

Tree Games (a program on trees and tree biodiversity), done by [Tracy S. Feldman](#) on 13 July 2014

In the highlighted portions of the text below, I discuss aspects of the activities that did not work well. I discuss how I would do things differently next time.

1. Introductions

Introduce myself and have everyone introduce themselves. In this activity, we will explore trees, both different trees and different types of trees. Why are trees important to us? What do we use or what do we need each day that comes from trees?

2. Building a tree (from Joseph Cornell *Sharing Nature with Children II*, 1989, page 62)

I think this activity works best with at least 10 people. There were about 9 when I did it, and it went ok. I had one heartwood, one taproot, two lateral roots, two sapwoods, two cambium layers, and one bark.

3. Meet a tree (from Joseph Cornell *Sharing Nature with Children* 1998, page 28)

In this activity, participants get to know and distinguish among individual trees by touching the bark and branches, ideally honing their observational skills and ability to articulate detailed descriptions. When you begin, choose a forested area and have parents blindfold their children (or vice versa). Have the partner without the blindfold lead the other to a tree, and ask the blindfolded partner to get to know their tree by feel, and to describe what they feel to their partner as they do it. After 5-10 minutes, lead them back to a nearby gathering place, take blindfolds off, and see if they can find their tree. They can explain to one other participant how they knew it was theirs.

Some thoughts about introductions: When I began the activity, I just introduced the basic instructions without giving examples. Initially, I thought that presenting ideas to participants beforehand would stifle creativity once they are describing their own trees. Yet when I conducted this activity, some people did not seem to know how to articulate how their trees felt. Thus, participants were sometimes unable to describe how they knew the tree they found after the blindfold was lifted was the same one they interacted with when blindfolded. To address this, it might be worth suggesting a few descriptive terms for them, without limiting them to those terms, so participants have some guidance about what to “feel” for before they start. One way is for the leader to model a couple of examples, describing their tree aloud as they feel it. Alternatively, it might work to have participants feel a few different trees at first, to practice describing differences between trees ahead of time. In this case, children could ask their parents to help them describe what they are feeling if they find it difficult.

4. How many kinds of trees in the forest?

I frame this activity as if the participants were exploring a new area. Their mission is to figure out how many types of trees this new area has without harming the trees. Ask the participants how they might do these things. Hopefully, someone will suggest using leaves on the ground. Then you can lay those ground rules. You can try asking them ahead of time about variation in leaf color (is this brown fallen leaf from a different type of tree than this green leaf?) and size (point out small and large leaves on the same tree?). Or you can do this after they've collected their leaves.

Pass out bags to each group of 2 or 3 (or they can work in family groups), and ask them to look for leaves that are as undamaged as possible, and that have different shapes (or skip this step to see if they come to this conclusion themselves, to appreciate the value of good quality samples). Also, make sure participants know how to avoid poison ivy!

I combined the collection trip with a hike to the creek. But I would not do this in the future. I think the walk was too long. Even though I had fun talking about cool natural history along the way, most of the things I pointed out were tangential and could have led people to lose interest in collecting. This also caused me to run out of time, so we ended up rushing through the process of figuring out how many species we had.

Depending upon the ages of the group, it is best to keep the collection period short and if a walk is desired, do it after the collection activity. Keeping the activity in one relatively small area could be better, so you reduce the amount of time people take to collect, and you can keep up the pace of the activity.

Upon return, have them work as a big group to sort the leaves into piles by type, so we only use one example of each type of tree. Have them figure out how many species they think they have, comparing all of the leaves to each other. You could find out which group had the most.

Do any of the groups have species the others did not find? How many species of trees are there all together? To answer this last question, you can use tape or push pins to tape/pin each example leaf (determined by the group)

Because I ran out of time for this activity, we sorted leaves together as a large group. I had not prepared them for variation among leaf sizes and colors, so some people were inclined to think that each leaf could represent a different species. Perhaps it is ok not to discuss such variation ahead of time, if time is allowed for participants to discuss and work out disagreements about which leaves really represent different types of trees. Because time was limited, I ended up leading them toward certain answers, to figure out that some different sized (or different colored) leaves were from the same type of tree, which was not ideal. We ended up finding about 20 different types of trees, out of at least 52 species in Glennstone Preserve.

Finally, I asked participants: How many different types of trees do you think are in the forest? If we searched more, would we find more different kinds? Would you find many more or just a few more? Did you have trouble finding new leaves after a while?

5. Concluding song

End by playing a song people can sing along to, preferably about trees (“Branching Out” by John Gorka works very well for this).