Minibeast Hunt: Sorting Bugs by Legs, Shell or Wings in Reception

A minibeast hunt is a simple way for Reception children to explore bugs by observing and sorting them into groups based on what they notice – like how many legs they have, whether they have a shell, or if they have wings. It's a hands-on activity that builds early scientific thinking and helps children learn to look carefully at the world around them.

What it is

A minibeast hunt is an outdoor or garden activity where children search for small creatures – woodlice, snails, spiders and butterflies are perfect – and then sort them into groups based on what they observe. Rather than learning the names of different bugs, children look at features they can actually see: do they have legs? Do they have a shell? Do they have wings? This links to Reception learning in Understanding the World, the part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) that focuses on exploring and understanding the natural environment. The activity needs no special equipment – just curiosity and somewhere to look. A simple sorting mat (which can be drawn on paper or cardboard) helps children organise what they find.

What happens

Children go on a minibeast hunt – in the garden, park or even a flowerpot – looking carefully for small creatures. When they spot a bug, they observe it gently (looking without touching, or holding it carefully if it's safe to do so). Then they bring it to a sorting area. Using a simple mat divided into sections, children sort their finds into groups – for example, 'has legs' and 'no legs', or 'has a shell' and 'no shell', or 'has wings' and 'no wings'. They can draw or place pictures on the mat to show which group each creature belongs to. The activity might take 15–20 minutes. Afterwards, all minibeasts go safely back where they were found.

What it means for your child

This activity helps children develop observation skills – looking closely at details – and learn to group things based on features they notice. These are the foundations of scientific thinking. Children start to understand that things can be sorted and organised in different ways, a skill that grows into formal classification later on. It also builds confidence in exploring the natural world and encourages curiosity. Because children are doing the sorting themselves, based on what they see, they're learning to think for themselves rather than memorising facts. This hands-on approach helps ideas stick, and the outdoor setting often makes learning feel like play rather than a lesson.

How you can help at home

A minibeast hunt works wonderfully in a garden, balcony, park or even a potted plant. Encourage your child to look under stones, in grass, or around the base of plants – that's where bugs like to hide. You don't need to identify every creature; instead, ask open questions: 'How many legs can you count?' 'Does it have a shell?' 'Can you see any wings?' Let your child lead the hunt and decide which group each bug belongs to. Keep it short and playful – five to ten minutes is plenty. Afterwards, gently return the creatures to where you found them. If your child is worried about bugs, start by just looking without touching, or

search for pictures of minibeasts online and sort those instead. The aim is curious exploration, not pressure.

Questions parents often ask

Isn't this messy? Not really. You're observing bugs outdoors or in a contained area, then returning them. There's no mess to clean up at home. **Do we need special equipment?** No – just somewhere to look and a piece of paper to divide into sections for sorting. You can draw lines on cardboard or use a muffin tin with six sections. **What if we don't find many bugs?** That's fine. Even finding two or three creatures is enough to practise sorting. You could also draw or print pictures of bugs and sort those. **Will my child be scared?** Some children are nervous about bugs at first. Let them watch you looking first, or start indoors with pictures. There's no rush. **Can we keep one as a pet?** Better to return creatures to their homes, where they belong. This teaches respect for living things.

Sources

- Department for Education: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework – Understanding the World area of learning
- GOV.UK: Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage – what children should experience and learn