

The great sock challenge!

It all started, with a challenge. On a hot day last year, Sue Sheldrick and her fellow childminders from Luton's Wigmore childminding group, brought their children to a huge early years event in Luton, which was showcasing all sorts of exciting practical ideas. My job was to provide an entertaining activity outdoors for the children – who ranged from five months to five years. Question: How to hold the attention of a large group of children I had never met before, in a completely new environment? Answer: do something with socks!

Children and adults seem to find socks fascinating, and there are an endless number of activities that you can invent which will not only hold their attention, but also develop language and learning across a wide age range.

We sat on my rugs on the grass in the sunshine, and I passed around a selection of soft toys related to children's TV programmes. We encouraged the children to swap the toys with each other, until they got the one that they liked best. This activity was exciting in itself, because it encouraged the children to talk about the toys, and why they liked or didn't like what they had got.

Once everyone was satisfied, I brought out my picnic hamper containing a large collection of pairs of socks of all different colours, patterns and sizes. I handed every child a sock, and we played the swapping game again, until everyone had the sock they were most happy with.

Next we helped the children to stuff their TV toy into their sock! Again, this encouraged lots of chat: My sock is too small for this Bob the Builder; Thomas the Tank Engine is blue, and my sock has got blue stripes; I can still see Peppa Pig's nose; and so on.

Finally, we played 'Pass the Socks' (just like 'Pass the Parcel', but without the wrapping paper).





Case study

Games from The Sock Challenge

Game 1

Hang all the socks on the line randomly. Ask a child to choose one sock, listen to the sound it makes, and see if they can find its pair.

Game 2

Hang one sock from each pair on the line and put the remainder into the box. Ask the child to take one sock out of the box and listen to the sound it makes. Then ask them to see if they can locate the matching sock on the line.

Game 3

Hang all the socks on the line randomly. Ask the child to choose two socks and listen to their sounds. If they are not a pair, move onto the next child and see if they can locate a matching pair. (This game is for older children, to encourage their memory skills.)

Game 4

Hang one of each pair onto the line and put the remainder into the box. An adult shakes each of the socks on line, and asks the children to listen to the sound that each sock makes, and remember where they are situated. Ask each child to choose a sock from the box and find the matching sock from the line.

We all had a great laugh, and the children were not only entertained, but had remained focused for about 30 minutes. Then it was time for me to set my challenge to the adults: 'Can you invent and try out a set of activities involving socks, for children from six months to eight-years-old, that would interest the readers of **Child Care**? If you can do that, then I will donate the fee for writing the article to provide resources for Wigmore's childminding group.' Sue and colleagues eagerly accepted the challenge, and then I promptly forgot all about it!

Three months later, I received a very detailed account of a morning's successful activity with 25 children and 25 pairs of socks! The group had spent the day in the Ashridge Forest in Buckinghamshire, and the main focus of the morning was finding out if 'The Sock Challenge', as it became known, would stimulate children aged from six months to 15 years. The answer was a definite 'Yes!'

Sue Sheldrick explains: 'We had a lot of fun thinking up the activities, and our aim was to help the children investigate objects and materials by using as many

of their senses as possible. We decided to use clean socks, so there was no need to use the sense of smell!

'Our activities revolved around pairs of socks, a washing line and a large decorated shoebox. Each pair of socks was filled with materials that made different sounds, including bells, crinkly paper, wooden clothes pegs, pebbles, gravel, and dried peas.

'We felt it would be important to have pairs of socks of identical sizes and colour, as this would encourage the children to focus mainly on the sound and feel of the socks (and not make it too easy). We found two trees in a shady part of the forest and hung the washing line between them.'

And how did the children respond? Sue and colleagues are very enthusiastic: 'All the adults had great fun making up the activity. The older children and teenagers enjoyed helping the younger children, who in turn were completely absorbed in playing with the socks, and joining in the games. It was easy to make the activities more challenging for the older children, who became quite competitive! There was plenty to talk about, and we were able to use this activity over and over again when we got home.'

The fee for this article was used to provide resources for the Wigmore childminding group. With thanks to Sue and Kevan Sheldrick, Karen Smith, Tracy Blair, Debbie Galvani, and all the childminders and children of the Wigmore childminding group.

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