

Sensory Hikes Anywhere, Anytime

All Ages

A family walk in the out-of-doors is so much more than a walk. In addition to family time and physical exercise, being outside naturally engages all the senses. Each season brings new, multisensory opportunities to experience and explore the natural world around you. Using all your senses and sharing the experiences, provides opportunities to build vocabulary and storytelling skills. Just step outdoors and a new adventure begins. Start by finding a place where you can be outside and active as a family. Then try some of the ideas below to get your senses going. Once you start, you'll discover fun, new ways to use every sense to engage with nature and each other. Remember to take your time, slow down, and let nature lead the way.

Visual—What can you see?

- go birding, bug hunting, or search for a rainbow of colourful flowers
- play 'I Spy' - use colours, textures, shapes, to identify what you spy
- notice changes over time—bare twigs develop buds which burst into leaves, watch ants work, a caterpillar crawl
- sketching helps you really seeing what is there, check out our **Winter Sketching** activity for tips
- form 'binoculars' with your fingers to focus your field of vision, or recycle a cardboard tube into a spyglass
- use magnifying glasses (try our **Mini Safari** or **One-metre Hike**), or bring binoculars



Hearing—What can you hear?

- listen for a minute with your eyes closed, take turns sharing what you heard and how you felt while listening?



- make a sound map (find instructions under **Adventures**)
- tap rocks, snap twigs, (make twig letters or build critter forts for experience in measuring, shapes, and structures as well as listening)
- make animal sounds together, try imitating the nature sounds you hear, explore where it is coming from — is it an animal moving, or bird calling, an insect, water, air?
- listen for worms in the garden in the dark of the night
- lie in the snow and listen to the winter trees
- play with an echo, time the response
- in the open, get far, far apart and time the speed of sound

Touch—What can you feel? Remember: BE KIND, touch gentle and cause no harm.

- feel leaves, moss, bark, icicles, rocks, pine needles, and even a critter or two, there is so much to touch! Play 'Simon Says' touch something ... flakey, bumpy, prickly, squishy, damp and so on.
- feel the warmth of the sun on you, on different surfaces, (notice how snow melts, find ants under warm rocks), how does the temperature change when you step from the woods to open space. Is it the same at night?
- feel a breeze, what is it like when your skin is wet, try taking off your jacket in a cold wind then put it back on and zip it up
 - how does the surface are you walking on feel under your feet?
- make rubbings - check out our **Wax Rubbings** activity
- toss and catch pinecones, toss pebbles or sticks into the water

Sensory Hike continued

Smell– What can you smell?



- start your adventure with a deep breath– how does the day smell? stop along the way to 'sample' the air, does your garden smell different at night?
- crush a leaf or break a pine needle and then smell it, compare the smell of different leaves, needles, twigs, grasses, and so on
- make plant potpourris, compare concoctions
- talk about smells, use scent words—sweet, moldy, fresh, dry, rotten, musty, sour, etc.
- observe how animals, insects and plants use smell

Taste-What can you taste? *Caution, there are lots of edibles in nature, there are also noxious and toxic things. Children should always check with an adult before eating wild foods.

- bring fruit for a snack (fruit comes from nature) - describe the tastes,
- make trail mix to take with you—where did all the ingredients come from?
- try our **Scat Snacks** activity for a new sensory experience.

Proprioception–Working muscles and joints to tell the body where it is in space.

- walk, hop, stomp, jump, bend, leap, gallop, or skip– consider the surface; sidewalks, tall grass, forest trails, changing elevations use legs and core muscles differently
- climb hills, trees, rocks, jump down from heights
- moving heavier objects— large rocks, big limbs, make a fort, build snowmen, push on boulders or trees (notice big, rough trees resist, little, smooth ones yield)
- carry a backpack with a water bottle, snack, sit-upon
- use a stick to write in the snow, mud, sand, dig out rocks



Vestibular Sense—Keeping your balance while moving.

- try simply spinning with eyes open for a unique look at nature, try spinning with eyes closed, arms outstretched.
- try somersaults, cartwheels, rolling down a hillside
- balance while walking along a log, across steppingstones, sliding on icy puddles, 'tightrope' walking along the shadow under a power line

Interoception–Notice how your body feels inside.

- how does your body respond or feel after an activity or sensory experience – note differences in heart rate, breathing, temperature.
- do you feel thirsty or hungry, how is your body telling you it needs water? how does it feel afterwards once you've had a drink?
- notice how your body tells you it's tired - stumbling, tripping, grumpy
- how does your body feel when you are excited, worried, happy?
- what helps you feel calm, relaxed inside – deep breaths, listening to the wind, walking, watching nature?

Tip: Have each family member pick a sense to focus on. After a few minutes, share the story of those minutes based on the sense chosen. For example, "I heard our gritty footsteps on the sidewalk, then we walked on the grass, and I could only hear our breathing." Play again in a different place or with a different sense.



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