



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.

