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What's This Activity About?

This activity allows participants to develop an understanding of the relative sizes (volumes) of the planets in our solar system. Families start with a big ball of playdough and divide it up following the steps on the instructions sheet. When they are done, they see how the planets vary in size. By the time they get to tiny Pluto, they are typically quite amazed.

Materials

Each group (2-4 students) will need:

- Three pounds of playdough per group
- Plastic knife
- Construction paper, Breadboard or wax paper as surface for cutting play-dough
- Instruction sheet
- Planet name worksheets

Setting Up the Activity

This activity works best if the **worksheets (just a sheet of paper with one of the 9 planets written on it)** with the planet names are placed side-by side on a table, and are arranged to match the order from the Sun. In front of these sheets place the **instruction sheet** and the **play-dough** and **plastic knife** on the **breadboard** (or equivalent). Be sure there is enough room in front of the table for the group to work together. It is **crucial to have the indicated amount** of play-dough for each group. If there is less than three pounds, the Pluto piece will be too small to see! We recommend three pounds each and urge you to try the activity for yourself before leading it.

Suggestions for Introducing the Activity

For any of these scale model activities, it is useful to start by exploring the notion of models, referring to playthings, such as dolls or toy cars, can be a useful reference for talking about scale models. If you facilitate this activity from the start, begin by asking the participants which planet they think is the largest. Which is the smallest? For whatever planet they say is the largest (it will most likely be Jupiter), ask them the following question: If we could combine all the planets together into a big ball, what fraction (yay math!) of that ball would the largest planet be? Might it be $1/9$ or $1/5$, for example? End the introduction by telling them they will get a better idea after completing this activity.

Doing the Activity

Students start by reading the instructions, but they should get into working with the play-dough as quickly as possible. They should follow the instructions as to how to divide up their play-dough, placing the parts in the proper planet boxes. Each time the play-dough is divided up and parts are combined to make a planet, be sure participants roll the combined parts around in their hands until the planet has a ball shape.

Wrap-up

Start by asking the group about some of the discoveries they made regarding the sizes of the planets. Were there any surprises? Ultimately direct the discussion so that they realize the smaller planets (except Pluto) are the inner planets, while the larger planets are the outer planets. You may also want to note that more than 96% of the combined volume of the planets is in Jupiter and Saturn (approximately 60% in Jupiter and 36% in Saturn). Those giant planets really ARE giants.

Materials Sources:

Play-dough:

Three pound tubs of Play-Doh, Crayola Dough or other similar modeling clay can be purchased from many craft suppliers. As of this writing, Dick Blick sells 3 lb. tubs of Crayola Dough for \$7.49 each (www.dickblick.com or (800) 828-4548). Alternatively you can make your own dough using the recipe below. The only drawback is that this can grow moldy, so if you plan to do this activity often, it is recommended that you invest in the commercial product.

Kool-Aid™ Play-dough Recipe

This recipe makes three pounds of colorful, scented play-dough:

5 cups of flour

1 cup salt

4 packages dry unsweetened Kool-Aid™

4 cups boiling water

6 tablespoons vegetable oil

Mix the dry ingredients together in a bowl. Mix the liquids together and pour them over the dry ingredients. Stir the mixture until it forms a ball (this may take a while — keep stirring). As the mixture cools, it will become less sticky. After the mixture has cooled to room temperature, take it out of the bowl and knead it until it is smooth. Store in Ziplock bags in the refrigerator until ready to use.

STUDENT INSTRUCTION SHEET

What's This About?

This activity demonstrates the different sizes of the nine planets in our solar system. Follow the steps outlined below to see the relative size (volume) of each planet. Start with a big 3-pound ball of playdough, which represents the volume of all the planets combined.

1. Divide the Entire Ball of Playdough into 10 Equal Parts

You may find it easiest to start by rolling the ball into one big hot dog shape.

- Combine 6 parts together, roll them into a ball, and put the ball into the Jupiter box.
- Similarly combine 3 parts and put them into the Saturn box.

2. Cut the Remaining Part Into 10 Equal Parts

- Take 5 parts and combine them with the ball in the Saturn box.
- Combine 2 parts to put into the Neptune box.
- Put 2 parts into the Uranus box.

3. Cut the Remaining Part Into 4 Equal Parts

- Take 3 parts and combine them with the ball in the Saturn box.

4. Cut the Remaining Part Into 10 Equal Parts

- Put 2 parts into the Earth box.
- Put 2 parts into the Venus box.
- Take 4 parts and combine them with the ball in the Uranus box.

5. Combine the Remaining 2 Parts and Cut Into 10 Equal Parts

- Put 1 part into the Mars box.
- Take 4 parts and combine them with the ball in the Neptune box.
- Take 4 parts and combine them with the ball in the Uranus box.

6. Cut the Remaining Part Into 10 Equal Parts

- Put 7 parts into the Mercury box.
- Take 2 parts and combine them with the ball in the Uranus box.

7. Cut the Remaining Part Into 10 Equal Parts

- Take 9 parts and combine them with the ball in the Uranus box.
- Put 1 part into the Pluto box.

And Now...

Now that you have divided the playdough to represent the planets by volume, roll the pieces in each planet's box into balls to best represent the shapes of the planets.