

Dive into the ocean depths and discover a world full of fascinating fish. Their attractive colours, shapes and movement through water are relaxing to watch and inspire imaginative underwater play. As well as promoting descriptive language and storytelling, talking about ocean life will extend children's knowledge and understanding of the natural world.

Fishy friends

The fish stones are beautifully visual and tactile, providing sensory feedback as children feel with their fingers the same details they observe with their eyes. There's plenty to examine and discuss together:



- You might like to place the fish in an ocean-themed setting for children to find. They could be partly hidden in the folds of a blue silky cloth or submerged in a shallow water tray among pebbles and plants.
- Ask questions about the fish to develop children's thinking, descriptive vocabulary and observation skills. Can you find a fish with yellow on it? Can you find a stripy fish? Which is the biggest/smallest fish? Which fish are flat? Which fish has the most fins? Which is your favourite, and why?
- Do the children know any books or stories about fish? Let them be the experts and share their prior knowledge.
- As they compare the fish, encourage children to sort them by various characteristics. Do they have stripes or no stripes? Dots or no dots? Are they tall or flat? Are they red or another colour? Can you put them in size order?
- Can the children find the fish's eyes, mouth, fins and tail? They might even be able to identify the gills.
- Where do children think the fish might live? In a coral reef? On the sea bed? On their own or in a shoal? Do they try to hide by being the same colour as their surroundings – are they camouflaged?
- Talk about how the fish move through the water. Which parts of their body do they use to swim? Are any of the children learning to swim? Discuss how we need to come up to the surface to breathe air, but fish gulp water into their mouths then use their gills to take oxygen from it.
- On a large screen, display a video of fish swimming through water – there are plenty of high definition videos available online of coral reef fish that you can leave playing while children engage with fishy activities.
- If accessible locally, take children to an aquarium, pet shop or garden centre with fish tanks so they can observe fish swimming for themselves. Can the children spot a fish that matches one of the stones?

Underwater world

The fish stones are ideal for prompting discussions about the natural world and how we can protect it:

- Talk about how vast and deep the oceans are, covering over 70% of our planet and going down to over 10km (6 miles) in the deepest places.
- Talk about coral reefs – they're made up of many tiny living creatures, and home to a huge number of different fish and other sea life. Offer books or watch videos to show children this beautiful underwater world. Why is it important to protect coral reefs?
- Find out more about the fish species shown on the stones, using simple websites, books or videos.
- Children may know that plastic in the sea is bad for fish and other animals. Most plastic that ends up in the sea is actually dropped on land then washes into the oceans via rivers or drains. You might like to make a poster together to encouraging others to protect the oceans by not dropping litter, connecting environmental protection with children's own lives.

- If you have access to a fish tank in your setting, share the responsibility for caring for the fish with the children. What do fish need to survive? What sort of habitat do they need?

Aquatic adventures

The fish stones offer many opportunities for creative play:

- For a small-world ocean, use either shallow water (perhaps with added blue food colouring), blue biodegradable sensory goo, bubble foam (whisk two parts water with one part sensitive bubble bath using a handheld mixer until it forms stiff peaks), blue fabric or a large mirror lying in a tray. Add other features such as sand, pebbles, shells, plants, coral (made from pipe cleaners, tissue paper or card shapes), seaweed (strips of green fabric or crepe/tissue paper), Yellow Door's Ocean Play Sensory Stones, Play Shell or Play Cave as an underwater cave.



- To allow children to role play caring for fish in a tank, offer the fish stones together with a small fish bowl or similar glass container full of water. Artificial plants, pebbles and shells will help the fish feel at home in their tank.
- Encourage role play as marine biologists, offering a selection of notebooks, ocean-themed books, diving masks and snorkels.
- Imprint the fish stones in dough (such as blue or green dough, with added biodegradable glitter) and encourage children to feel the imprint with their fingers. Create imprints of the different fish in separate pieces of dough and rotate the imprints so children need to orientate the fish stone to fit correctly. This will help develop spatial awareness and fine motor skills.



- Immerse the fish stones in (blue coloured) water – can the children identify a stone by touch alone? This will promote fine motor skills and sensory feedback.
- Take turns to pull a fish stone from an attractive bag or box, keeping it hidden, and describe it so another child can guess which it is.
- Create a crawl-in aquarium together. Cover the top and sides of a sturdy frame (such as a small climbing frame or the stand for a water tray) with cling film leaving a gap as an entrance, then stick on pieces of blue tissue paper for a watery effect and add a sand-coloured floor using paper, fabric or real sand. To the floor and watery sides/top, stick on green tissue paper strips for seaweed, paper shapes for coral and fish shapes drawn or painted by the children. Inside the aquarium, provide the fish stones, shells and other ocean props.
- Play some ocean-themed music, such as Saint-Saëns' 'Aquarium' from The Carnival of the Animals, and encourage children to move like fish to the music.



Books about fish

Hooray for Fish! by Lucy Cousins

Tiddler by Julia Donaldson

The Odd Fish by Naomi Jones

The Big Book of the Blue by Yuval Zommer

Get talking – useful words

Red cichlid, blue tang, golden butterfly fish, blue-spotted ray, peppermint angel fish, clown fish, sergeant major fish, plaice, fins, tail, camouflage, ocean, sea, underwater, shell, coral, reef, seaweed, sea bed.