

These rollers are easy and satisfying for young children to use to explore the different patterns and textures in the world around us. They feature natural materials that children are fascinated by and love collecting or comparing – such as pebbles, tree bark, leaves and shells. The nature-inspired patterns they will create in play dough are wonderfully tactile so children will enjoy touching their designs and then adapting them. And at the same time as having fun, children will also be developing their coordination and fine motor skills. The unique design of the rollers helps to strengthen children's hand muscles, laying the foundations for mark-making and future handwriting.

Start the ball rolling

As well as allowing children to explore using the rollers independently, you can extend their learning in various ways:



- Admire the pattern that the child makes in the play dough and ask them what they can see in it. Talk about the shapes and patterns. Are all the shapes the same?
- Children might choose to roll round and round, up and down, or in any direction – use directional language as you talk about their movements.
- Younger children may simply enjoy using the roller as a stamp.
- Encourage them to press harder or more gently and see how this changes the appearance of the pattern.
- Talk about how the play dough feels as they squish it under the roller. Is it smooth or rough, hard or soft?
- The patterns in the dough are inviting to touch – what do they feel like?
- As well as using the rollers spontaneously and seeing what pattern emerges, children might enjoy being more intentional. They might like to create pictures by combining patterns from more than one roller – such as pebbles and shells on the beach, or dragonflies flying among the leaves.
- Inviting the children to use the rollers on a flat surface outdoors will allow them to compare some of the patterns with what they can see around them – such as leaves on a tree or pebbles on the ground.



- Offer the rollers and play dough on a nature explorers table alongside natural materials and books about nature.
- Roll the tree bark roller around in a circle to create a giant shell or fossil.

Mix it up!

- Offer play dough in several colours for children to explore mixing and rolling together.
- Make the dough multisensory by adding something naturally scented to it – such as rosemary, basil, dandelions or lavender.
- Use the rollers with a variety of substrates, each with a different feel to it – such as kinetic sand, cloud dough, clay or a thick slime.
- Children may enjoy enveloping the roller in play dough and then peeling it away to reveal the pattern.



It's good to talk

As they create different patterns with the rollers, you can talk about the patterns they've seen in the natural environment. This provides a wonderful opportunity for children to engage in thoughtful discussions about the importance of caring for our environment.

Leaves

- Can you see any leaves outside? Are they on the trees or on the ground?
- Are all leaves the same shape? Are the edges smooth, wiggly or spiky?
- What colours are the leaves you've seen outside? Do they change colour?
- Why do some leaves fall off the trees in autumn/fall?
- Have you ever jumped in a big pile of leaves? What do they feel like?
- Why are trees good for our planet? (They provide oxygen for our air and absorb pollution and carbon dioxide.)



Bark

- Where do you see bark?
- What does bark feel like?
- Does the bark on different trees feel different?
- What colours might bark be?
- What insects might live on the bark? Even after a tree has died many insects and spiders may be living in the bark.

Pebbles

- Where's a good place to look for pebbles?
- What colours do you think they might be?
- What do pebbles feel like?
- Where do pebbles come from?
- What creatures might be hiding underneath?

Shells

- Have you ever seen shells at the beach?
- What do shells feel like?
- What sea creatures lived in these shells, do you think?
- Talk about how important it is to look after the world's oceans – it's better to see shells on the beach than rubbish people have left behind!
- Talk about why it is best to leave shells on the beach (technically it is illegal to remove them).

Ferns

- Have you ever seen a real fern? What did it look like?
- Where do ferns grow?
- How many small leaves are on each piece of fern?
- Look at pictures of ferns curled up before opening.

Dragonflies

- Have you ever seen a real dragonfly?
- How many wings do they have?
- What colours are their wings?
- Do you know where they might live? Talk about how important ponds and rivers are for lots of insects.

Out into nature

When you've talked about the patterns on the rollers, make sure you take the learning outside:

- Go for a nature walk and look for any interesting patterns and textures – even grass has a pattern to it!
- Take rubbings of the bark on different trees – is there one that's similar to the bark roller?
- Collect pebbles or leaves and use them to make patterns outdoors – or alternatively, you could use seeds, daisies, sticks or grass.
- Talk about how important trees are – you could discuss how they make the outdoors nicer for us, give us oxygen to breathe and provide a home for lots of different creatures.
- Visit a pond – can you spot any dragonflies darting over the water?
- Go on a scavenger hunt, looking for particular natural items, such as a green leaf, a long stick, a round pebble, an acorn, and a feather.
- Use leaves you have collected to make a collage – does it look like the pattern made with the roller, or are the leaves a different shape?



Get talking – useful words

Soft, hard, rough, smooth, ridged, dry, shiny, rustle, float, dart, curl

Rolling action: roll, push, stamp, away, towards, across, round, roll gently, press harder

Books about nature

The Oak Tree by Julia Donaldson

Let's Go Outside! by Amy Pixton

A Walk in the Woods by Flora Martyn

Big Outdoors for Little Explorers series by Anne-Kathrin Behl