

# Indigenous toys used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

**Warning** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and students are advised that this curriculum resource may contain images, voices or names of deceased people.

## Toy time!

This term your child is studying a history and science unit featuring toys used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. They're exploring traditional methods used to make these toys, and the push and pull forces involved in using them. The assessment at the end of the unit will see your child design and make a toy boat using sustainable materials.

## Push and pull forces

Simple toys (the ones without batteries) don't move by themselves. They need to have a force applied to set them in motion. A force can move something, make it go faster or slower, change its direction, stop it or change its shape (The Physics Classroom 2020). Two common forces that are applied to toys are *push* and *pull*. In a push, we usually move the toy away from us. In a pull, we usually move the toy towards us. A soft push or pull means less force has been used, and the object will usually move more slowly. A strong push or pull means more force has been applied, and the object will usually move more quickly.

## Indigenous toys and games

Before colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children played with a variety of natural toys made from shells, pandanus leaves, grass, emu feathers, clay, forked branches and many other natural materials (Haagen 1994). Toys were shared among all children in the community (Haagen 1994). Toys were designed to amuse and educate children, and to prepare them for adulthood (Australian Museum 2019).

Marngrook, the name given to a game that was played by several Aboriginal nations across south-eastern Australia prior to colonisation, is thought to be the origin of the Australian Football League (AFL) (Deadly Story 2020). In south-western Victoria, it was usually played with a possum-skin ball, however, in different areas the ball was made from other materials like kangaroo skin (Deadly Story 2020). AFL is an example of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have survived and continue to influence our national identity.

## Pandanus leaves to plastic

Sustainable Indigenous toys started to disappear after European colonisation. This was because many children no longer had access to Country and the natural resources that they used for making toys. During the twentieth century, more and more toys used by First Nations children started to be made from the rubbish that was discarded by Europeans and their descendants. Also, toys started to be made from plastic and began to build up in landfill.

During this unit, your child will explore how to make toys from sustainable materials and how to repurpose old toys.

## Activities to do at home

- Check out the important online collection called *Aboriginal toys* on the Australian Museum website: <https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/atsi-collection/aboriginal-toys/>  
Ask your child which toys they like best, and what they've learnt about these artefacts.
- Practise making a toy boat using biodegradable materials like sticks, clay, leaves and paper. Try different designs and see which ones float the best.
- Work with your child to 'upcycle' a toy that they don't use any more. Can you make a new toy, or something useful out of it?

---

## References

Australian Museum 2019, *Aboriginal toys*, viewed 11 October 2020, <https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/atsi-collection/aboriginal-toys/>

Deadly Story 2020, *First game of Aussie Rules Football played, inspired by Marngrook*, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Coop Ltd, viewed 11 October 2020, [https://www.deadlystory.com/page/culture/history/First\\_game\\_of\\_Australian\\_Rules\\_Football\\_played\\_in\\_Melbourne\\_based\\_on\\_Koorie\\_game\\_Marngrook](https://www.deadlystory.com/page/culture/history/First_game_of_Australian_Rules_Football_played_in_Melbourne_based_on_Koorie_game_Marngrook)

Haagen, C 1994, *Bush toys: Aboriginal children at play*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra. [No longer in print, but may be available from your local library.]

The Physics Classroom 2020, *The meaning of force*, viewed 22 October 2020, <https://www.physicsclassroom.com/class/newtlaws/Lesson-2/The-Meaning-of-Force>