Activity Ideas
Sensory Play Stones – Seashells

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Many children love finding shells at the beach: bring the joy of discovering nature's hidden treasures into your own setting. These realistic tactile seashell stones will spark curiosity about the natural world and prompt imaginative storytelling.

Shell-ebrate the ocean!

The seashell 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 hide the shells in sand and small pebbles for children to find. This could be under water to add to the intrigue.
- Ask questions about the shells to develop children's thinking, descriptive vocabulary and observation skills. What colours can you see on these shells? Which shells have lines or dots? What different shapes can you see? Which is your favourite, and why?
- Talk about what the shells feel like. Can you feel any ridges, bumps or spiral shapes? Which shells feel smooth?

- Which shells are bigger or smaller? Can you sort them by size – small, medium-sized and large? How many are in each group?
- Explain that all shells once had a small sea animal living inside them, which made the shell originally. Where would the animal live in these shells – inside a hole or between two curved shells? Why might they want to hide inside a shell? Do any of the children ever feel like they'd like to hide inside an imaginary shell? When might they feel like this?
- You might like to compare the shell stones to any real shells you have available. What is the same and what is different? Children might notice that the surfaces of the real shells are thin and light, but still strong. Have any of the children ever found any real shells at the beach? What were they like? Were they loose on the sand or stuck to a rock?
- Children might enjoy spinning, rolling or flipping the stones. What happens to the patterns as the shells are rolled or spun round?

- Challenge children to say the tongue twister 'She sells sea shells on the sea shore'. Draw attention to the /s/ and /sh/ sounds to promote phonological awareness.

Discovering the deep

Find out more about the fascinating creatures that live inside seashells. You might like to use Yellow Door's free downloadable poster for reference, or look at non-fiction books together:

- Which sea animal lives inside each of these shells? The spiral shells are all home to sea snails, whereas the shells that open and close like a book (together with a second matching shell) belong to the clam, mussel, cockle and scallop. The cone shell is a limpet, a special type of sea snail. All these animals are molluscs, with a soft body hidden inside the hard shell.
- Why do these animals make shells to live in? Why might they stick onto rocks?
- Sometimes another animal, such as a hermit crab, might use a shell after the original animal. Use books or videos to find out more about how shells are reused in this way.
- Why is it important to look after our oceans? Find out how these animals are affected by pollution and sea plastic.

Small-world seas

Whether under the sea or on the shoreline, these shimmering shells will inspire imaginative small-world play:

- Make a watery world for fish and other sea life to explore. This could be a tray of water, blue biodegradable sensory goo for a sensory ocean, or for less mess, blue fabric, strips of blue crepe paper or a large mirror. Along with the shells, you might like to add sand for a seabed, plants, coral or Yellow Door's Ocean Play Sensory Stones. Add some aquatic animals, such as the Fish or Ocean Life Sensory Play Stones.

- Create a rock pool using a variety of stones and pebbles, perhaps stuck together with hot glue. Add plenty of places for shy creatures to hide, such as plants and seaweeds (which could simply be small strips of green fabric). Small buckets, nets, magnifying glasses or observation pots will allow children to engage in role play as rock pool biologists.
- Take a trip to the beach in a large sand tray – ideally outdoors. In addition to the shells, create a beach feel using pebbles, seaweed, driftwood (or worn pieces of wood), glass beads, coconut shells or pieces of rope. Crabs, turtles and gulls would feel at home on the beach, or children might like to set up a beach picnic.
- Create a magical aquatic small world using the shells with colourful kinetic sand. You could offer multicoloured fabric strips as seaweed, colourful glass beads as water drops, mermaid figures, treasure chests or a shipwreck.

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- Enjoy Julia Donaldson's *Sharing a Shell* together, then offer a small world story setting so children can retell it. Create a rock pool with the shells, a paper cup and a tub. Add the three main characters – these could be cut-out card shapes, or constructed from pompoms and pipe cleaners.

Shaping shells

The natural beauty of seashells will inspire children's own artistic creations:

- Encourage children to build sandcastles and sand models in a sand pit, then decorate them with the shells and natural materials such as pebbles, glass beads (or sea glass if safe), cones, seaweed-like leaves, or driftwood or worn pieces of wood or bark. You might like to discuss how damp the sand needs to be to make it easier to build with.
- Children could also use the shells and natural materials to create simple patterns or pictures on a sandy backdrop.
- Make imprints with the shells in play dough or damp sand, which will highlight the different textures on the shells. In a large area of damp sand, you could also make repeating patterns (such as limpet-periwinkle-clam-limpet-periwinkle-clam).
- Use play dough or clay to model shell shapes. For a spiral, roll a long sausage, then wrap it into a spiral shape, getting larger as you go along. For a curved shell (such as a clam), roll a ball, cup it in the palm of your hand, then press into it using your thumb to form the curved shape – you might like to offer play dough tools (or even a fork) for creating ridges on the outside surface. For a limpet's conical shell, push a ball of dough onto the tip of your finger, form a point at the top, then take it off your finger and pull the lower edge out a little to complete the cone shape.

- Create your own shells from cardboard junk modelling materials, so children can easily paint colourful designs on them. You could use egg box cups, moulded pulp fruit/vegetable trays, or clamshell packaging. Tearing the outer layer off one side of corrugated cardboard will give you a ridged surface, which you could stick to the outside of a shell to add texture. Alternatively, cut a strip of this card with the ridges running across it (not lengthways), then roll it into a spiral shape (and an adult can fix the end with a small amount of hot glue).

Books about shells

Sharing a Shell by Julia Donaldson

A Shell is Cosy by Dianna Hutts Aston

Shells… And What They Hide Inside by Helen Scales

If you Spot a Shell by Aimée Sicuro

Get talking – useful words

Limpet, sundial, cockle, barrel, painted top, mussel, volute, turret, periwinkle, turban, scallop, clam, mollusc, sea snail, hermit crab, beach, shore, waves, rock pool, sand, ocean, coral, seaweed, spiral, cone, smooth, ridges, bumps.

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