

Learn about Dirt Tracks

Is your child curious how characters in books and movies are often able to track the movements of other people or animals by studying and following the tracks they make in the dirt? Conduct a simple experiment with your child to study how dirt tracks change as they age.

What You Need:

- Large patch of open soil (make sure it's exposed to the elements but doesn't get too much traffic)
- Rake
- Notebook
- Pen or pencil



What You Do:

1. Start by talking about tracks with your child. What are tracks, and where do they come from?
2. Have your child rake the patch of soil to loosen the dirt. Ask him to make a clear track of some kind, such as his hand or footprint.
3. Have him describe the track's appearance in his notebook and record the time and date. How clear is the track? How deep is it? Are there any major marks around or on top of it?
4. Once or twice a day for the next several days, check the track with your child and have him make notes about any changes in its appearance. These changes may include:
 - Crumbling edges caused by wind and rain
 - Debris covering the tracks such as fallen leaves or pine needles
 - Other tracks or marks (such as cat footprints) blurring part of the track
5. At the end of the experiment, talk to your child about what he's learned. If he were tracking a real person or animal, what clues could he look for on their tracks to help him determine when they had passed?

Real trackers do not have records in a notebook to tell them when a track was made, but they do have detailed knowledge of the world around them. If they can see that a track was made before a rainfall, and they know it rained four hours ago, then they know the track is more than four hours old. If a track is free of loose leaves and debris, whereas the rest of the ground is full of them, trackers know the track is very fresh.

If your child enjoyed this activity, you can extend it by taking him to a place where tracks are easy to find, such as a park with a muddy stream bed or sandy wash. Find some of the clearest tracks, and let him use the signs to make educated guesses about when people and animals have passed by.