



EARTH DAY BIRTHDAY CAKE

With each birthday we celebrate another year of life and a new beginning. Spring is the season in which we enjoy the rebirth of nature after its long winter sleep, so it's the perfect time to throw a birthday party for the Earth! It's no coincidence that Earth Day, marking the founding of the worldwide environmental movement, takes place during the northern spring, on 22 April every year.

Spring is the time when many animals are born, when birds hatch from their eggs and the land becomes colourful and vibrant with blossom and flowers, ready for bugs to feast on the nectar and pollinate the fruits to come. Indeed, we can think of spring and the explosion of life and colour that it brings as nature's way of celebrating - and what better way to join in than by throwing a birthday party?



This is messy play at its best: a mud cake made from earth and water, decorated with nature's gems - fallen petals, leaves, sticks and stones... whatever the forest floor provides to shape the choices of the designer.



By engaging in this sort of active free play, children become fully immersed in and connected to the environment, developing both physically and cognitively to better understand, interact with and navigate the world around them. As they look for and carry their chosen decorations, noticing the different textures and shapes of

the objects they find, their senses are fully engaged, and the free play involved in pretending to bake, decorate and eat the cake allows for fantastic role-playing opportunities and make-believe games, firing up their imagination and inspiring their creative thinking. Celebrating the world together in this activity connects us not only to the Earth, but also to each other, developing a sense of community, empathy and hopefully inspiring a future generation of environmental custodians.

Get Ready

This is definitely an activity for old clothes that no one will mind getting (very!) dirty. Choose a spot for your celebrations -

LOCATION	Any natural area with soil and trees	
AGE GROUP	2 years +	
LEARNING ABOUT ...	Being active ✿ teamwork ✿ community ✿ empathy ✿ role play ✿ sensory, nature ✿ connections ✿ imagination ✿ creativity ✿ sustainability	
KIT	→ Water (if a nearby source is not available) → Containers to carry	water (suitable for little hands) → Trowel/small spade for each child
OPTIONAL	→ Wooden spoons, buckets or bowls for mixing mud, candles and a lighter/matches, paper plates, cupcake cases, rubbish bags	





somewhere with lots of soil. Make sure it is free of litter, and near to fallen petals and other natural objects (such as sticks, pebbles and feathers) to use to decorate the cake. It's useful if there is somewhere to wash hands nearby; if not, bring water and soap. Get the children to collect water (from a natural source, if there is one) in the containers. If you are not using spoons, they can also collect some sticks for mixing the "cake mixture". Give everyone a trowel.

Get Set

Trowels in hand, everyone digs a hole - they can make a big one together if they want to. If you live in an area of clay soil, mud can easily be made in the ground by pouring water into the hole and then adding the loose soil back in. If the soil is more sandy and water is likely to seep away, put the soil and water into a bucket or similar container. Mix well using your sticks or spoons.

Go!

Once you've made the mud, it's time to build the cake! You can either make one big cake or lots of little ones. Using the trowels or bare hands, start piling up the mud in your chosen spot, moulding the cake into whatever shape you like - a rectangle or circle, perhaps - anything goes! Once you've got a shape you like, start to add some natural decorations. As this is a cake for the Earth, ask the children to find decorations they think the Earth would like. They can explore their surroundings as they search for the



perfect feather, stick, pebble or flower. You could also make other party food, such as mud sausages or mud marshmallows on a stick or mud cupcakes (if you have brought cases).

Once the cake is complete, it's time to add your candles (these can be wax candles that you light, or pretend wooden stick ones) and gather everyone together to sing "Happy Birthday" to the Earth. Maybe the children will want to pretend to eat the cake or leave it for the Earth and its creatures. Celebrations may continue with party games, or it may feel like the right time to end. Before leaving, have everyone gather up any litter to take home.

Endings

At the end of the activity, you might like to discuss with the children what the Earth might like as a gift on its birthday. Some ideas could include planting a new tree, putting up a bird feeder, or making an effort to use less water. This can open up great discussions about how we can all be more friendly to the environment. We are a part of the world, so when we look after it, we are looking after ourselves, too. You could ask the children how old everyone thinks the Earth is (4,543 billion years!), and how long people have lived on it (about 200,000 years). You may like to talk about what the children love best about our magnificent planet. Let the conversation take its own course - we find that, when talking about the Earth, it usually ends up somewhere amazing.



TRY THIS!

If you find that your cake is a little bit runny, try lining the outside with lots of twigs of about the same length, which helps keep everything in place.





BARK MASKS



Mask making has roots in so many cultures across the globe, from the ritual masks created by African or Amazonian tribes to the modern masks used in contemporary art and dance. The masks created in this activity can transform the wearer into an animal, a mythical creature, a plant, a tree or something else entirely ... the imaginative possibilities are limitless.

Wearing masks made from natural materials is a great way to celebrate the summer season, allowing the maker to become part of the surrounding landscape. The trees and plants of summer have put in immense energy to power their growth and create the flowers and seeds of the next generation. With this in mind, bark that has been shed by trees provides the ideal material to make masks during this season, as it causes no damage; if leaves or flowers were used, busy plants would have to divert essential energy into repair.



LOCATION Woodlands with lots of trees to choose from are ideal, but parks with trees also work.

AGE GROUP 4 +

LEARNING ABOUT ... ☿ Communication ☿ history ☿ sustainability ☿ nature connections ☿ gross and fine motor skills ☿ creativity ☿ imagination ☿ independence ☿ confidence ☿ trust ☿ team-building ☿ sensory experiences ☿ tree identification ☿ tree biology

KIT ☿ Soft card ☿ Children's scissors ☿ Hole punch ☿ Sellotape ☿ String } ☿ PVA glue ☿ Glue pots and brushes ☿ Wet wipes for cleaning hands

OPTIONAL ☿ Double-sided sticky tape, pencils and rubbers, colouring pens, water

This activity opens up opportunities for conversations about ancient human history and traditional practices that still take place today, as well as about our connection to and understanding of the world around us. Finding the right trees and bark enhances the children's knowledge of trees, while gathering the materials needed and using them to create the masks is a great way of developing their fine motor skills. This is a truly creative activity, in which the children are free to shape their own piece of work, unconstrained by any defined outcome, which boosts their sense of independence and confidence as well as bringing out their natural artistry.





Get ready

Show everyone a London plane tree. This is a large deciduous tree that has shiny green maple-like leaves and camouflage-patterned bark of olive, grey and cream. Let them know that the outer bark is the tree's protection against any potential threats in the outside world. This layer is non-living, but just underneath it is a living layer. Any harm to this living layer could damage the tree, so they should only collect shed bark that has fallen onto the ground at the base of the tree, or harvest from a fallen tree.

Get set

All the makers gather a handful of bark from the ground, looking for different shapes and sizes to make their mask as unique as each one of them is. Bark collected, you can all collect the rest of the materials for making their mask and settle down to get creative.

Go

Now the mask makers take a piece of card and, having checked it covers their face, cut it into any shape they want. Don't forget the eye holes. To make sure these are in the right place, each maker can line the card up against their face and feel where one of their eyes are, then move the card away from their face while holding this point with their fingers until they can safely cut it away. Then they can fold the card lightly in two in order to cut the second eye slot.

The places where string will be attached on either side of the mask can be strengthened by glueing on a short strip of tape (where the ears will be). Use a hole punch to punch through the card and tape, creating two holes quite close together on both sides. Take two



Summer



WATKINS

pieces of string and tie one on each side of the mask, threading through both holes and making sure the strings are long enough to tie the mask securely at the back of the head. Now the mask makers can break their bark into pieces. Small or large - it's their choice (but small pieces tend to stick better). Get them to apply glue to the paper and then stick on the bark. The glue should dry quite fast.

Everyone will have their own approach to making and decorating their masks. Our son decided that the string holes should go further in from the edge, so the card fans out once tied. We hadn't thought of that but it looked amazing! Some may want to use coloured pens to add further decoration, or glue on other natural items. Once the masks are done, it's time to transform ... we have had many amazing masked performances in our Forest School sessions, featuring tree fairies, insects, warriors and even aliens!

Endings

Invite the makers to talk about their masks: what do they become once the mask is on and why did they choose this? How do they feel wearing their masks? You could discuss how people have used masks for many, many years in ceremonies and rituals. In African culture, for example, masks made from natural materials, including wood, feathers and bone, are used in wedding ceremonies and other rites of passage. How old do they think the oldest mask is? The oldest known mask, made of stone, dates back some 9,000 years!

TRY THIS!

If you do not have access to a London plane tree, many others shed bark, including birch, shagbark hickory, scots pine and eucalyptus.