

# ART WITH REPURPOSED MATERIALS

ART ACTIVITIES TO DO AT HOME

A photograph of a wire spring sculpture, possibly made from a repurposed metal spring, set against a vibrant purple background. The sculpture features a dense, coiled section on the left and a more loosely wound, flowing section on the right. In the background, there are abstract, organic shapes in shades of yellow and orange, suggesting a creative and artistic environment.

7 FUN ACTIVITIES • EDITED BY LOUISA PENFOLD



# Contents

- 02** About this ebook
- 03** Getting started
- 04** Experimenting with light and shadow
- 08** Experimenting with nature frames
- 11** Experimenting with cardboard
- 14** Experimenting with wind chimes
- 17** Experimenting with bioplastics
- 21** Experimenting with stitching

Image: Farah Osman







Image by laura fantini

# About this ebook

Art is a language that allows children to express themselves in ways that go beyond words.

It encourages them to make new connections between themselves, other people, and the world around them.

This ebook shares six fun and easy art ideas you can do at home as a family.

The activities have been designed for children aged two years and over however you could modify these for all ages.

What I love about this guide is that you won't need to spend money buying new or expensive art materials as each activity shares how you can do art at home with

bits and pieces you most likely already have.

For more children's art ideas, you can check out the contributor's Instagram accounts:

Laura Fantini at [Laurafantini\\_it](#)  
Angela Ruggles at [The Nature Atelier](#)  
Jenna Planden at [Mousse Art Studio](#)  
Stephanie O'Brien at [Crafted by Me Art](#)  
Farah Osman at [Frh\\_art](#)  
and Jaime Bruce

I would also like to thank [Kelly Boucher](#) for sharing her ideas early on in this publication.

Happy making!

Dr Louisa Penfold (Editor)  
[Art Play Children Learning](#)

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# Getting started

## What are repurposed materials?

Repurposed materials are materials that have had a previous life as something else. For example, a cardboard box, recycled string, bottle tops, plastic containers, or natural materials. These materials are important in children's play as they are open-ended and encourage imagination and creativity. Children often see the creative potential in these materials that adults may look over.

## Collecting repurposed materials

Repurposed materials can be gathered from anywhere including your house, garden, or local thrift stores. Activities often work best if you gather a large amount of one material in advance.

Children can help to collect these materials. For example, you could give them a basket and set them the challenge of collecting things from around the house or garden.

Also try tracking down any creative recycle centers in your area. For example, Reverse Garbage (Brisbane, Australia), The Beautiful Stuff Project (Boston, USA) or ReMIDA centers (worldwide).

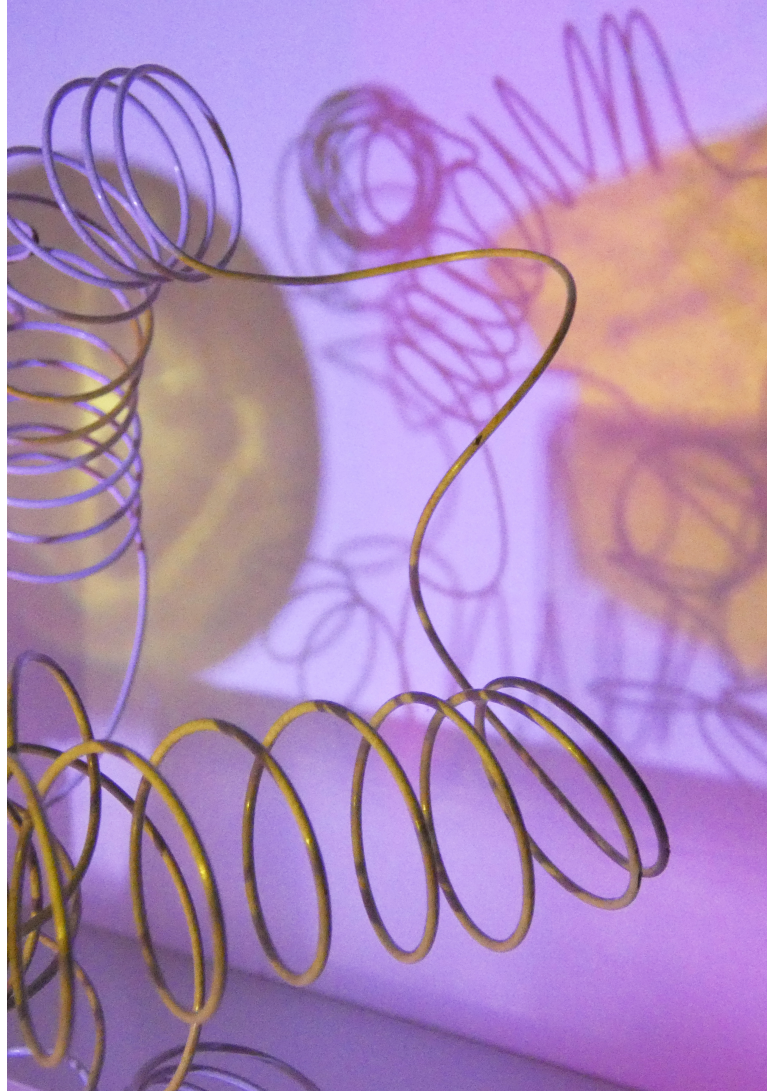
Local businesses may also have material off-cuts that they are happy to give away. For example, leftover cardboard boxes and tubes from your local post office.

## Safety tips

Please note that some repurposed materials pose a choking hazard. Please use care and judgement when collecting and using materials with children, especially if they are under the age of four.

Please also make sure that all materials have been cleaned, sanitized, and do not have any sharp edges before they are presented to children. The activities featured in this ebook should be supervised by an adult at all times.





# Experimenting with light and shadow

BY LAURA FANTINI

Laura Fantini is an atelierista from Reggio Emilia, Italy who has been working in early childhood centers for 14 years. Her inquiry-led approach to working with children brings together art, science, and digital technologies. Laura is fascinated by archeology and the phenomena of light. She is also interested in nature and understands children's learning as emerging from within a complex ecosystem.

## About the activity

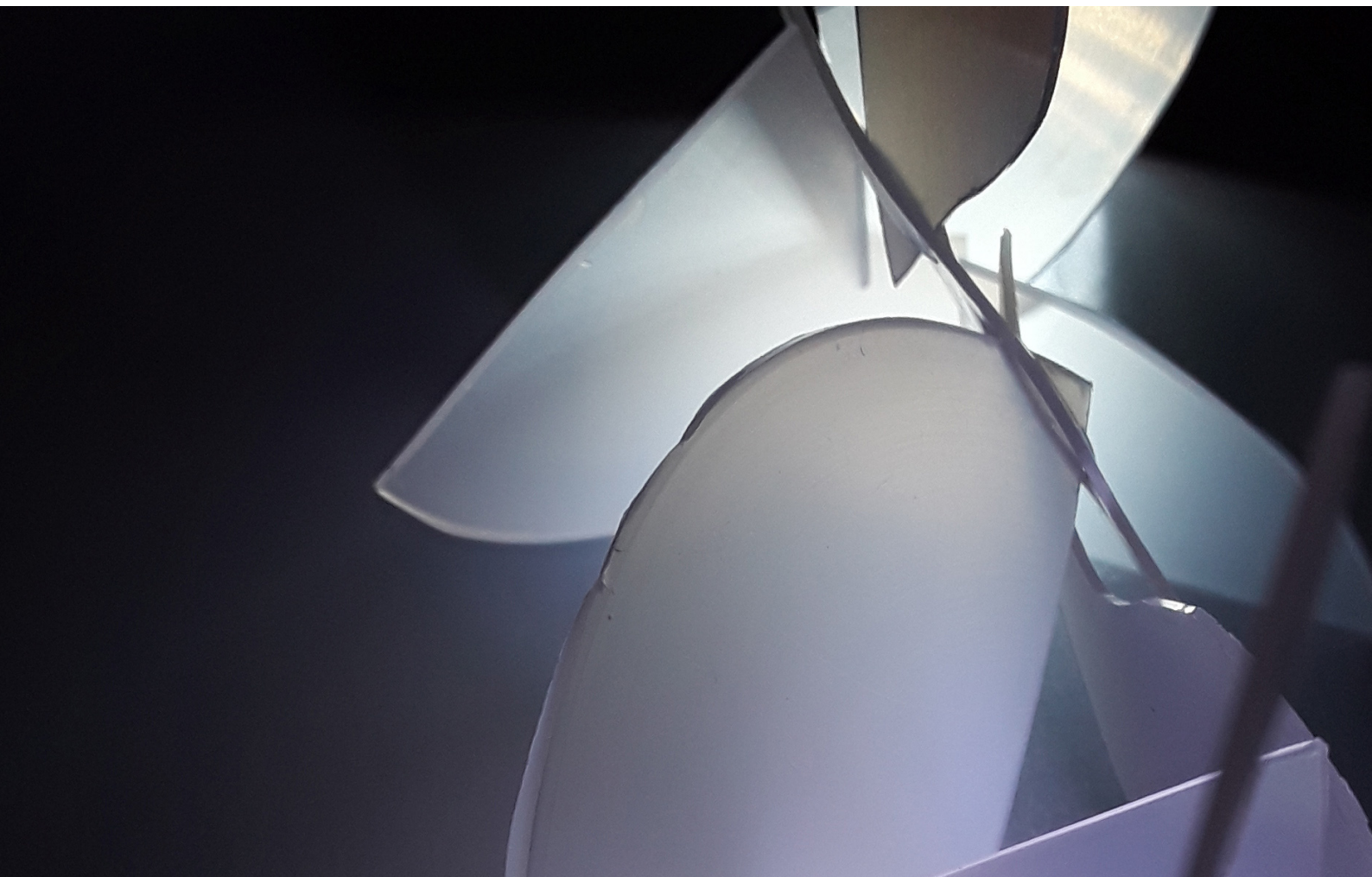
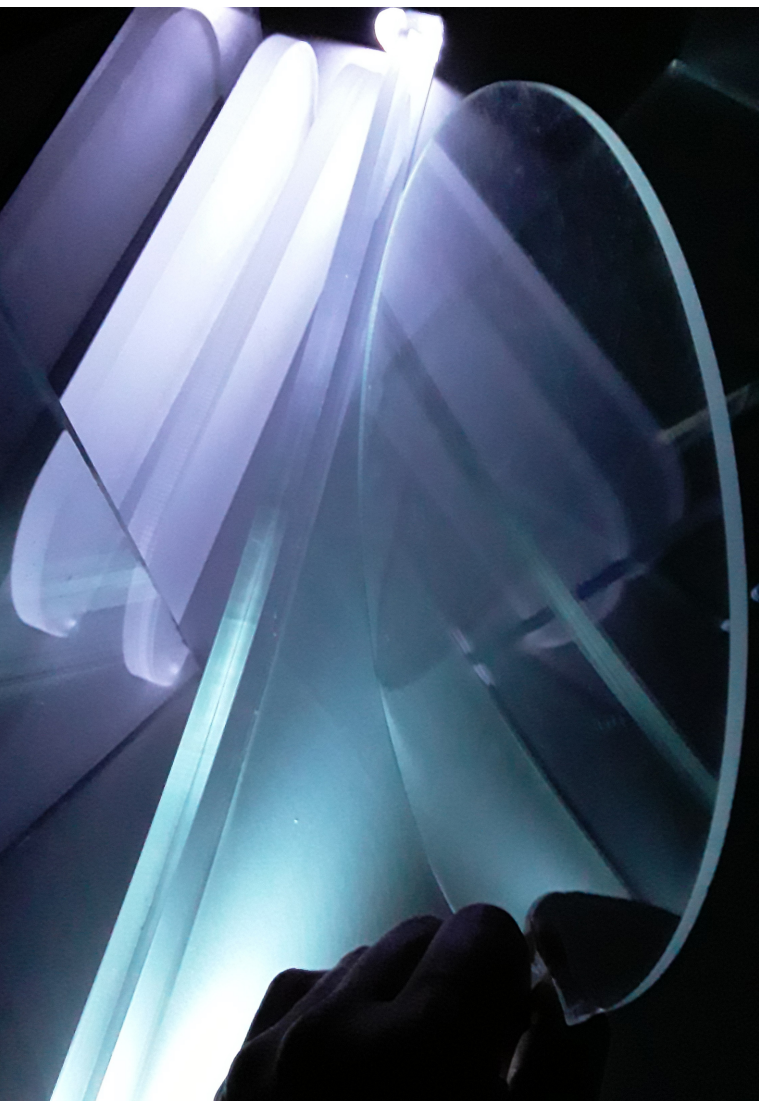
Light is a phenomena that children can observe, manipulate, and interact with.

When we use repurposed materials to experiment with light, the materials transform and take on new identities.

## What you need

- Transparent, translucent, and opaque materials. For example, plastic packaging, bottles, and containers.
- A torch, lamp, or smartphone flashlight.
- A flat surface
- A wall or vertical surface
- A camera







### Gather your materials

With children, look for recycled materials around the house. I suggest not buying disposable plastic items, but if you have them at home, you can extend their life by reusing them. Encourage children to look for unusual objects. For example, materials that are transparent, colored, translucent, and opaque are ideal.

### Start experimenting

Find a flat surface, ideally against a wall, to work on. Children can then experiment with arranging the materials and shining the torch through to create different light effects. Each material will react differently to the light. For example, some surfaces will reflect it, while others will be transparent, transmit, or filter the light. Other materials may be opaque or translucent and as a result, generate shadows or dark-colored shapes. You can also invite children to use the materials to create 3D structures, like a tower.

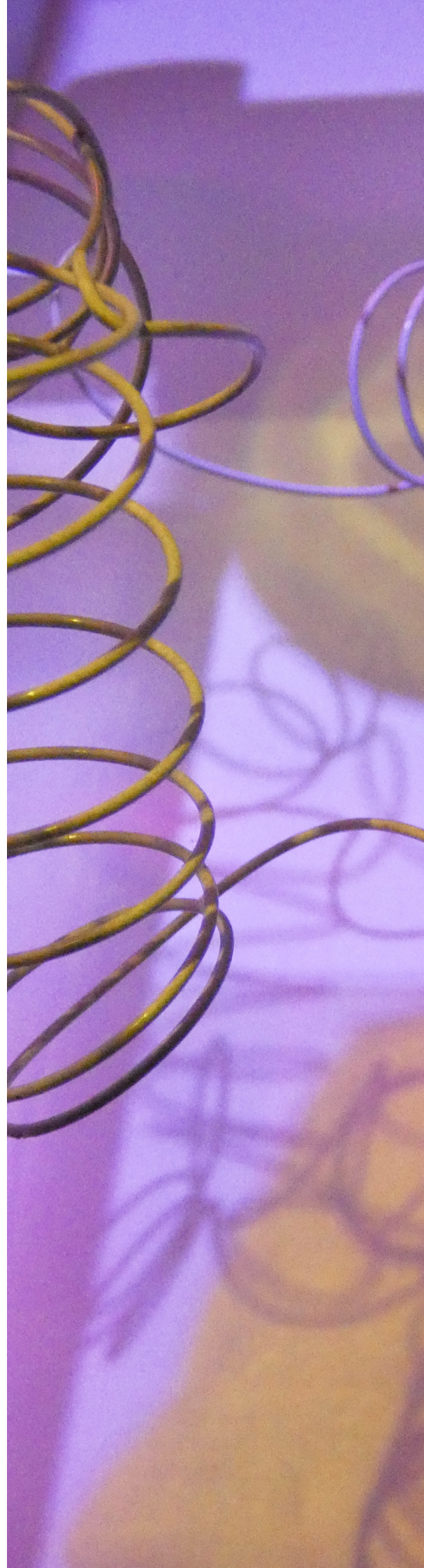
*"The materials and tools will encourage children to explore concepts such as stability, balance, height, weight, and proportion"*

### Taking it further

Light filtration is an interesting concept for children to experiment with as it involves the transmission and absorption of light across different materials. To explore this, try layering materials to create a variety of shadows and lighting effects. Children may also explore the concept of 'perspective by placing materials closer or further away from the light source. This will generate shadows of various sizes and shapes.

### Extending children's creativity

Adults can support learning by asking questions like:  
What happens if we shine the light on the material?  
Are all the shadows the same or are they different?  
Why does the shadow become larger or smaller?  
What does this shadow remind you of?  
Where does the shadow go when we turn off the torch?  
What happens if we use two torches?  
What happens if we move the torch closer?





### Why we love experimentng with light and shadow

Light and shadow are phenomena that have fascinated many artists and designers. For example, both György Kepes and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy experimented with light and movement extensively. A great example of this is Moholy-Nagy's 'Light Prop for an Electric Stage'.

This activity allows children to compose, deconstruct, and transform repurposed materials in many different ways. As light is not permanent moment (it is constantly changing form and disappearing) adults can encourage children to focus on the creative process, instead of creating a final product. Light and shadow are therefore dynamic phenomena for children's learning that transform in unpredictable ways. For example, a plastic packaging container changes form as the light passes through it to make unusual shapes and colors on the wall.

Experimentation with light and shadow can also encourage storytelling in children's play. For example, a shadow may become a landscape, character, or animal that children spontaneously construct narratives around.



Image: Materials such as plastic bottles, containers, bubble wrap, springs, and lids can be repurposed in this art activity to encourage children's experimentation.



# Experimenting with nature frames

BY JAIME BRUCE

Jaime Bruce is an Australian-born, London-based teacher who has been working as an elementary school teacher for the past eight years. She enjoys facilitating children's artistic pursuits in addition to gardening, oil painting, and climbing trees.

## About this activity

In this activity, children collect and arrange materials such as leaves, sticks, flowers, and rocks into a rectangular 'frame'. You don't need to be in a forest to do this activity, Nature frames can be made in any outdoor space including a backyard, city park, or allotment.

## What you need

- A container or pocket for collecting materials
- A flat surface to act as the Nature Frame's canvas
- A camera as Nature Frames won't last forever, photos and stop-motion animation apps are a great way to record children's creative process

## Making the frame

Work with children to gather a handful of sticks and twigs then use them to create a rectangular shape on the flat surface. This empty frame acts as an invitation for children to fill them with natural materials!

Image by Jamie Bruce







Images by Jamie Bruce





### Gather your materials

Children can collect natural materials, such as sticks, flowers, stones, sand, and rocks in their pocket or a container. It may be a good idea to remind children that natural places are special habitats for many animals and plants so it may be considerate to take only what is needed and find materials that are already on the ground to minimize any disturbance.

### Start experimenting

Children can experiment with arranging the materials inside the frame. They could create a picture, a mandala, or something more abstract. I have found that children are often drawn to sorting items based on color, shape, variety, or size.

*"Children are natural collectors. They forage treasures even in the most banal and uninteresting places, filling their pockets, carrying tiny things."*

### Extending children's creativity

Adults can support learning by asking questions like:  
I see you have found something big and spiky. How could you use this in your frame?  
Why do you think the leaves are different shapes?  
How do these stones make your fingers feel?  
What do you think will happen to our artwork once we leave?

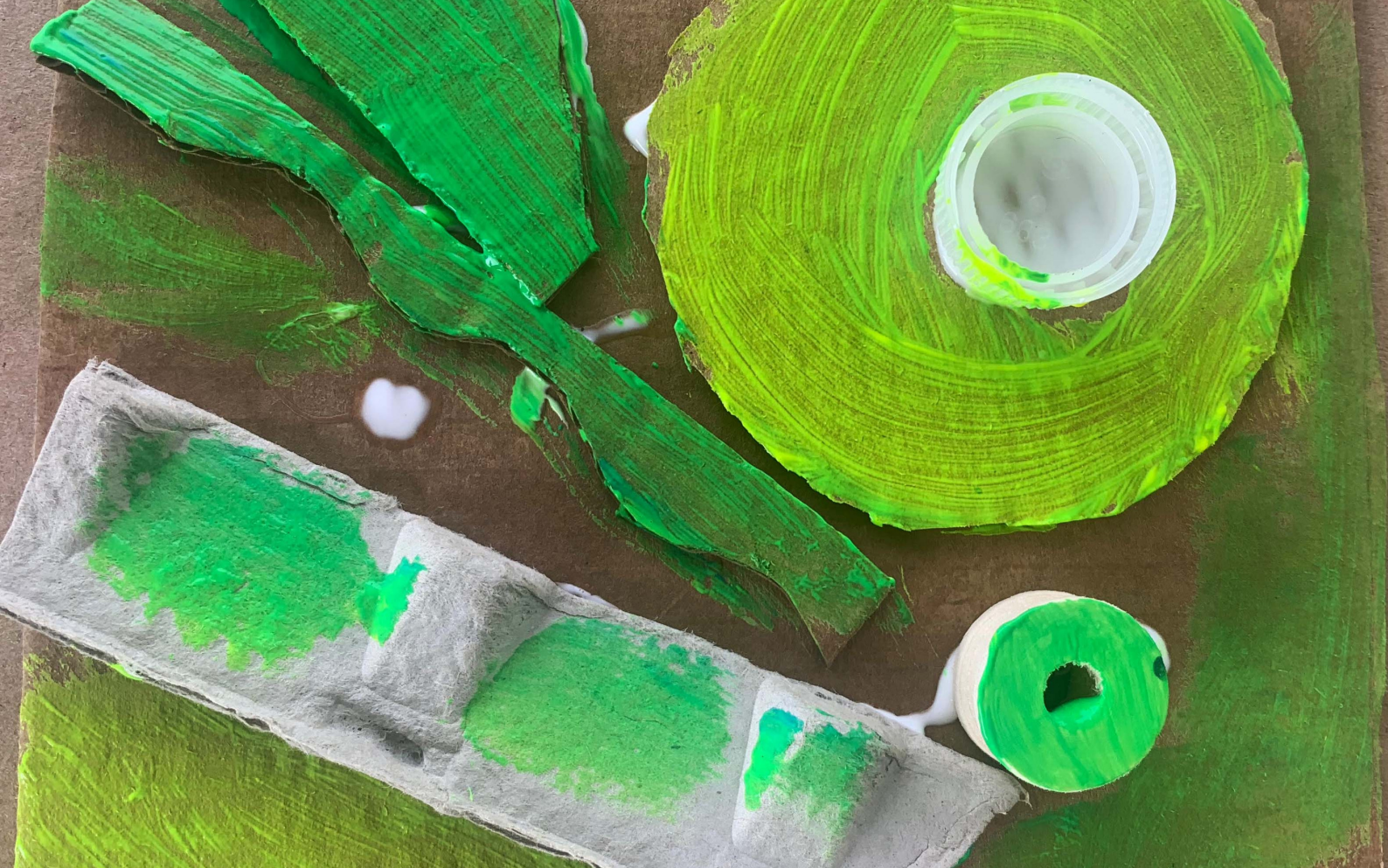
### Why we love Nature Frames

Nature Frames are a simple yet open-ended activity that encourages children to connect with nature and think seriously about the planet. It's important that children see art as more than an endless supply of paper, glitter, paint, and sellotape. I hope that as they grow up, they might choose more sustainable art supplies as a result of their experiences with repurposed materials in their youth.

In many countries, natural materials change depending on the season. Making a Nature Frame in Autumn allows experimentation with warm-colored leaves whereas Winter may involve mud, snow, or puddles. One of the most famous artists to make art in nature is Andy Goldsworthy. Children may enjoy looking at how he has arranged leaves, sticks, and stones to create different visual effects.







# Experimenting with cardboard

BY STEPHANIE O'BRIEN

Stephanie O'Brien is an art educator based in La Jolla, California. A former art museum director, Stephanie has enjoyed working in children's creative education for over 20 years. She holds an MA in Art Education from Stanford University and is a certified early childhood educator. Stephanie currently runs '[Crafted by Me](#)', a mobile art studio for toddlers and teenagers.

## About this activity

Cardboard is a great art material for children's open-ended play. In this activity, children make a sculpture-like structure called an 'assemblage' using recycled materials from around the house.

## What you need

- Recycled cardboard such as delivery boxes, food packaging, and paper rolls
- School glue
- Small repurposed materials such as bottle tops, egg carton cups, twigs, and rocks collected from around the house.
- Tempera or acrylic paint

## Gathering materials

Children can collect recycled cardboard such as tubes and packaging boxes before starting the activity. Any large pieces of cardboard can be cut into smaller shapes and sizes.







*“The act of gathering and collecting recycled cardboard is a creative process in itself.”*

### **Taking it further**

Introduce the small repurposed materials so children can stick these onto their creation. Notice in the photo (right) the child was fascinated by gluing and placing pebbles onto bottle caps. Once the glue has dried, children can then experiment with painting their creation. There's no need to wash the brush as mixing paint on the cardboard is a fun sensory experience in itself for children!

### **Extending children's creativity by asking:**

How does it feel to paint on the bumpy cardboard?

I see that you pushed all of the twigs into the clay. Can you tell me more about this?

What was the trickiest part of playing with the cardboard?

### **Why we love experimenting with cardboard**

Cardboard assemblages is a process-led art activity that encourages children to experiment and problem-solve with materials. Children can collect and combine everyday objects into new and exciting creations.

Many modern artists have also been fascinated by making assemblages. For example, Joseph Cornell was one of the first artists to create an assemblage. In Soap Bubble Set (1948-50) and Untitled (1948), John would stick objects like toys, marbles, natural materials, and paper together to create a unified structure.

Louise Nevelson was another artist who created assemblages. She did this by sticking together dismantled furniture, wood scraps, and boxes that she found on New York streets as can be seen in artworks including 'An American Tribute to the British People' (1960-64) and Symphony 3, 1974 that looked like make-believe cityscapes.







# Experimenting with wind chimes

BY FARAH OSMAN

Farah is a Singapore-based atelierista who recently obtained her Bachelor (Honours) of Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts in collaboration with Goldsmiths. Farah's work with multi-aged children while exploring the encounters of everyday materials and objects.

## About this activity

Children can explore making sound and movement by creating a wind-chime out of repurposed materials.

## What you need

- A long stick (10 inches approx.)
- Recycled paper including envelopes, junk mail, wrapping paper, brochures, magazines and newspaper

- String or twine
- Glue
- Bells or small pieces of metals such as spoons (to make noises when banging together)
- Scissors

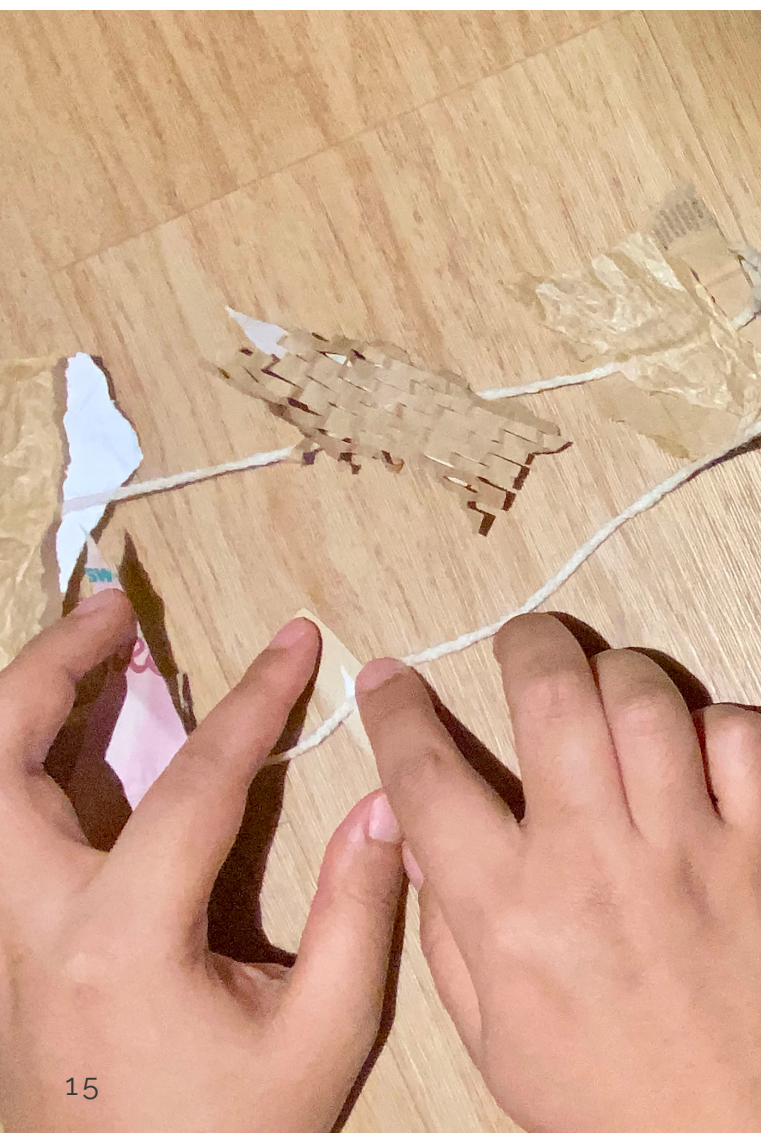
## Gathering materials

Find a pole-like structure that can be used as the wind chime's base, for example a 10 inch stick, coat hanger, ruler, or embroidery hoop.

## Create your wind chime composition

Lay your repurposed materials out on a flat surface alongside the glue, scissors, and string. Cut lengths of string approx. 15-30cm and tie end of each string to the base..







Children can then cut, crumple, and tear the recycled paper into different shapes before sticking it to the string with glue. Let children use their imagination by experimenting with the paper. Some may choose to paste the paper immediately onto the string, while others may prefer to arrange them into a pattern before doing so. You can also add materials like dried leaves, bottle caps, plastics, and small metal objects to make different sounds. Heavier and lighter materials can also be added to make the wind chime move in different ways.

*"Wind chimes are fantastic because they have a performative quality that children love to explore."*

### Testing out your wind chime

Once complete, children can bring their wind-chime outside to test! To draw attention to the sounds it makes, adults can ask children question like, "what do you think this sounds like?". It may also be interesting to observe the paper's shadows as it moves in front of the sun. You can hang the wind-chime in different places around your house or take it outside at different times of the day. Compare how the sound and kinetic movements change depending on the weather and light. You can record this using a camera.

### Extending children's creativity by asking:

What can you hear?

What sound does the wind-chime make?

What does it look like?

What makes the wind-chime move?

How could we make the sound louder or softer?

### Why we love wind chimes

Sound has also been a popular material for contemporary artists to experiment with. For example, the artist [Cevdet Ere](#)[k](#) has explored rhythm through making site-specific installations. In his project, '[Shore Scene Soundtrack](#)' (2012), he uses a piece of carpet to produce ocean noises. This artwork pushes the use of everyday objects to make new sounds, movements, and meanings.

By doing this activity, children can explore new creative ways of using repurposed materials. For example, how they can become noisy and animated artworks. By using repurposed materials in new ways, wind chimes encourage children to think about sustainability and reuse in art-making.







# Experimenting with bioplastics

BY ANGELA RUGGLES

Angela is a museum educator, archaeologist, and founder of The Nature Atelier, a children's art studio in Portland, Oregon. She is passionate about the environment and creating settings where families can co-create and explore nature using sustainable and eco-friendly materials. When she's not busy creating new programs or art kits, you can find her exploring nature, gardening, or cooking with her twin toddlers.

## About this activity

Bioplastic is a material created out of vegetable fats, oils, corn starch, straw, woodchips, sawdust, and recycled food waste. In this activity, children arrange and preserve natural materials in a liquid gelatin before it sets into a hard-like material.

Experimenting with bioplastic is a multi-day project as it takes time for the gelatin to cure and become hard. This activity can be adjusted for children aged between two and ten years old. I provide two examples of how children can create with bioplastic: a nature window and colored binoculars.

## What you need: Nature Window

- Gelatin
- Boiling water
- Large recycled plastic lid or parchment paper
- Natural materials such as leaves, flowers, or moss (dried, fresh or pressed).
- Sticks or jar bands
- Twine or yarn
- Food coloring and bio glitter (optional)
- Cup and spoon for mixing gelatin







### What you need: Colored Binoculars

- Gelatin
- Boiling water
- Small recycled lids
- Cup and spoon for mixing gelatin
- Toilet paper tubes
- Cardboard
- Tape or glue
- Twine or yarn

### Gathering your materials

If making the Nature Window, go on a nature walk and search for different colors and textures to include in your piece. Use this time to enjoy, observe, and discuss the natural world with children. If making Colorful Binoculars, search your recycling bin for the lids, cardboard and toilet paper tubes.

### Preparing your materials

As gelatin begins to set within 10-15 mins, it's best to prepare your materials in advance. Lay out your parchment or plastic lids. If you are creating using natural materials, thinner leaves and flower petals work best. Pull apart flowers and slightly press them. If making the Nature Window, tie twine onto the top stick or onto the jar bands. Older children might want to lay out their design or create a sketch in advance. They don't need to stick to their plan and it is ok to experiment along the way but this planning step often leads to more creative discovery and deeper engagement.

### Mixing your gelatin

Bioplastics are created best when there is a high gelatin to water ratio. In a humid climate 1 part gelatin to 3 parts water works best. If your climate is more arid, a 1:4 gelatin to water ratio should be fine. The water should be boiling, so you may need to measure and pour this over the gelatin for children. Add the water slowly to the gelatin to avoid lumps and bubbles. Use a strainer if too many lumps form. Pour a thin layer of the mixture into your lids or parchment paper.

### Creating the Nature Windows

Press sticks into the gelatin to create a frame, then place your flowers and other natural materials. You will want them to be completely immersed in the gelatin, so you may need to go over and press things down if they float up. Add swirls of colors, bio-glitter and pour a bit more gelatin over any larger pieces as needed. Set in a warm sunny spot to dry. Depending on thickness, it will take 1-3 days to dry and a few more to cure into a plastic-like hardness. After 1 day, or once the gelatin is firm, place the bioplastic on a fresh dry sheet.





### Creating the Colored Binoculars

With a thin layer of gelatin in your lids, add swirls of color or bio-glitter to the mixture. Place the toilet paper tubes into the middle of the solution. Set in a warm sunny spot to dry, this may take up to 1-3 days. Once the edges start to curl up, carefully remove it from the lids. It is normal for the material to warp and change shapes. Once dry, construct your binoculars using cardboard tape and twine.

*"Bioplastic is biodegradable as it can be broken down by bacteria and living organisms, making it an eco-friendly alternative to plastic."*

### Extending children's creativity by asking:

What happens when we add the water to the gelatin?

How is the gelatin changing as it cools?

How do your fingers feel after you touch the gelatin?

What patterns can you make in your design?

Why have you chosen these colors, flowers, or design?

What does the Nature Window look like in the sun?

What do you see when you look through it?

### Why we love bioplastics

Bioplastic feel like resin yet is different as it is non-toxic. This makes it safe for children to play with. We can get inspiration for how bioplastics can be used in children's art activities by looking at how contemporary artists have experimented with resin. For example, [Mitch Gobel](#) pours resin over canvas and used with paints to create a glass-like effect.

Resin can also be poured into molds and used to create sculptures and mixed media pieces like the work of [Annalugia Boeretto](#) and [Yamada Isana](#). Though bioplastic made from gelatin won't always perform exactly the same as resin, it is a great material to explore a variety of art projects in an eco-friendly way. I also recommend checking out [Muddy Puddly Laboratory](#) for more information on the science and how-to of gelatin bioplastic. If you'd like more inspiration of the many ways you can create also see [Eat.Play.Paint.](#)







# Experimenting with stitching

BY JENNA PLANDEN

Jenna Planden has 12 years experience as an elementary school teacher and is the owner of [Mousse Children's Art](#), a process-based art studio in Calgary, Canada. She is passionate about providing open-ended art opportunities that grow children's creatively.

## About this activity

Stitching can be a tricky activity for young children as their hand-eye coordination is in development. This activity shares how children can learn the up and down movement of sewing without having to position the thread in a specific place.

As large-scale artworks always begin with small-scale experimentation, children can apply their stitching skills in new art activities later on.

## What you need

- Sturdy paper such as cardstock
- Stick(s) smaller than your paper
- Embroidery thread (various colors)
- Yarn needles (steel ones work best)
- Push-pin
- Scissors
- Tape (sellotape, masking, or wash tape)
- Tray (useful to stop table scratches)







## Gathering Materials

Create an inviting work surface by laying the materials out on a tray. Aesthetically pleasing set-ups will help children see what materials are being offered. If this is your child's first experience with sewing, try pre-threading needles with the thread and knotting the needle's eye to hold them in place. Each thread should be about an arm's length long. Discuss safety precautions, reminding children to go slow and be mindful of the needle and push pin's sharp ends. Parental supervision is a must to ensure safety, support, and scaffolding.

## Getting Started

Children can tape their chosen stick to the paper, securing it with the masking tape. This can be taken off later once the stitches are in place. Next, you can show your child how to pierce holes into the paper with their push-pin before they get started, or you may pre-pierce some or all holes for them.

With my daughter, a five-year-old, I was able to show her how to pierce on a separate piece of paper and from there she made her own. I found it was helpful to also show her how to enlarge the hole by wiggling the push pin through it, making it easier for the needle to pass through.

Children can then start sewing the thread through the paper. You can tape down the first and last stitch of each colored thread on the back of the paper to hold it in place. This taping prevents the end of the thread from slipping through the holes.

You can show children how they can jump from hole to hole or go through the same holes a few times to create a net-like effect. There are no rules here, just the general idea that the more stitches that cross the stick, the more secure it will be.

## Getting inspiration from contemporary artists

This activity was inspired by mixed media artist [Natalie Ciccoricco](#) who has created artworks using twigs, thread, and paper to create beautiful geometric stitches. Her compositions feature embroidery thread in combination with other materials, and thus bringing new life to old images, books, magazines and natural materials. Her Nesting (2020) series evolved as a direct result of being in quarantine, incorporating natural materials available from her yard and walks. With her beautiful colour palette, striking use of paper, and details of the individual pieces of thread, her work appears simple yet intricate.







We hope you enjoy doing these art activities with your family!

For more creative inspiration, follow our Instagram accounts at:

Louisa Penfold at [\*\*Art Play Children Learning\\_\*\*](#)

Laura Fantini at [\*\*Laurafantini\\_it\*\*](#)

Angela Ruggles at [\*\*The Nature Atelier\*\*](#)

Jenna Planden at [\*\*Mousse Art Studio\*\*](#)

Stephanie O'Brien at [\*\*Crafted by Me Art\*\*](#)

Farah Osman at [\*\*Frh\\_art\*\*](#)

Kelly Boucher at [\*\*Boucher Arts\*\*](#)

Happy making!