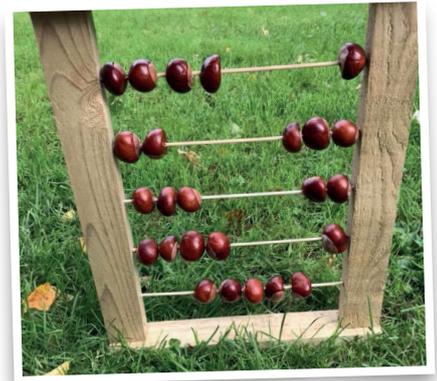


5 ways to explore...

conkers

Conkers have huge affordances – and luckily there is plenty of them right now, and they're free! By **Julie Mountain**



CONKER BATTLE

So simple, and yet so much fun:

conker battles are a traditional autumn game, and are perfectly safe (see below). Some people bake their conkers for hours, some pickle them in vinegar. Me, I just use a hand drill to make a hole through the middle, thread my string through and tie it off in a huge knot. The aim is to bash your opponent's conker to pieces.

Good hand-eye co-ordination is required, along with patience and an agile wrist/elbow action; goggles and gloves are not essential (although see below for an alternative take on this). Using a hand drill is a great precision activity in itself.



CONKER ABACUS

This super suggestion is from Amy Smith of Little Squirrels Childcare: Make a simple rectangular wooden frame (glue or screw the ends together) and drill five holes down the two longest sides of the frame. Thread a length of string through the first hole and tie it off. Ease five conkers onto the string, then thread its other end through the matching hole on the opposite side of the frame, and tie off that end too. Repeat for the other four sets of holes you drilled, so that you have an abacus consisting of five rows of five conkers, each of which can be shifted along the string.

Making shapes (left) and a conker abacus (above right)



CONKER STEMS

A trugful of glossy conkers is irresistible!

Use children's urge to handle them to support early STEM skills:

- Create long lines of conkers that weave in and out of your outdoor space; make shapes with them.
- Add big piles of them to your mud kitchen/lab for crushing, weighing, mixing.
- Arrange them in size order – or more tricky, shininess order.
- Dunk them in water to see which ones sink and which float.
- Cut them in half to examine the inside under a magnifying glass.
- Grow your own conker trees by sticking four toothpicks into the sides of each conker and suspending each one over a jar of water, so the bases of the conkers are wet. Place them on a warm windowsill and watch the shell crack open to reveal emergent roots and stems...



CONKER GOLF

First, mark out three to nine 'holes' around your outdoor space by tying a large picture of a conker (numbered from 1 to 9 as needed) towards the bottom of features and places such as play equipment, fence posts or trees. Choose a start point and give each child a conker, marked with a coloured dot so they know whose is whose.

The aim of the game is to throw the conker to hit the picture in as few



throws as possible. Record each child's throws on a hole-by-hole tally chart. Make it easier by reducing the distance between the holes or more difficult by planning the course so that there are hazards (for example, your sandpit/bunker) in-between.



COOK AND COMPARE

Conkers – horse chestnuts – aren't

edible, but sweet chestnuts are. They are also delicious, and while they begin to fall at the same time as conkers, the season is much longer.

Collect a bucket of sweet chestnuts, and examine them alongside conkers. Compare the texture and spikiness of the cases, then open them to compare the size, shape, shine and colour of the nut, and their smell. This will help children correctly differentiate between the edible sweet chestnuts and the nasty-tasting conkers – but do remind them that neither are edible straight from the case!

To cook sweet chestnuts, remove them from their cases, slit the shell (only) with a sharp knife, and roast, flat side down, on a baking tray at 180°C fan/gas mark 6. They'll take about 30 minutes and are ready when the shell has split.

And another thing...

Did schools really ban conkers? Apparently so, according to the Health and Safety Executive, which says if children hit each other over the head with conkers, it's a discipline issue, not an H&S one. The myth began when a head teacher jokingly provided children with goggles, hardhats and hi-vis vests. In fact, the injury risk from conkers is infinitesimally small, so get out there, collect like crazy and make the most of this fruitful resource.

→ See the HSE's poster here: www.tinyurl.com/HSEconkers