

# Companion Guide for Parents and Educators

## Activity 3: Model the Solar System

### Objective:

Help children visualize planetary distances and orbits, developing an understanding of the scale of the solar system and the positions of the planets relative to the sun.

### Background for Parents and Educators:

In Galileo's time, people believed Earth was the center of the universe (geocentric model). Galileo's observations, including the discovery of Jupiter's moons, supported the heliocentric model—where planets orbit the sun. This activity demonstrates the relative positions and distances of planets, helping children grasp how revolutionary Galileo's ideas were. Understanding the vast distances between planets and their orbital paths offers perspective on our place within the universe, connecting historical scientific discoveries with modern astronomy.

### Materials Needed:

- Balls of varying sizes (representing different planets)
- String or yarn (to measure and represent distances)
- Labels for each planet (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune)
- Measuring tape (optional, for accurate distances)
- Paper and markers (for additional notes and sketches)

## Companion Guide for Parents and Educators

Instructions:

1. Assign each ball to represent a planet based on relative size (Jupiter being the largest, Mercury the smallest).
2. Use string to measure and represent distances between the planets proportionally, making sure to show how the planets are spaced out.
3. Arrange the planets in their correct order from the Sun, labeling each clearly.
4. Discuss each planet's unique characteristics, including size, temperature, atmosphere, and moons.

Enhancements (Expanded):

Connect to Galileo's Discovery:

Discuss how Galileo's telescope observations of Jupiter and its moons changed humanity's understanding of the solar system. Galileo's discovery showed that not everything orbited Earth, challenging deeply held beliefs. Encourage children to reflect on how groundbreaking this revelation must have been. Invite them to imagine themselves in Galileo's position, making a discovery that contradicted common beliefs. They can write or act out Galileo presenting his discovery, dealing with skepticism, and finally being recognized for his revolutionary ideas.

Introduce the Heliocentric Model:

Explain the heliocentric model proposed by Copernicus and supported by Galileo's findings. Before this discovery, people believed in the geocentric model, where Earth was at the center. Use the model they created to physically demonstrate how the planets revolve around the sun. Reinforce that Galileo's observations were crucial evidence supporting the sun-centered view. Discuss with children why evidence-based thinking is important in science and everyday life, making connections to how modern

## Companion Guide for Parents and Educators

science builds upon historical findings.

### Comparing Planetary Features:

Have children research and share fun facts about each planet, such as the extreme heat of Venus, the stormy Great Red Spot on Jupiter, or the beautiful rings of Saturn. Create simple informational cards for each planet to attach next to their models. This provides an opportunity for children to practice research, writing, and presentation skills. Additionally, it allows them to explore the solar system creatively and collaboratively, fostering teamwork and curiosity.

### Discussion Questions with Expanded Answers:

#### 1. Why was Galileo's discovery about Jupiter's moons so important?

Galileo's discovery showed that not all celestial bodies orbit Earth, directly challenging the idea of Earth as the universe's center. This helped validate the heliocentric model, fundamentally changing scientific understanding. Discussing this with children emphasizes the importance of questioning accepted ideas and seeking evidence to support new theories. Galileo's findings laid the groundwork for modern astronomy and the scientific method. Children learn the value of curiosity, observation, and courage in scientific exploration.

#### 2. How is the solar system model helpful for understanding space?

A physical model helps children visualize and comprehend the vast distances and positions of planets in space. Models simplify complex concepts, making them accessible and engaging. It allows children to physically interact with abstract ideas, deepening their understanding. Children can clearly see planetary order, scale, and orbital paths, which are challenging to grasp through text alone. This hands-on approach fosters retention, curiosity, and spatial awareness.

## Companion Guide for Parents and Educators

### 3. What surprised you most about the sizes and distances between planets?

This question encourages reflection on the surprising scale differences among planets. Children often find it remarkable how far apart planets are compared to the relatively small size of each planet. Many are surprised by the enormous scale difference between giant planets like Jupiter and smaller ones like Mercury. Discussing these observations helps children appreciate the vastness and diversity of the solar system. It also prompts curiosity about why planets differ so much in size and composition.

### 4. What do you think it would be like to travel between planets?

Prompt children to imagine space travel-floating in zero gravity, seeing planets up close, and experiencing the silence and isolation of space. They can consider the long travel times, necessary preparations, and what they might encounter on each planet. Encourage creative storytelling or drawing about their imagined journey. This helps children develop imaginative thinking and understand real challenges faced by astronauts. It also engages them emotionally with the concept of space exploration.

### 5. How has our understanding of the solar system changed since Galileo's time?

Since Galileo, we've discovered new planets, dwarf planets, moons, asteroids, and comets. Modern telescopes and space probes provide detailed pictures and data about celestial bodies, far surpassing Galileo's capabilities. Children can learn about recent discoveries, such as Pluto's reclassification or detailed images from the Mars rovers. This discussion highlights that science continually evolves as we gain new knowledge and technologies. It reinforces the idea that curiosity and exploration have driven significant advancements in our understanding of the universe.