

HUG A BUG?

Objectives

- To dispel some of the fears of young children (and, perhaps, their teachers) about the creatures living around them.
- To use the experience of holding a small, fragile animal to promote a sense of wonder, appreciation and respect.

Materials

- A nice outdoors area (the edges of a playground or a nearby field)
- Open-minded, enthusiastic teachers
- Children eager to learn

Background

Many of the small animals in our local fields, forests and even playgrounds can be safely handled. It is not always as safe, though, for the animals! It is important for children to learn that “bugs” (the common name for many little creatures) are not *bad* or *good*. Some can be dangerous if they feel the need to protect themselves, so we need to be more careful with them. But many of these animals can be safely handled and provide an excellent experience for young children. A child’s memory of holding a Daddy-long-legs can remain a positive model for a lifetime.

Daddy-long-legs (Order: *Opiliones*, which means “aphid lion” because they eat small, soft-bodied insects like aphids and soft organic matter) are close relatives of spiders, but they are not real spiders. They appear to have only one body segment (spiders have two) and usually have long, slender legs. They can be found almost anywhere on land. You might find Daddy-long-legs on the playground, in the tall grass of open fields, on low hanging leaves in dense forests, or on edge shrubbery where woods begin. The females lay eggs deep in the ground. Like spiders, they have gradual metamorphosis so the babies look like little adults. They usually live only one season in the northern states, but some will survive mild winters under bark or leaf litter.

Daddy-long-legs can not bite people.

These very cool Arthropods can be safely handled. It is, however, easy for us to hurt them. One of the major defense strategies for Daddy-long-legs is to drop their legs off when grabbed by a predator. Its leg muscles are specially adapted to twitch when the leg is removed from the body. This twitching leg looks to a predator like another animal - one that might be easier to eat. While the predator is distracted, the Daddy-long-legs can hobble off to safety. They actually can move quite well with as few as four legs, but it is not a good thing for them to lose any of their legs.

A Daddy-long-legs has sensory organs in its legs. It uses its legs to smell and taste the world around it. It also feels vibrations and changes in air pressure with them. Its legs are like our noses, mouths, hands, and feet combined! If you try to pick up a Daddy-long-legs by grasping its legs, the legs will come off in your hand. The Daddy-long-legs will survive, but will lose vital sensory organs.

This activity will demonstrate how Daddy-long-legs can be handled safely and respectfully.

Procedure

First, find a Daddy-long-legs. You can find them on low leaves, shrubs, or on rock walls. There is a certain skill to finding them that you can develop. With a little practice, you will see them everywhere! Once you have discovered one, let the children see it without disturbing it. Since some of them might be a little nervous about this big “spider,” it is best to go slowly. You might find some of your children want to grab it right away. This is a good opportunity to talk about using all our tools to learn about something. Ask questions about its color, shape, size, and what it might feel like. Is it moving? Why or why not?

Try to carefully touch one of its legs with a small twig and see if you can get it to move a little. Often, this will send it zooming away or falling to the ground, but sometimes, you can see the way it uses its legs when it just walks slowly. Have the kids mimic the way it walks with their four legs.

The most respectful way to hold a Daddy-long-legs is to have it hold you. You can accomplish this by scooping your hands under it and slowly lifting it up. It will probably start walking very fast on your hands and will fall to the ground if given a chance. With a little practice, you can learn to place one hand quickly in front of the other always giving it a place to walk. Remember, if it falls *don't reach down and grab it!* Just scoop it up again. (You might want to practice this technique on your own before you do it with your students.)

It will stop walking after a short time and can be observed close up. Sometimes it will bounce its body up and down on your hand. It is not clear why it performs this amusing behavior, but the children might enjoy trying to guess why it dances like this! It might even lower the front of its body to your palm and taste your skin. Remember, *it won't bite!*

Usually, the Daddy-long-legs will draw its legs, one at a time, through its mouthparts. Have the children watch this and guess what it's doing. They will probably guess that it is cleaning its legs since they've seen cats and dogs do this. They will be correct, but they might be surprised to learn that it is also blowing its nose! Since it uses its legs to smell with, cleaning them enables it to smell better - just like when we blow our noses!

Now you can ask the children if they would like to let the Daddy-long-legs hold them, too. Most will be very excited to try, but some might still be nervous. It is okay to encourage them, but a positive experience with nature sometimes means just looking at it! Don't force anyone or make them feel badly for not wanting to try. Respect is important for people too. Have the kids who want to hold the Daddy-long-legs sit in a circle (if possible) and let them pass it around, getting it to walk from open hand to open hand. Ask them how it feels. Does it hurt? Does it tickle? How do our hands feel (or smell or taste) to the daddy-long-legs? Is it scared?

When everyone has had a chance to handle the Daddy-long-legs ask them what you should do next with it. Make a big deal about the release - be sure to allow at least one of the children to actually release the animal and then congratulate all of the children for being so respectful.