

TOP

Tips on parenting



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Parenting through a Divorce

by Brian Ramboz, MFT

Any parent or child who has gone through a divorce knows first hand the many difficulties this all too common event can cause. As a marriage and family therapist, I am called upon to work with families, especially children, who experience trouble in adjusting to the post-divorce changes. Even though the level of divorce has been very slowly declining for the past decade, there are still an estimated one million children who experience their parents separation or divorce each year.

Divorce researcher Judith Wallerstein and her colleagues from the Center for the Family in Transition, have compiled nearly three decades of research on the impact of divorce on the family. In her book Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce, Wallerstein reports that the prevailing wisdom in the 1980s was that divorce was “a time-limited crisis, that children were resilient, and that within a year or two at most everyone in the family would settle down and life would improve for all.” What they found was the divorce and its aftermath were life-shaping events for most involved. After about 15 years, approximately half of the parents they interviewed had moved on and considered the divorce over while the other half were still bitter, angry, and embroiled in conflict. Even more amazing is that not one of the grown children interviewed considered their parents divorce a dead subject. “They remembered the day that one parent left home with a vividness that took my breath away,” writes Wallerstein.

As the social science evidence continues to grow pointing to negative consequences of divorce for children, how can parents help their children during and after a divorce to alleviate some of its negative effects? The following are suggestions for parents to consider in evaluating what is best for their own children.

Talk to your children

In a time of great stress and family turmoil, much of the parent’s time is often spent “putting out fires” instead of tending to the daily needs of the family. Rushing from one crisis to the next, parents often overlook what is obvious to them but sometimes frightening to children. It is not uncommon for adults to “fear the worst” in a situation when little or no information is available. Many parents of teenagers have conjured up visions of crashed automobiles when their children are late arriving home. How unreasonable is it to expect young children to do the same? Researchers report children from affluent families worry about starvation. Some children worry about coming home from school and finding themselves abandoned by both parents. Other children carry the heavy burden of guilt for

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Questioning Testing: Each Child a Treasure

by Martha L. Whitaker, Ph.D.

The Limitations of Testing

Ask any parent of more than one child about their family and you will likely hear about their children's differences. Each child is a treasure of unique gifts and abilities. Caring, insightful parents and educators know that a one-size-fits-all approach is neither advisable nor effective. We delight in considering and appreciating the various dimensions of children's personalities and adjusting our guidance for each child accordingly. Thoughtfully assessing their progress is an ongoing and important part of the process of helping children learn. Educational researchers agree that standardized tests cannot accurately measure the expansive and unique learning of an individual child. In fact, standardized tests can and do interfere with children's learning in troubling ways and are particularly inappropriate when used with young children.

Early childhood educators know that each child develops skills and abilities according to their own timetable. Children crawl, walk, and talk when they are ready and not before; unwelcome practice sessions and drilling will not speed the process along and will, in fact, frustrate a child who is otherwise moving toward these milestones in their own appropriate way. The same is true for other skills. Learning colors, shapes, numbers, letters, reading, writing, and social skills are naturally unfolding processes that we can encourage but not rush. Most importantly, within a wide range of normalcy, children whose readiness for these skills occurs later than a neighbor's or friend's child are not "slow learners" or likely to do less well in future schooling. They are simply developing according to their own schedule. Using standardized tests to measure young children's achievements is not only unwise, it sends messages to children at an early age about their competence or lack of competence, inflating their ego inappropriately or frustrating them unnecessarily. Often these tests raise inaccurate concerns about the child's achievement and potential.

Despite this carefully researched understanding of testing and young children, a tidal wave of reform has been swelling impressively in the United States over the last decade. Legislatures across the country are requiring educators to administer standardized tests as early as kindergarten, creating an atmosphere of intensity among teachers and pressuring them to teach multiple skills to young children on a schedule that leaves little room for adjusting expectations to the developmental readiness of the students. Children often spend time drilling simple facts and skills over and over that they would likely learn with little effort some time in the near future. This drilling of facts actually takes time away from the purposeful

learning that should be central to the educational experiences of young children. Kindergarten has become increasingly academic and now there is evidence that preschool caregivers, aware that children will be tested when entering kindergarten and expected

by parents to prepare children to do well on these tests, are creating increasingly structured and stress-inducing environments.

No one who cares about children would dismiss the importance of assessing their progress toward learning goals. Good teachers have always known that effective assessment (as opposed to standardized testing) is a complex process of observation and intervention that takes into account the needs, interests, and developmental readiness of children. They spend much time and energy implementing this kind of meaningful and useful assessment. Unfortunately, standardized testing actually interferes with this kind of good teaching. It can result in the

gradual narrowing of the school experience to teaching only the kinds of skills that can be measured by these tests. If this is the case, why has the national movement to increase the frequency of testing and to press one-size-fits-all curriculum into the classrooms of very young children been so extensive?

A Bit of History

A brief journey back in time can help us understand why the educational practices of today conflict with what we know about the educational needs of our youngest students. Standardized testing was developed around 1920 by psychologists and educators who were more worried about the social conditions of the day than they were about providing a rich and appropriate education for students. Our nation's cities were struggling as immigrants arrived in the United

States in record numbers, cities grew into dreadful slums, and a weak economy threatened the country's stability. Standardized tests were developed with the intent of helping students learn their place in society. Their use has always disadvantaged minority populations, funneling them into less difficult educational experiences and eventually directing them into low paying jobs.

Today, as our country faces challenges similar to those of the 1920s, standardized tests continue to pressure teachers to teach a narrow range of skills and information. Insightful, well-informed teachers and parents know that each child is a treasure and they know that standardized tests cannot measure creativity, initiative, imagination, curiosity, or complex thinking and communication skills. Despite the tireless efforts of creative, caring teachers who understand the educational needs of children, the trend toward an

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increasing reliance on standardized testing is part of a powerful political agenda that diverts the public's attention from genuine educational reform (equitable funding, smaller class sizes, developmentally appropriate early childhood intervention, better working conditions for teachers, etc.).

We know with certainty that standardized testing provides limited information and that this information is often used inappropriately. We know that this kind of testing is not good for young children and can be harmful. We know that the overuse of standardized testing leads to narrow educational experiences.

Educators and parents need to dream a new dream for our children and we need to share that dream effectively with educational decision-makers. In the meantime, parents need good advice about how to approach the inevitable testing their children will face as they move into their first years of school.

A Vision for Tomorrow

Parents are their children's first teachers. As children begin to explore the world, no one is better positioned to observe and support their daily learning adventures. Both in the home and in daycare situations, parents should be concerned about providing

their children with the opportunity to be creative as they explore the world in a setting that allows each child to follow their own learning timetable. To watch a child at play is really to watch a child at work. As we observe carefully we can discover the ideas and skills they are developing and support them in their efforts by offering conversation, toys, and experiences that will entice them toward further learning. As we come to know and understand our children and how they learn, we can be more effective in responding to school requirements and helping teachers know about our children's unique way of learning and growing.

As our children encounter structured expectations and testing in the school setting, we can help them by talking about testing and performance expectations. Rather than worrying about our children's performance or, worse yet, increasing their anxiety by pressuring them to do well, we can focus on the importance and the joy of learning and encourage our children to do the same. We can talk openly with our children about their unique gifts and abilities. We can decide today that we will regularly spend time sharing the joy of learning with our children.

While we may not be able to change the current trends to inappropriately test young children and to structure school

learning in ways that can actually discourage children, we can decide how we will parent. We can read to our children. We can explore the world together with great enthusiasm. We can soften a child's anxious response to testing by telling them the best way to take a test is not to worry about the test but to have fun trying out the questions or activities. We can let children see us trying to do something difficult unsuccessfully and accepting it in a light-hearted manner. Knowing about the limits and dangers of testing can give us the courage to speak out against their misuse and to choose to think more deeply about our children's developmental readiness and learning as we interact with them. We can be strong advocates for our children as we remember that each child is a treasure, the bearer of wonderful gifts and abilities that will emerge as we encourage them in sensitive and supportive ways.

~Martha Whitaker is an assistant professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University. She teaches foundations of curriculum, classroom management, and curriculum theory.

activity corner

Paint Blots

MATERIALS NEEDED

Tempura paint in cups
Spoon or paintbrush for each color
Paper, pre-folded down the middle
Covered work surface
Scissors, optional



ART PROCESS

1. Place the pre-folded piece of paper on the covered work surface and open it out flat.
2. Drop blobs of paint on the fold or on one side of the paper.
3. Fold over the other side of the paper and rub or press the paper very gently. Pressing outward from the fold spreads the paint out onto the paper.
4. Unfold the paper to see what the "blot" looks like.
5. Make more blots on new paper. Think about what shapes might occur and what colors might mix together.
6. Dry the complete project. Cut out the design if desired.

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Parenting through a Divorce

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years believing they caused their parents divorce simply because their parents never told them otherwise. From an adult perspective these worries may seem illogical, but from a child's perspective the many changes associated with divorce can be terrifying.

What do children need to know? Here is a brief list of examples parents might want to consider:

- The children did not cause the divorce nor can they fix it.
- Parents will continue to take care of and provide for the children.
- Parents are sorry for any hurt the divorce has caused the children.
- Parents still love the children.

It is important to remember age-appropriate messages. The kind of information provided to a preschooler will be very different than the kind of information provided to a teenager. At any age, open and accurate communication is important. No matter what the age of the child, the message of love, caring, and support needs to ring loud and clear.

Encourage children to express their feelings

Recently I had a mother and her 5-year-old daughter in my office. The family had just gone through a divorce and were experiencing difficulty transitioning to their new lifestyle. As I sat on the floor playing a game with the daughter, we talked about all the changes in her life. Quite suddenly she blurted out that she hated her father. Quickly the mother corrected her daughter saying, "You don't hate your father; you love him." As I motioned to the mother to be quiet the daughter went on to describe a father who regularly does not keep the visitation schedule, who is usually late when he does show up, and who had not kept his promise to attend her birthday party (no present either!). Listening to the little girl I came to believe that she not only had the right to be angry, her reaction was right on target.

Too often parents may want to soften the disappointment or soothe hurt feelings. What may actually happen is children learn to conceal their feelings so they do not cause their parents to get upset. According to Barbara Dafoe-Whitehead, a nationally recognized researcher on family matters, children are asked to invest in the emotional well-being of their parents—to be sympathetic, understanding, respectful, and polite to confused, unhappy parents. The sacrifice comes from the children instead of the parent. In this particular example, the mother may have also inadvertently given the little girl the confusing message not to trust her own feelings when in reality the little girl was experiencing very real emotions. By allowing and encouraging children to express their emotions, they become better equipped to handle similar situations in the future.

Here are a few thoughts for parents to remember:

- Anger, sadness, and anxiety are common emotional reactions for both adults and children.

- Talking to children may alleviate some of their anxiety.
- Children still look to and need parents to calm, soothe, love, and nurture them during and after the divorce.

Stock up on emotional reserves

Often custodial parents receive the brunt of disappointment and anger simply because they are the ones who are there. Dealing with and helping children process sadness, anger, and disappointment can be time consuming and exhausting, both emotionally and physically for everyone involved. Helping children deal with their emotions often stirs up emotions in the parent. If parents require help dealing with emotions, there are many sources of support. Friends, family, and religious leaders all may be sources of support. Many communities have support groups for divorced or divorcing parents. Parents Without Partners is an international nonprofit, nonsectarian, educational organization devoted to the interests and well-being of single parents and their children. Headquartered in Boca Raton, Florida, they can be reached at 561-391-8833 or online at www.parentswithoutpartners.org. Their website has information on locating local chapters or starting one in your community.

Some parents may find it necessary to seek out professional assistance to deal with either their own or their children's emotions. There are many well trained and experienced therapists and counselors who can offer assistance during times of strain and stress. To find a marriage and family therapist in your area, visit the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy online at www.aamft.org or look in your local telephone directory under counselors.

Here are a few final ideas to keep in mind:

- Unlike other family crises when friends and family are present and supportive, divorcing parents often feel abandoned and alone.
- Avoid turning to children to meet your social needs.
- Friends, family, church, or professional services may all be helpful.

Parents might find it comforting to know that recent research indicates they can and do have a powerful influence on how well their children adjust to the post-divorce family. At a time when time is a precious commodity, paying attention to and spending time with children is very beneficial to everyone involved. This is especially true for the "non-custodial" parent. Maintaining a warm, caring relationship between parent and child during a difficult time can help build a closeness that can influence the relationship for decades to come. As parents learn and become more sensitive to the needs of their children, they do a better job during a very difficult time and everyone involved benefits.

~Brian Ramboz is a doctoral student in the Department of Family and Human Development at Utah State University and a licensed marriage and family therapist.

question corner

"My daughter is almost two and I can't get her to give up her binky. What should I do?"

~ Shannon in Utah



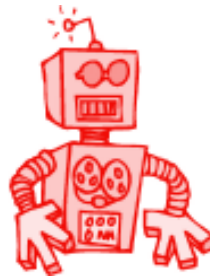
Binkies and pacifiers provide comfort and satisfaction for babies and toddlers. The more accustomed they are to a source of comfort, the more difficult it is for them to do without it. Because your daughter is close to 2, she won't simply forget the binky if it disappears. She will probably ask for, or demand, her binky.

Taking the binky away slowly is the key. Gradually provide less and less accessibility to her binky during the day, especially while your daughter is involved in play. It won't take long until your daughter only needs her binky at nap or bed times. Reducing the need for the binky at these crucial transitions will be difficult. You will have to help her learn to fall asleep without her binky. Develop a routine you can follow every night and then stick to it. A nap-time or bed-time ritual provides feelings of comfort and security once provided by the binky.

~Kaelin Olsen, graduate student, Department of Family and Human Development at Utah State University

question corner features questions posed by parents to early childhood experts who provide brief responses in this newsletter. If you have any questions you would like answered, please send email to eejcenter@coe.usu.edu or mail to EEJ Center for Early Childhood Education • Utah State University • 6515 Old Main Hill • Logan UT 84322-6515.

activity corner



Robot and Master

To help children learn directions, play "Robot and Master." Take turns being the Robot. The master gives directions such as "take two steps north," "bend down and touch your toes," "stand up," "walk three

steps east," etc. Increase the number of commands for older children.

How many treats under the cup?

To help children understand missing addends, play "How many treats under the cup?" Show the child a small number (start with five) of treats (raisins, cereal, etc.). Without the child looking, cover one or two of the treats with an upside down cup. Have the child guess how many are under the cup. Increase in difficulty for older children. Eat the treats when you are finished.



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science corner: AUTUMN LEAF SCIENCE

by Rebecca Monhardt, Ph.D.



On a crisp, cool autumn day, a leaf walk can be an enjoyable experience for the whole family. The natural world, in any season, can provide a rich learning environment for children of all ages. The activities that follow focus on leaves. While many of these can be done at any time of the year, the fall colors seem to make these activities especially suited to the autumn season. Some activities are suited for younger children while others are specifically for older children. All the activities can benefit from parent involvement.

Don't forget that perhaps the most valuable part of an autumn leaf walk is simply being outdoors. Adults and children alike can experience a sense of wonder at the beauty of nature. Walking through piles of leaves, or simply watching them flutter to the ground in the breeze or perhaps finding that extra special leaf to take home are memories that will stay with a child their entire life. Providing experiences such as these give children a strong connection to place, something that many believe is important to development. Do you have friends and family who live in a place where they don't get to experience fall color? Send them a box of leaves!

COLLECTING LEAVES

Young children love to make collections and leaves are a good choice because they are plentiful, free and have many interesting characteristics to observe. Children may be so taken with leaves that they want to create their own herbarium, and this can easily become a project for the entire family. When making leaf collections, it is impossible not to notice the diversity in nature by observing the differences in leaf color, arrangement on the stem, shape, size, and number. It is also a great way to learn the common names of local trees. Occasionally older children may want to learn the scientific names of trees and if they do, that's great! However, as in any activity, children's interest should direct how far they want to take this. Nothing can destroy a child's genuine interest in a topic more than to make them learn unnecessary terminology that they have no interest in. As a parent, can you think of a time when you were made to "learn" (memorize) things that you had no interest in? How many of these do you remember today?

MAKING OBSERVATIONS OF COLLECTED LEAVES

Leaves come in many different shapes, sizes and colors and offer the opportunity for children to look at attributes of individual leaves. Hand lenses can be useful in getting a closer look at the veins in leaves but are not essential. Simply looking at leaves may be enjoyable for children of all ages, especially young children.

Parents can provide a few questions to focus children's observations and encourage them to use as many of their senses as possible:

- Do the edges of leaves look different? Can you find leaves with smooth edges? Edges that look like the blades of a saw? Curly edges? What does the edge of the leaf look like to you?
- Do the veins of leaves look the same or do they look different? What do you think the veins are for?
- How many different colored leaves can you find?
- How many shades of the same color?
- When leaves fall from the tree, which take the longest to reach the ground? What do you think makes a difference in how they fall?
- Listen carefully ... do leaves make sounds?



A SCAVENGER HUNT

A more structured approach to leaf observation is a leaf scavenger hunt. Prepare in advance, a list that includes many different attributes of leaves. Children can help prepare this list or even take charge of preparing the list themselves. Examples to search for might include: A leaf with a toothed edge, a yellow leaf, a leaf made of tiny leaflets (compound leaf), etc. Distribute this list to all family members along with recycled grocery bags for collecting and then turn everyone loose. You may want to add a category for "the most unusual leaf" and see what people find. You can set time limits for the hunt to see who can find the most in a given time period or you can let this activity continue until everyone finds all the leaves on their list. When sharing leaves at the end of the activity, children will discover that many of their leaves have multiple attributes.

CLASSIFICATION

Making observations leads naturally into creating classification schemes. In any classification activity, it is important to allow children to develop their own grouping schemes. A guiding question might be, "How can you put these leaves in groups? Are there other ways you could group them? And then have children explain the particular organizational patterns they developed. Allowing children to develop these schemes themselves promotes higher levels of thinking than simply telling children to put leaves into groups by color, or according to the pattern of the veins. When adults determine the classification scheme for children the activity virtually becomes a "fill in the blank" kind of activity where little thinking and creativity is required. It may be quite amazing to see just what kind of organizational schemes children are able to come up with. Often they think of things adults never considered!

LEAF IDENTIFICATION

As children become older they may be curious about what kinds of leaves they have found and want to identify them by name. There are many books available that will provide help identifying leaves. Here are some suggestions:

What Tree is That? A tree identification booklet from the National Arbor Day Foundation. The booklet offers clear pictures of leaves and is available in either Eastern or Western versions. The cost is \$3 and can be ordered from:
The National Arbor Day Foundation
100 Arbor Avenue
Nebraska City, NE 68410
The booklet can also be ordered online at www.arborday.org. This website also has an online identification guide easy enough for school-age children to use in identifying their leaves.

Peterson's First Guides, *TREES* (1993). Boston; Houghton Mifflin Co. ISBN 0-395-91183-4. This guide is a children's version of the well-known Peterson field guides.

Trees Fandex Family Field Guides (1997). New York: Workman Publishing. ISBN 0-7611-1204. This guide folds out like a fan and the colorful pictures make identification easy.

Leaves in Myth, Magic & Medicine (1997) by Alice Thoms Vitale. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang. 1-55670-6649. This beautiful book, though very useful in identifying leaves, is



more for adults than children. The illustrations are lovely and interesting information is included about each leaf.

PRESSING AND PRESERVING LEAVES

Botanists often collect and press plants in order to have a record of the different species that grow in a particular area. A collection of pressed leaves that have been mounted, identified, and labeled makes up an herbarium.

Pressing and preserving leaves can be as simple as placing a leaf between two pieces of a paper towel and then layering several sheets of newspaper around this. Or, leaves can be placed between the pages of magazines or old phone books. Heavy books or bricks can be stacked on top and in three weeks the leaves can be removed.

MAKING A LEAF PRESS

You can also construct a simple leaf press that is more mobile. Here is a simple version that works well.

The press is constructed of two identical top and bottom pieces. Each piece is made from four horizontal wooden slats, about 3/4 inch wide and placed about 2 1/2 inches apart. These slats are nailed to six 3/4 inch vertical slats placed 3 inches apart. You can vary the size of this press to suit your purposes.

After the press is built, cut pieces of corrugated cardboard that are a little smaller than the sides of the finished press. Carefully place the leaves you want to press between two pieces of cardboard, making sure not to overlap the leaves. Adding additional layers of cardboard will allow you to press more leaves. These cardboard "leaf sandwiches" are between the two sides of the press. The sides of the press are held together using large heavy duty rubber bands or by making your own giant rubber bands by cutting a rubber tire inner tube into 1/2 inch strips. Old belts can also be used to hold the two sides of the press together. The press should be held tightly together. This press can also be used to dry flowers and plant parts other than leaves. In areas with low humidity, the leaves will dry in a few days. In more humid areas, it may take a little longer.

To create an herbarium, dried leaves can be mounted on sheets of paper with white glue. Each mounted leaf should be labeled with the kind of tree it came from, the place of collection, the name of the collector and the date.

LEAF PRINTS

Younger children may simply want to make rubbings of leaves. This is easily done by placing a leaf on a sheet of cardboard or other solid surface with the vein side facing up. Place a piece of paper on top of the leaf and rub over it with a crayon. Leaves especially suited for leaf rubbing are those with strongly defined veins like a maple leaf. In looking at the rubbings, young children become increasingly aware of detail and their ability to compare and categorize develops as well.

Children can take leaf printing a step further by designing their own field guide on a t-shirt. Using a variety of leaves, apply fabric paint to the vein side of the leaves with a paintbrush or a foam roller. Carefully place the painted side of the leaf onto a cotton t-shirt and press gently across the entire surface of the leaf. Follow the specific directions on the fabric paint to make sure the paint bonds to the fabric and won't

wash off. Using a permanent fabric marker, children can add the name to the leaf print and they'll have a great leaf field guide to wear!

WHY DO LEAVES CHANGE COLOR IN THE FALL?

This is a question children will probably want to know. Here is the explanation. Leaves serve an essential function for trees. They make food for the tree using water taken in from the roots and carbon dioxide from the air. Chlorophyll is a chemical found in the leaves that is a necessary part of the food-making process. Chlorophyll is also what gives leaves their green color. As a response to the shorter days of fall, trees begin to shut down the process of making food. They will survive the winter by living off stored food made during the summer. Chlorophyll begins to disappear from the leaves and they lose their green color. What becomes visible are yellow and orange pigments that have been in the leaf all along but have been covered up by the green chlorophyll. Other colors are also visible in the fall. Maple trees often appear red and purple. These colors are made in the fall. Some of the food made by the leaves remains trapped in the leaves after the food-making process stops. The cooler temperatures of fall and sunlight turn this food (glucose) into a red color. Oak leaves appear brown in fall due to the waste materials left in the leaves.

AUTUMN LEAF CHROMATOGRAPHY

This activity adapted from the National Gardening Association requires parent supervision and is suitable for older children only. Through the process of chromatography children can actually see the other pigments in green leaves. To begin, children should collect green leaves from one kind of tree. Next, they should crush the leaves and put them in a clean baby food jar or similar container with a lid. Parents can carefully add nail polish remover (acetone) to the jar until the leaves are covered. Put the lid on the jar and allow the mixture to sit for 24 hours. During this time, the different pigments in the leaves will dissolve in the acetone. Then, cut 3/4 inch strips from the center of a coffee filter and attach one end of the coffee filter strip to a popsicle stick or a pencil with tape. Put the other end of the coffee filter into the leaf mixture. This end should just touch the liquid leaf mixture in the jar. The popsicle stick will rest on the rim of the jar and prevent the strip from falling in. Allow this to sit another 24 hours in a well-ventilated place away from any open flame. The next day, remove the strips and let them dry. Children should be able to observe green, yellow, and light orange bands of color on the filter strip. What has happened is that the different pigments in the leaves have dissolved in the acetone. As they travel up the coffee filter strip, some "fall out" of solution before others, creating bands of color.

Children may want to repeat this activity with other types of leaves or at different times in the growing season. Make sure children label their filter paper strips with the date and the kind of tree the leaf came from in case they want to make comparisons later on. There are many different variables that children may choose to test using this activity and many questions students may want to investigate. Do all types of leaves create the same pattern? Will colors be the same? Will the width of the colored bands be the same? What happens if you try this with a colored leaf?

~Rebecca Mohnhardt is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University.

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