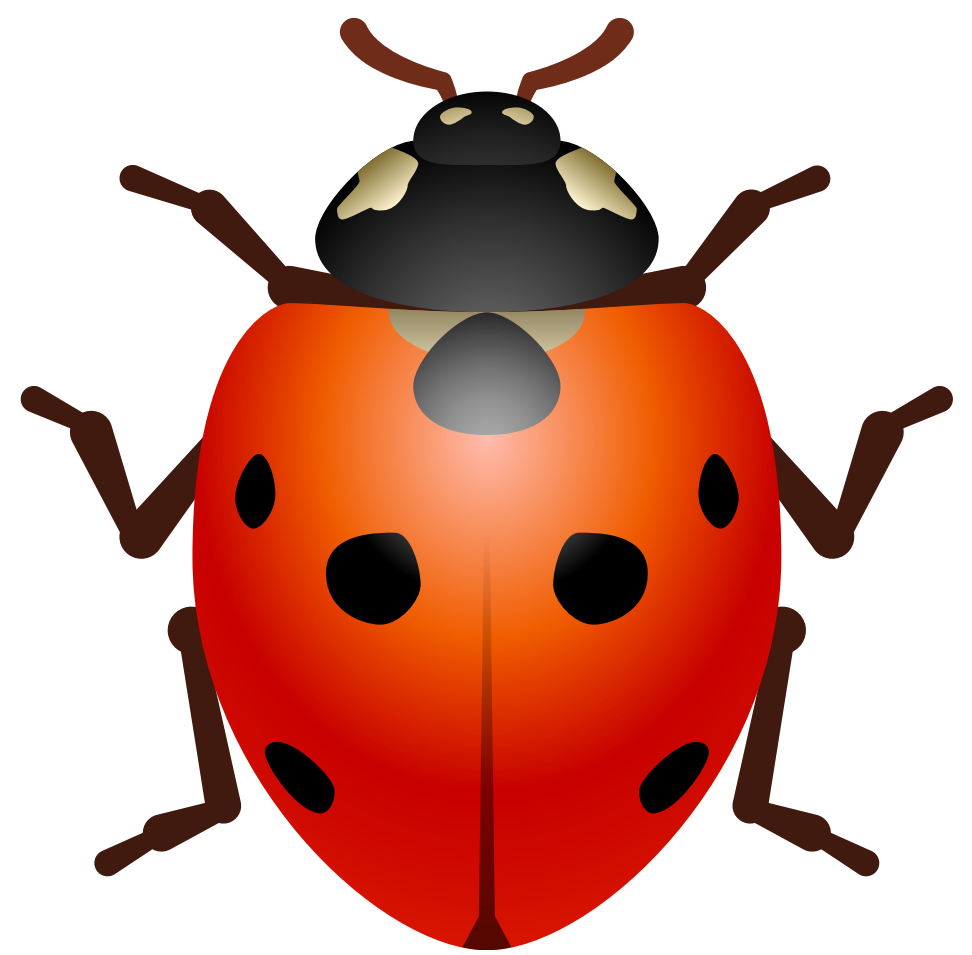
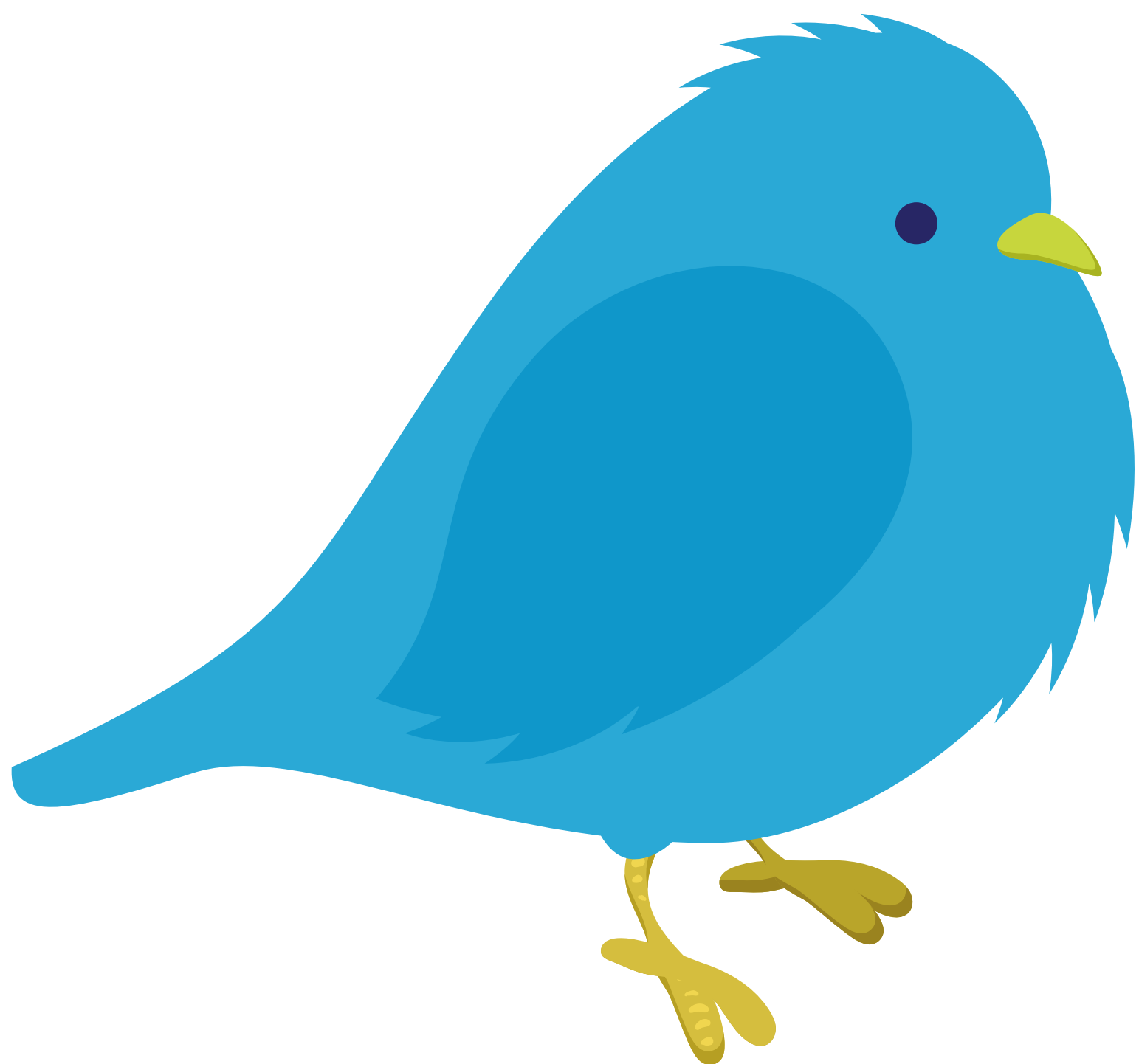
Cognitive Development –CD2.4, CD3.2

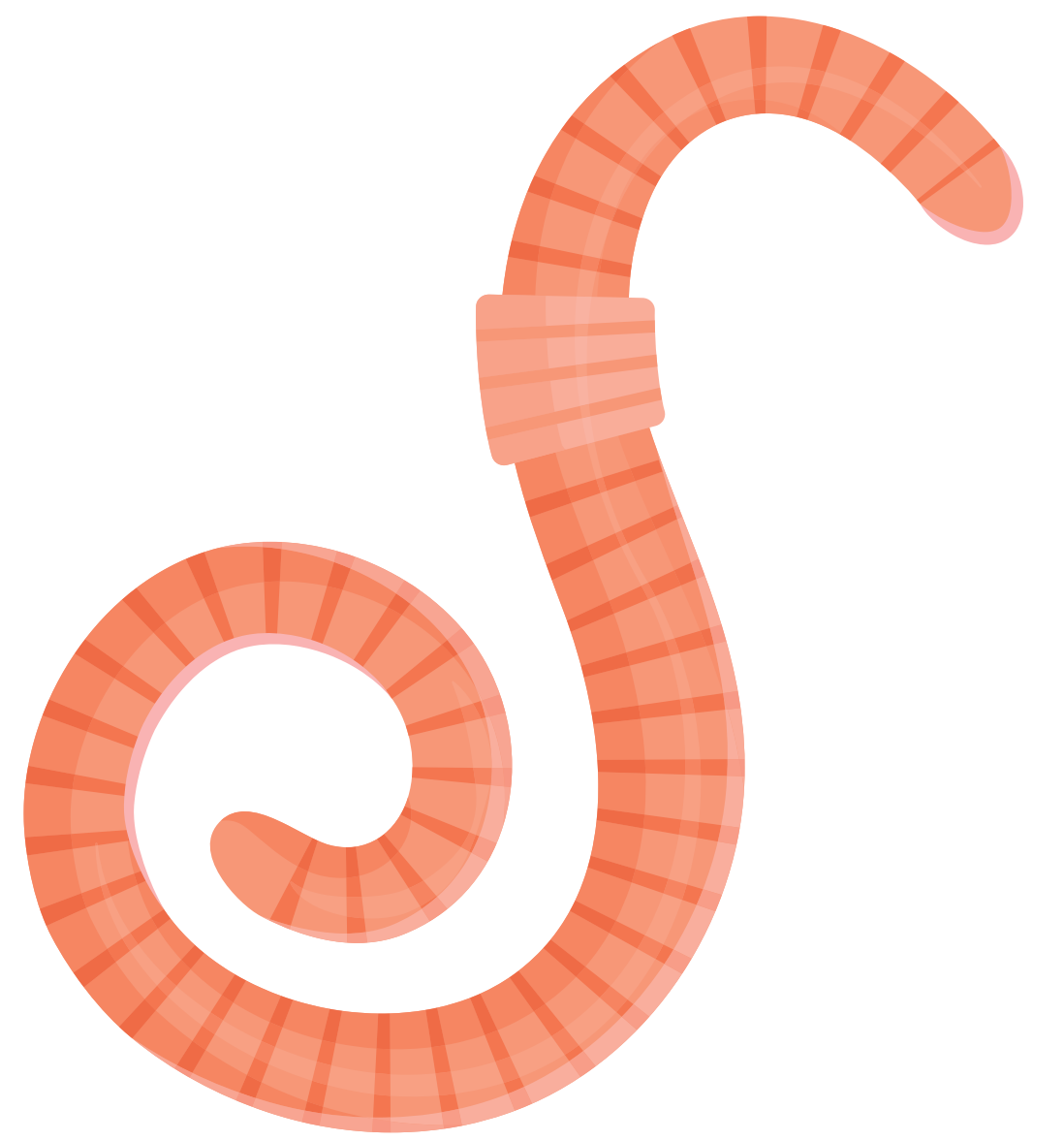
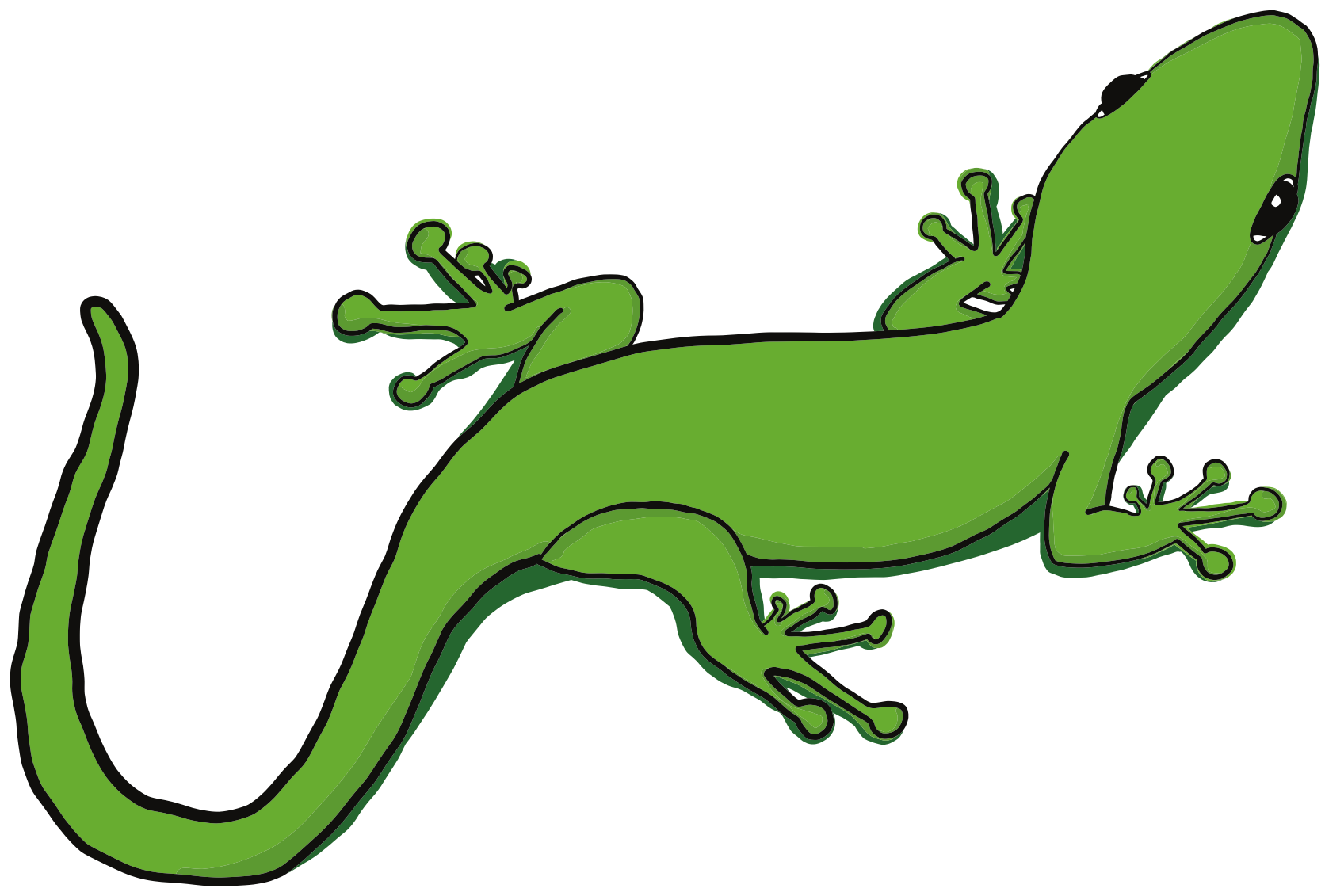
Language Development - LD1.1, LD2.1, LD3.1

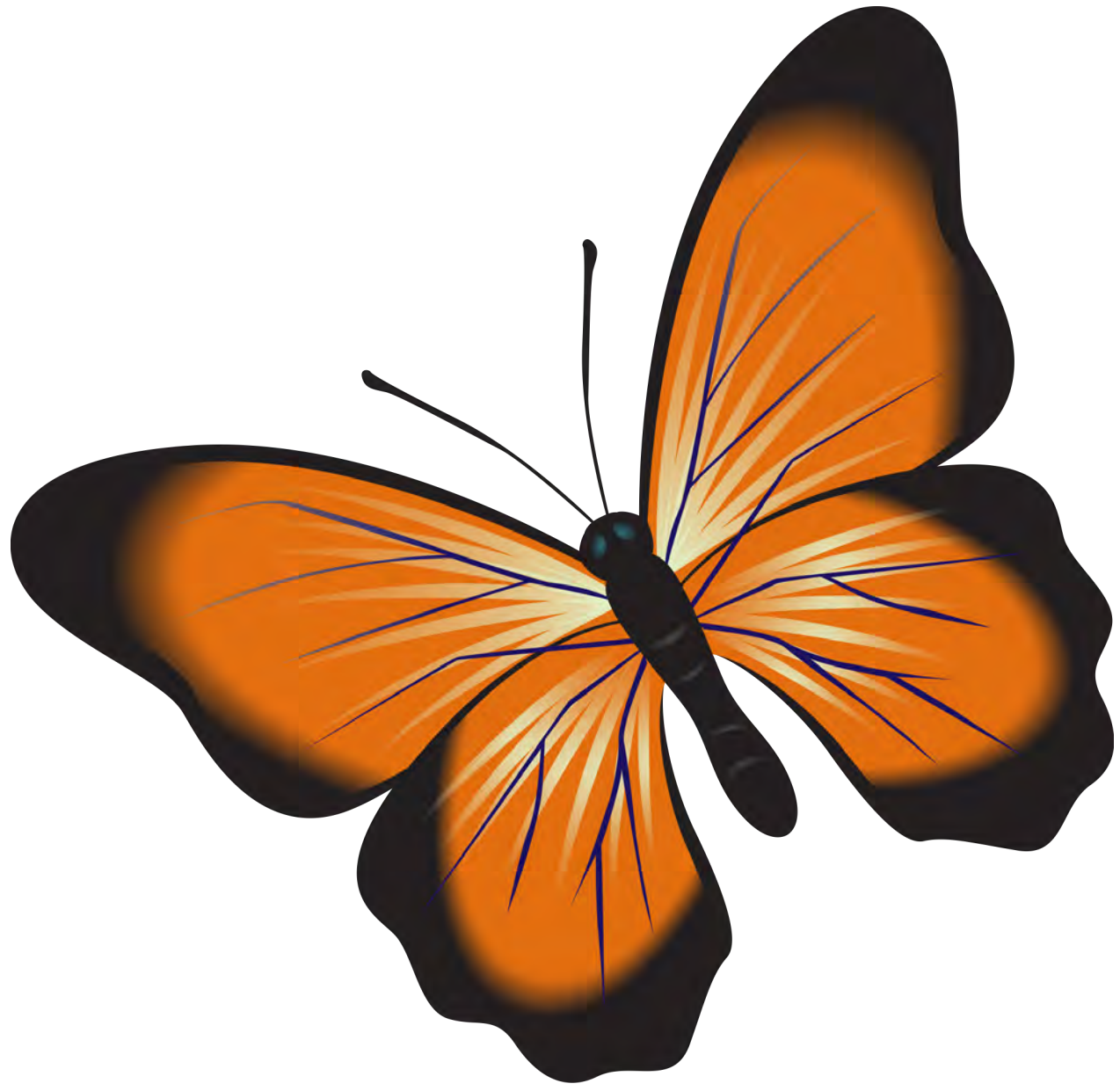
Emergent Literacy - EL1.1, EL1.2

Creativity and Aesthetics - CA3.1









Enhancing Our Play Spaces

Toddlers and two-year-olds learn best - and most - through open-ended play.

Large Body Play

Very young children need to move and engage in active play throughout each day. Therefore, our indoor and outdoor spaces invite children to climb, tumble, run, hop, push and pull big things, and use their whole bodies in other ways.

Schematic Play

Children experience play urges to empty or fill containers, gather and carry materials, and interact with play objects in other schema-driven ways. Our play spaces include many open-ended materials, and children have the freedom to use them in their own ways.

Sensory Play

Children often have opportunities to scoop and pour sand or similar materials. They can also scribble with chalk, crayons, and other tools. And, they're sometimes invited to dabble with paints, squeeze clay or playdough, and crumple and tear paper. Close, responsive supervision is always provided to protect health and safety.

Constructive Play

Children are invited to use blocks and other construction materials for lining and stacking up, balancing, and building. There is at least one area in our play space that is especially suited for playing this way.

Imaginative Play

Simple, realistic props encourage children to think about, talk about, and imitate familiar roles and experiences. Children can find collections of materials that go together to enhance and expand their play. Many of these play objects are homelike and authentic.

Retreating and Relaxing

Being a toddler or two-year-old is hard work! Our play spaces include soft, comfortable places where a child can choose to relax, regroup, or recharge.

When children are interested in neighborhood creatures, we might add or emphasize some of these familiar play materials.

- Soft toy pets and props that invite children to pretend to feed and care for them
- Realistic wooden or plastic insects, pets, or other familiar animals
- Puppets that represent neighborhood creatures
- Peg puzzles and matching cards featuring familiar animals
- Bug boxes and similar habitats for small creatures
- Simple costumes, such as vests and headbands, that invite children to dress up as animals

Enhancing Our Daily Routines

Much of our day with toddlers and twos is spent in daily care routines like **meals, toileting and diapering**, and **rest**. Rather than viewing these as chores to be hurried through, we recognize that each daily routine offers many opportunities to strengthen relationships and foster learning.

Here are some ways that we support children during daily care routines.

Predictable Schedules

We invite children to become familiar with the flow of our day and the steps within each routine. We often talk about what is happening now and what will happen next.

Nurturing Relationships

We infuse daily routines with warmth and joy. We speak with and touch children gently. We make friendly eye contact and use children's names in positive ways.

Inquiry and Interest

We notice children's curiosity about the world around them. We provide time for them to look closely at things that seem interesting to them and talk with them about their experiences.

Growth and Development

We offer opportunities for children to make choices and build self-help skills. We provide unhurried time for children to practice new skills. Spills, messes, and mistakes are a natural part of the learning process and are managed calmly and gently.

When children are interested in neighborhood creatures, we might notice, investigate, and talk with children about these familiar things that are part of our daily routines. *

- Animals we often see during our transition to the outdoor play area, including earthworms and other small creatures
- Animal pictures and patterns on children's clothing
- Classroom pets and supplies used to care for them



Neighborhood Creatures in the World Around Us

Toddlers and twos are often eager to explore their world by going on short walks or going for buggy rides. There are also many fascinating things to be seen by looking out a window or through a playground fence. We can sometimes plan special opportunities for children to observe something that interests them.

Adults notice what children are looking at or pointing at. We listen to children's questions and describe what children see or what is happening. We might also take photos for children to look at and talk about later.

Here are some examples of real-life occurrences that could support children's interest in neighborhood creatures.

- A neighbor walking a dog
- Older children showing and talking about their class pet
- Someone refilling a birdbath or bird feeder
- A gardener tending to flowers that feed butterflies, bees, and other insects
- Birds or squirrels building a nest
- Hummingbirds visiting a window feeder
- A turtle crossing the lawn



Books About Neighborhood Creatures

Books are often shared informally with just a few children at a time and children can also choose to look at books on their own. Two-year-olds may even enjoy a short storytime where almost everyone comes together. If group storytimes occur, we invite (but do not force) children to join.

Share some of these books and/or your favorite books featuring neighborhood creatures.

Flutter! Fly! (Indestructibles), by Kaaren Pixten, Workman, 2009

Follow the Trail: Bugs, by DK, Dorling Kindersley, 2018

Goodnight, Rainbow Cats, by Bàrbara Castro Urío, Chronicle Books, 2019

Grumpy Bird, by Jeremy Tankard, Scholastic Press, 2016

Hello, Day!, by Anita Lobel, Greenwillow Books, 2008

Hop, by Jorey Hurley, Little Simon, 2019

Jump! By Scott M. Fischer, Simon and Schuster, 2010

Look and Learn: Caterpillar to Butterfly, by National Geographic Kids, 2016

Pet This Book, by Jessica Young and Daniel Wiseman, Bloomsbury, 2018

RRRalph, by Lois Ehlert, Little Simon, 2016

Shake, Wiggle, and Roll, by Carli Davidson, Chronicle Books, 2017

The Very Busy Spider, by Eric Carle, World of Eric Carle, 1985

Wow! Said the Owl, by Tim Hopgood, Farrar Strouse and Giroux, 2009

Neighborhood creatures can be spotted in the illustrations of many other picture books, too. Make a habit of noticing them together.

Talking About Books

- Point to Pictures: "What is this by the tree?"
- Pause for Participation: "Green frog, green frog, what do you see? I see a...purple cat looking at me." (Let children say the parts they know.)
- Notice: "Oh, look at her face. How do you think she feels?"

Talking with individual children about books is an essential part of every day!

Songs, Rhymes, and Games About Neighborhood Creatures

We sing and share playful rhymes and games with individual children during indoor and outdoor playtimes. We may also use songs or rhymes during transition times between other daily events.

Five Little Kittens – *traditional rhyme*

Depending on the age and interest of the children, share one, two, or all three verses of the rhyme. The first, short verse may be best for very young toddlers, while older toddlers may enjoy the longer rhyme.

Five little kittens standing in a row. (hold up five fingers on an open hand)
They bow their heads to the children so. (bend fingers to bow)

They run to the left, (wiggle fingers while moving hand to the left)
And they run to the right, (wiggle fingers while moving hand to the right)
And they stretch up tall with all their might! (open hand very wide)

Along came a puppy, looking for some fun, (hop your other hand toward the kittens)
Meow! Meow! - Away the kittens run! (hide kitten hand behind your back)

End the rhyme by making a howling sound for the puppy. Or, have the puppy bark and chase after the kittens playfully.

Did You Ever See a Creature?– *to the tune of “Did You Ever See a Lassie”*

Children and adults can move like animals while singing this song.

**Did you ever see a little toad, a little toad, a little toad,
Did you ever see a little toad hop this way and that?
Hop this way, and that way, hop this way and that way,
Did you ever see a little toad hop this way and that?**

Sing again with other animals, such as crawling turtles, leaping bunnies, marching ants, swooping birds, and buzzing bees.

Songs, Rhymes, and Games About Neighborhood Creatures (cont.)

Sleeping Bunnies - *traditional British action song*

If you've never heard this song before, you can learn the tune from an online video. Remember: Adults can learn new songs and rhymes by viewing videos, but they sing the songs with children themselves. Singing together (screen-free) is far more valuable for children than watching videos!

Children lie on the rug and pretend to sleep while their adult sings slowly and softly.

**See the little bunnies sleeping 'til it is nearly noon,
Shall we go and wake them with a merry tune?**

Children pop up and bounce to the second part of the song, which is sung energetically.

**Hop little bunnies, hop, hop, hop,
Hop little bunnies, hop, hop, hop,
Hop little bunnies, hop, hop, hop,
Hop little bunnies, hop...now stop!**

Invite bunnies to sleep again to repeat the song.

Gray Squirrel- *traditional rhyme*

Gray squirrel, gray squirrel, swish your bushy tail. (Shake body, pretending to shake tail)

Gray squirrel, gray squirrel, swish your bushy tail. (Shake body, pretending to shake tail)

Hold a nut between your toes. (Pretend to hold a nut between your hands)

Wrinkle up your little nose. (Try to crinkle and wiggle your nose)

Gray squirrel, gray squirrel, swish your bushy tail. (Shake body, pretending to shake tail)

More Traditional Songs and Rhymes to Share

Fiddle-I-Fee

Five Green and Speckled Frogs

Here is a Bunny (with Ears so Funny)

How Much is that Doggie in the Window?

Little Green Frog

Little Miss Muffet

The Itsy, Bitsy Spider

Moving On

1. With your teaching partners, think about, and discuss the following questions.
 - What new experiences have our children had during this exploration? What new knowledge and skills have emerged?
 - Do the children seem ready to conclude this exploration? Have their questions been answered? Is their interest waning? If children are still excited about neighborhood creatures, consider ways to continue and extend their playful investigation.
 - How will we share the story of children's playful learning with families and others?
2. Model gratitude by creating thank you notes for families, school members, and/or community members who supported your exploration. For example, you might invite children to help pick out photos to send in a thank you card for someone who brought a dog to visit.
3. Where will you go next? Use your observations of children as you think about and plan your next exploration!

