

Outdoor Exploration

For Preschoolers (3 - 5 years)

Children are natural explorers. Set some basic boundaries, and let the child discover. The learning will come.

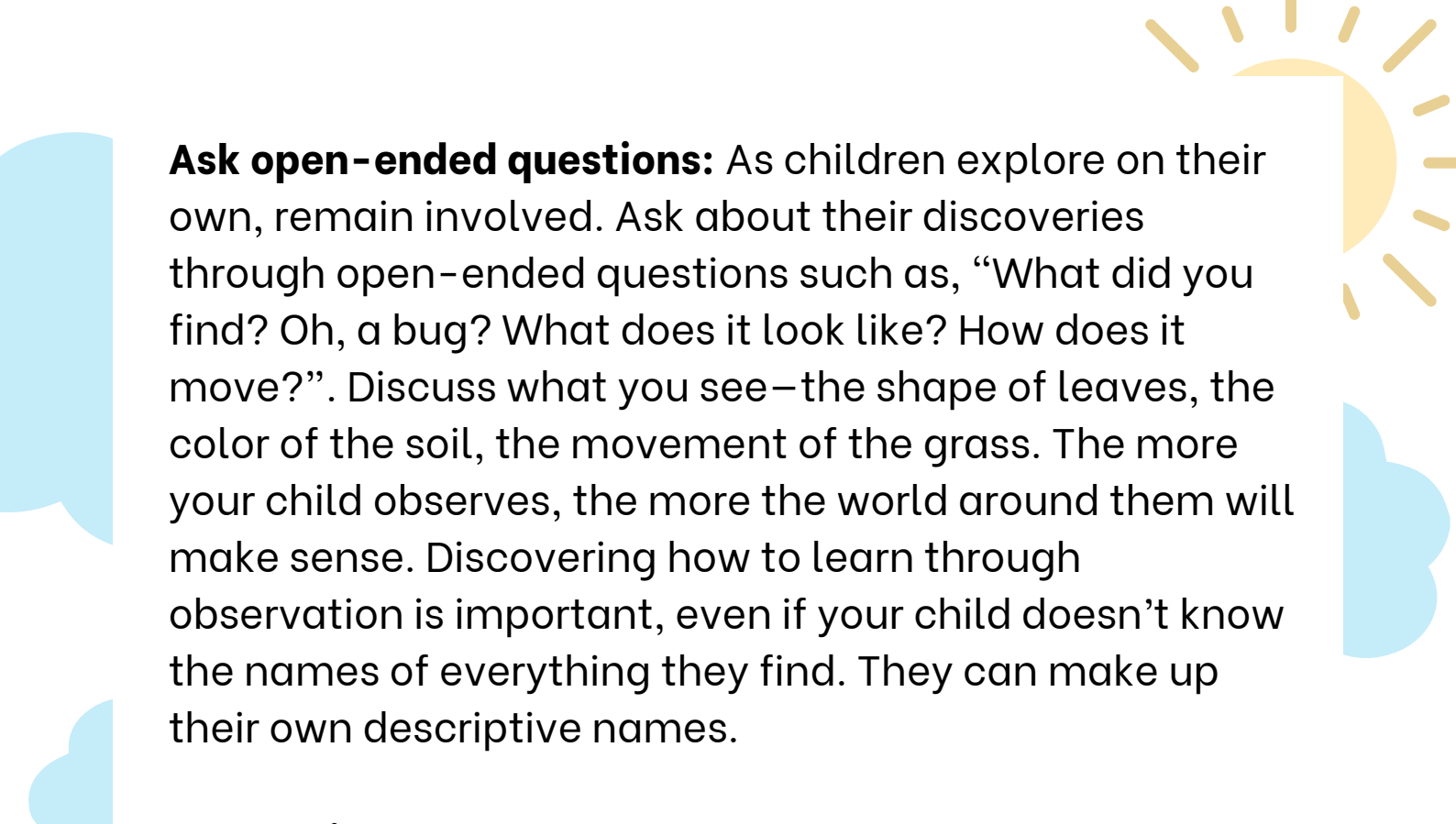
Children use all their senses to observe what is happening around them. Allow them to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste when appropriate.

For a child, everything is new—even the tiniest things are interesting and exciting. In today's entertainment-driven world, exploring the outdoors is an opportunity for children to actively engage in learning.

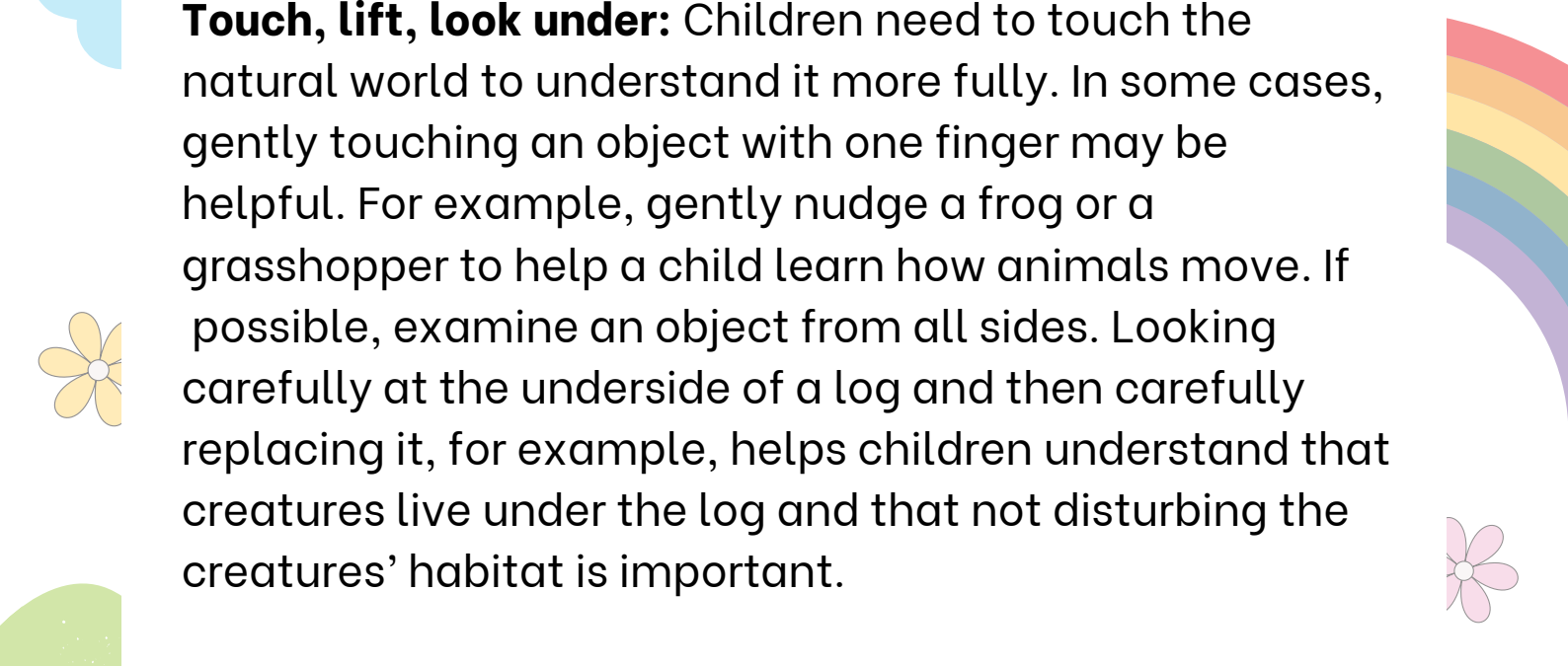
Steps to Guide Outdoor Exploration for Children:

Explore safely: Join your children in the fun if they want you to and keep an eye on them. Before you begin, dress appropriately and teach your child the basic safety rules of the outdoors. Simplicity is often the key to establishing safety rules, and there is usually no need to restrict children.

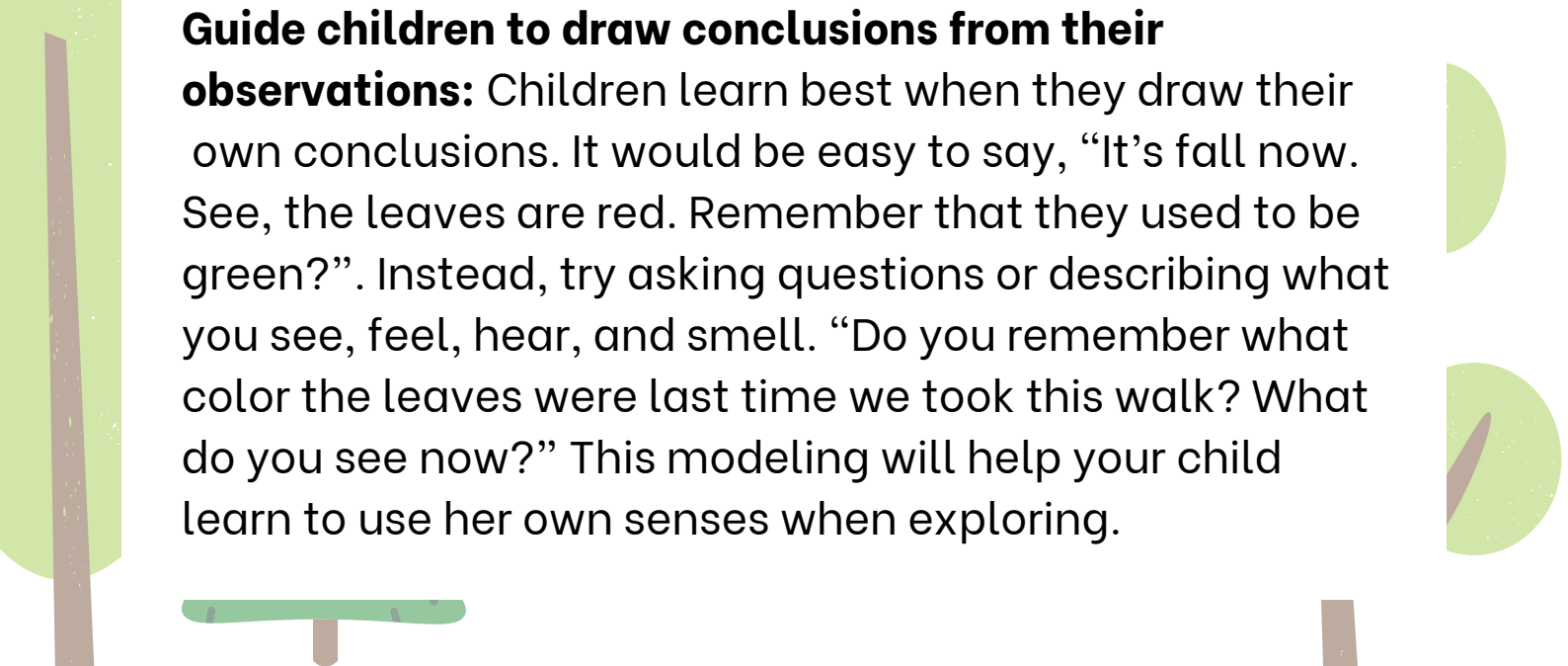
Let children choose what to explore: Without offering suggestions, see what children do on their own. Do they run? Build? Climb? Even the simplest activities lead to exploration and discovery.



Ask open-ended questions: As children explore on their own, remain involved. Ask about their discoveries through open-ended questions such as, “What did you find? Oh, a bug? What does it look like? How does it move?”. Discuss what you see—the shape of leaves, the color of the soil, the movement of the grass. The more your child observes, the more the world around them will make sense. Discovering how to learn through observation is important, even if your child doesn’t know the names of everything they find. They can make up their own descriptive names.



Touch, lift, look under: Children need to touch the natural world to understand it more fully. In some cases, gently touching an object with one finger may be helpful. For example, gently nudge a frog or a grasshopper to help a child learn how animals move. If possible, examine an object from all sides. Looking carefully at the underside of a log and then carefully replacing it, for example, helps children understand that creatures live under the log and that not disturbing the creatures’ habitat is important.



Guide children to draw conclusions from their observations: Children learn best when they draw their own conclusions. It would be easy to say, “It’s fall now. See, the leaves are red. Remember that they used to be green?”. Instead, try asking questions or describing what you see, feel, hear, and smell. “Do you remember what color the leaves were last time we took this walk? What do you see now?” This modeling will help your child learn to use her own senses when exploring.



Some Cautions

- Be aware of the environment and the creatures that live there.
- Always watch where they put their hands and feet. If they left shoes outside, make sure they empty their shoes before putting them back on.
- Use clear cups and look before they drink. No one wants to accidentally drink an insect!
- Be wary of brown recluse spiders (also known as violin, or fiddleback, spiders), black widow spiders, scorpions, and poisonous snakes.
- Be cautious when lifting boards or rocks to find animals and insects. Also be careful to observe what is living there without disturbing their environment
- Recognize poison ivy, poison sumac, and poison oak. If you or your child encounters any of these plants, scrub the exposed area with dish detergent or another strong soap.

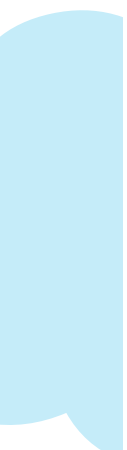


Prepare yourself and your child to encounter insects and stains.


- Wear old clothes you don't mind getting dirty.
- Wear light-colored clothing to keep insects at bay. Some insects are attracted to dark colors.
- Wear a scarf or hat when walking through the woods.




Preschooler Activities



Explore holes and mud: In an out-of-the-way corner, dig a hole and pour water in it to see what happens. Ask your child where she thinks the water goes. Play with the mud, squish it between your toes, and jump over or in the hole. When you are done, fill the hole with dirt again, and check it later to see what's growing there.



Press flowers and leaves: Find flowers and let them dry, pressed between the pages of a heavy book. Once they are dry, use them to make crafts. For example, put clear contact paper over the flowers to make a placemat. In the fall, try the same activity with leaves.



Follow an ant trail: Look up and look down, look all around, and feel free to crawl on the ground. Place a small piece of food nearby and watch what happens.

Go for a nature scavenger hunt:

Find something that:

- Is a certain color
- Is dry, wet, shiny, or pretty
- Is tiny or huge
- The wind blows
- Crawls
- Has no legs, four legs, or six legs
- Or make up your own ideas!

For each item you find or recognize have your child keep note.

