Observation Practice Activities

These activities can be done in 30 minutes or less or be extended as part of a unit of study. Some ideas for extensions are given, but many more exist. Contact the Education and Outreach Specialist for more.

1. **SLIPPERS FOR A SALAMANDERS**

Cut these suggestions out from the paper below and keep them in a film canister. This activity requires imagination and creativity! This activity can be facilitated a few different ways. The main objective is to help the students observe the world around them and to share their perspectives with others.

Slippers for a salamander.

Eyeglasses for an owl.

A couch for a bird.

A toothpick for a deer.

Toilet paper for bacteria

A comb for a porcupine.

A boat for a spider.

A rug for a raccoon.

A ladder for a ladybug.

A bathtub for a banana slug.

A drum for a gopher.

A hat for a rabbit.

A blanket for a toad.

A teacup for a chipmunk.

A skateboard for a snake.

A spoon for a fox

A hula hoop for a butterfly.

Dental floss for a woodpecker.

**Option 1:** Create a circle on the ground (with a stick in sand or pine needles, hula hoop, string, or other items). Tell the students they will be looking for something in nature that could be . . . insert one of the phrases on the strip here (i.e. A teacup for a chipmunk). They can use multiple things in nature to create this object too. When they have found something or created something that could be a teacup for a chipmunk, they need to place it in the circle. After a few minutes, have them stand in a circle around the objects. The students can then point out their “teacup” and explain why they picked it. This can be done by pairing up with the person next to them, in small groups, or in a large group. Give them another phrase and start over again.

**Option 2:** Give each child a slip of paper. Have them look while you are walking or waiting for the rest of the group to catch up after an activity. Share their findings.

**Journaling Option 3:** Add journaling to option one or 2 or just journal. After students find what they are looking for, have them draw what they found in their notebook and record their thoughts or reasoning. Sharing can happen afterwards or not.

**Materials:** Slips of paper with phrases on them.

1. **MEET A TREE**

Tell students that as humans we tend to rely on our sense of sight more than our other senses, so in this activity, the sense of sight will be taken away from them. They will get to know trees using their other senses.

Tell students they will be working in pairs. One person will be blindfolded and the other person will be their guide. Guides must be very careful with their partner as they are responsible for their safety. If a guide is unsafe, they will not be able to participate in the activity.

The guide will lead the blindfolded person to a tree. The blindfolded person will use their remaining senses to get to know that tree. Then, the guide will lead the blindfolded person back to the beginning spot, turn them twice, and unblindfold them. The person who has just regained sight must then move around and find their tree. They get 3 tries and then the roles are switched.

**Survey Circle** – Go to the middle if you found your tree on the 1st try, 2nd try, 3rd try, didn’t find your tree, if you think you could find your tree again the next time we visit this spot.

**Sharing: Turn and Talk, Walk and Talk, Group Share, or journaling**

1. What clues or strategies helped you the most to find your tree?
2. What was the most challenging part of finding your tree?
3. What did you learn about your tree from your other senses that you may not have learned if you just looked at it?

**Journaling options:** Before explaining the activity in full, ask students to write, “My Tree” on the top of a blank page. Then, they should write the prompts: I feel, I hear, I smell, I taste (up to you), I see on the page in a column on the left hand side, leaving room to fill them in. After each student does the activity, ask them to fill in the prompts – including “I see” after their blindfold is off. This may be good for younger students or students that need reminders to use all their senses when observing.

**Journaling option 2:** You could also use the prompts, “I notice, I wonder, It reminds me of.” This may be better for older students or students who have had a lot of practice using all their senses to observe.

**Materials:** Blindfolds or bandanas, one for each pair

1. **COLORS OF NATURE**

In this activity, students focus on all the different shades of colors in a forest or outdoor space. You will need to gather paint color sample cards from Walmart or another store – these are free! Colors of the rainbow are good for younger kids, while many shades of brown, green, black, and tan are great for older students. Laminating them will give them a longer life span.

**Option 1:** Give a pair or small group of students a paint card or 2 and have them find as many different things in nature that have those colors as possible. They can bring representatives back, but remind them not to harm anything that is alive. Set a time limit and boundaries if necessary.

**Group or Small Group Pair Share**

When you gather everyone back to together ask students to show their color cards to the group and report on what they found.

**Sharing: Turn and Talk, Walk and Talk, Small Group or Large Group Share, journaling**

1. Did anything surprise you?
2. Did you find anything that was exactly the same color as something else?
3. How many different things did you look at before you found something that matched one of your colors?
4. Look at the names of the colors on your paint cards. Which ones do you like the best?

Help students recognize just how many colors there are in nature by pointing out that this was just one day in one season. Imagine how many colors we might find during a year.

**Journaling option:** Record in your journals what you are finding. They could even create a table that lists each thing they find of each color group. Do this once every season and have students compare their findings. There are many, many ways to do this. One example of an end of year comparison for one color across the seasons follows. The possibilities are endless!

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Season | Base Color | # of Shades | # of Objects | Types of Objects |
| Fall | Green | 3 | 4 | Moss, leaves, stems, insect |
| Winter | Green | 1 | 1 | moss |
| Spring | Green | 7 | 5 | Moss, leaves, stems, insect, flower |
| Summer | Green | 3 | 3 | Moss, leaves, grass |

**Materials:** Paint Color Cards, many colors

1. **THE DAWN CHORUS (Bird Language)**

* Have you ever gotten up early and sat outside and listened as the diurnal (daytime) world came awake with sound? That time is called the dawn chorus and in the spring the animals you may hear the most are birds.

Give each student a sound canister.

**Teacher Note:** A sound canister is a small container that has a lid and is not transparent. Put different objects in the canisters that make sound, but make sure to have pairs (i.e. two with paper clips, 2 with sand, two with pennies, etc).

Instruct the students to shake the canister and listen to the sound it produces. They should not look inside the canister. When the students are all making noise at once, they are imitating a dawn chorus.

* It may sound loud and confusing, but the birds are actually communicating with one another. Different species or kinds are making different sounds and they are tuned in to their own sounds. In spring, the male birds are setting up their territories and singing all around them to defend them from other males and to advertise to the females where they live.
* In the summer, the males and females tend to talk to one another more as one sits on the nest and one finds food and defends the territory. Each pair is familiar with their mate's voice just as you are familiar with your parents’ voices.
* We are going to pretend like we are birds and it is summer out. So each of you has a sound partner. Someone who makes the same sound as you.

Ask students to find their sound partner. It will be loud and chaotic and hard to find each other at first, but most students will be paired off after a few minutes. Instruct the students to look in their canisters and see if they and their partner have the same thing in it. If so, they found their mate. If not, they did not find their mate.

Ask students to share something that was realistic and unrealistic about that simulation. They may also share challenges.

This game can be played multiple times by redistributing the sound canisters among students.

**Extension and Journaling option:** This can be followed up by learning some **bird songs** or if birds are singing doing a **solo sit** and creating a **sound map**. You can find great directions on how to create a sound map with students on page 64 of the free curriculum: *Opening the World through Nature Journaling,* by John Muir Laws. You have to fill out some information at the California Plant Society to get the pdf. All the activities are amazing and promote observation skills, wonder, and connection to the natural world. <http://www.cnps.org/cnps/education/curriculum/request/index.php>

**Materials:** Sound Canisters, one for each student

1. **CREATE YOUR OWN SCENT** **(Perfume or Cologne)**

Students are going to get their noses warmed up and create their own natural perfumes! They may use any natural material as long as they do not kill living things (i.e. one leaf or berry or flower from a tree or bush is okay, because it isn’t killing the whole plant. Take only the smallest amount you need.) Each student will need a small container with a lid to create their signature scent. A few drops of water can sometimes enhance the smell.

The teacher may demonstrate by mixing some soil and pine needles together as an example. Each student needs to come up with a name and description for the “perfume” they create. Allow at least five minutes for students to explore the immediate area, creating their scents.

**Group Share**

Reassemble in a circle and share the creations by passing them around one at a time to sniff. Students may also share the name and a short description of their scent as if they are selling it to the other students. Highlight again nature’s incredible variety that people often miss in their daily rush.

**Sharing: Turn and Talk, Walk and Talk, Small Group or Large Group Share, Journaling**

1. Name some natural scents that you come across and can recognize?
2. How is smell important to people?
3. How is smell important to animals?
4. Come up with a list of animals that you think use their sense of smell the most. Explain why you think it is there most used sense and what they might use it for.

**Materials:** Small containers with lids, one for each student