

Our oceans are full of weird and wonderful creatures that will fascinate children. The attractive and unexpected colours, body shapes and movements of these animals will encourage descriptive language and inspire imaginative play. Use them to develop children's understanding of the natural world and promote a desire to protect our oceans in the future.

Into the blue

The ocean life stones are beautifully visual and tactile, providing sensory feedback as children feel with their fingers the same details they observe with their eyes. There's plenty to examine and discuss together:

- You might like to place the sea creatures in an ocean-themed setting for children to find. They could be peeping out from the folds of a blue silky cloth, hidden in a sand tray, or submerged in a shallow water tray among pebbles and plants.
- Ask questions about the sea animals to develop children's thinking, descriptive vocabulary and observation skills. Can they find a red animal? Can they find one with a fin or tail? How many legs (or arms) can they see? Can they spot any eyes? What shapes can they see in the different bodies? Which is their favourite animal, and why? Children might be intrigued to learn that the jellyfish and sea star have no brain, but the octopus has nine!
- Do the children recognise any of these animals? Do they know anything about them already, or know any books or stories about them? Let them be the experts and share their prior knowledge.
- As they compare the animals, encourage children to sort them by various characteristics. Do they have a shell or no shell? Legs or no legs? Claws or no claws?
- Where do children think these animals might live? In a coral reef? In a rock pool? On the seabed? Do they try to hide by being the same colour as their surroundings – are they camouflaged?
- These sea creatures move through the water in a variety of ways. Which of them crawl or scuttle across the seabed? Which of them swim through the water using their legs, arms, flippers, fins, tail or bell? Did you know that lobsters swim backwards using their tail, and squid use jets of water to shoot themselves along?



- Why not have a go at moving like these creatures? Can you scuttle sideways like a crab, move backwards like a lobster, crawl across the floor like a sea star or paddle with your arms and legs like a turtle? You might like to show videos of how the various animals move and encourage children to try and copy them.
- Are any of the children learning to swim? Discuss how we need to come to the surface to breathe air, but most of these animals can take oxygen from the water – only the turtle needs to come up to the surface to breathe air like us.

Shore to seafloor

The ocean life stones are ideal for prompting discussions about the natural world and how we can protect it:

- Talk about some of the different habitats in the oceans, such as the deep sea, frozen seas, tropical seas, coral reefs and shorelines. Find out more about where the sea creatures on the stones live – some of them are found all over the world and others prefer particular habitats.
- Find out more about how some of these creatures blend in with their habitat to hide from predators or prey. Octopuses and squid can change the colour, pattern and even the texture of their skin to blend in with their surroundings.
- Turtles are particularly affected by sea plastic, as they mistake some for prey and eat it, or get entangled in discarded fishing nets. Most sea plastic comes from single-use plastics (such as bottles, bags or wrappers), some of which is dropped on land and then washes into the sea. Talk about ways we can reduce our use of single-use plastics and dispose of them safely.



Aquatic adventures

The ocean life stones offer many opportunities for small world and creative play:



- Create an ideal small world habitat for these fascinating creatures using shallow water, blue biodegradable sensory goo, bubble foam (whisk two parts water with one part sensitive bubble bath using a handheld mixer until it forms stiff peaks), blue fabric or a large mirror lying in a tray. Add aquatic features such as sand, pebbles, shells, plants, 'seaweed' (strips of green fabric or thin green paper), Yellow Door's Ocean Play Sensory Stones, Play Shell, Play Cave or Fish Sensory Play Stones.
- To allow children to role play caring for sea animals in an aquarium, offer the ocean life stones in a large glass container full of water. Artificial plants, pebbles and shells will help the animals feel at home – or use the Ocean Play Sensory Stones, Play Shell or Seashell Sensory Play Stones. Children might like to create signs to tell visitors about the sea animals – you could offer pictures of the animals and writing materials to encourage this.
- Encourage role play as marine biologists, offering a selection of notebooks, ocean-themed books, diving masks and snorkels.
- Imprint the ocean life stones in dough (such as blue or green dough with added plastic-free biodegradable glitter) and encourage children to feel the imprint with their fingers. Which parts of the animals' bodies can they feel? Create imprints of the different creatures in separate pieces of dough and rotate the imprints so children need to orientate the ocean life stone to fit correctly. This will help develop spatial awareness and fine motor skills.
- Immerse the stones in water – can the children identify a stone by touch alone? This will promote fine motor skills and sensory feedback.

- Take turns to pull a stone from an attractive bag or box, keep it hidden, and describe it so another child can guess which it is.
- Look at the pincers on the crab and lobster – what might the animals use them for? Have a go at picking things up with kitchen tongs, which will help with finger strength, hand-eye coordination and concentration. Depending on the size of the tongs, you might like to offer shells, aquatic animal figures or pebbles for children to pick up.
- Both the squid and octopus squirt ink to confuse other animals that are trying to catch them. Use pipettes or play syringes to have a go at firing diluted dark poster paint into water to see this effect.
- Play some ocean-themed music, such as Saint-Saëns' 'Aquarium' from The Carnival of the Animals or the theme from *Finding Dory*, and encourage children to move like sea creatures to the music.



Books about ocean life

Commotion in the Ocean by Giles Andreae

Deep in the Ocean by Lucie Brunellière

Little Turtle and the Sea by Becky Davies

I'm the Biggest Thing in the Ocean by Kevin Sherry

Get talking – useful words

Shell, claw, fin, tail, flipper, leg, arm, suckers, bell, camouflage, ink, crawl, scuttle, shoot water, paddle, ocean, sea, underwater, coral reef, shoreline, rock pool, seaweed, seabed, frozen sea, tropical sea, deep sea.