

Natural Illinois: The Trees You See



You don't have to go to exotic places to find interesting plants and animals to study at home or in the classroom! Illinois is home to a wide variety of trees that are as close as your local park or schoolyard. Exploring trees with children is one way to address Illinois Early Learning and Development Benchmarks 1.E.ECd, 5.B.ECb, 5.C.ECb, 11.A.ECa, 11.A.ECc, 12.A.ECb, and 12.B.ECa.



Start by drawing children's attention to some of the trees around them.

- Ask them to look at trees from a distance and up close. What are some things they notice? Introduce tree-related words such as *bark*, *trunk*, *branch*, *leaf*, *needle*, *twig*, and *roots*.
- Invite children to draw or paint pictures of their experiences with trees. Encourage them to tell the stories that go with their pictures.
- Ask, "What are some things you know about trees?" "How can a person tell that something is a tree?"
- Bring in a local expert to answer children's questions about trees. You might try a botanist, an arborist, or a master naturalist. It helps to have the children rehearse their questions before the visit.



Collect resources about trees.

- Ask a librarian to help you find nonfiction picture books and nature magazines with detailed illustrations of trees.
- Contact the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to order their beautiful posters, such as *Fall Colors*, *Illinois Trees: Volume II* and *Trees: Seeds and Leaves*. For details, see the order form at <https://www.dnr.illinois.gov/publications/>. Illinois teachers can borrow the IDNR "Tree Trunk," which contains books, lumber samples, coloring pages, a plant press, and other resources for pre-K through high school. You can decide which resources are right for you. (See <https://www.dnr.illinois.gov/education/Pages/ItemsForLoan.aspx>)



Visit nearby trees during different seasons.

- Take along field guides, magnifiers, and drawing materials. At any time of year, give children bags for collecting specimens: leaves and nuts during autumn, twigs and evergreen needles in winter, blossoms during spring, and seeds or fruits during summer.
- Have children take photos and make sketches of two to three trees once a month. They can make a book that shows how the trees change over time.
- Use a field guide or an IDNR poster to identify trees. Point out differences in leaves, needles, seeds, and bark patterns. Show the children how to make bark rubbings or leaf rubbings.
- Provide measuring tapes and non-standard measures such as unit blocks or lengths of clothes line. Let children measure the trunks, leaves, and other parts of trees.
- Call children's attention to other living things in or near a tree such as birds, insects, or squirrels. Help them keep a list of the creatures they find.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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