Children often enjoy playing with their clothing and filling all sorts of things with sand and other objects.

Adults could provide a large collection of random socks and leave them in various places in the environment.

The Activity
Leave a variety of socks around the setting, some paired, some odd. Good places to place them might include, for example, in the sand pit/tray or amongst small world play figures such as dinosaurs, people ... This might encourage children to experiment with filling the socks with different materials/objects. Other children might enjoy trying to sort and/or pair the socks.

Encouraging mathematical thinking and reasoning:

Describing
Tell me about these (socks).
What have you done with these (socks)?

Recording
Would you like to remember this by taking a photo?
How can we remember which sock goes where? (when sorting or ordering)

Reasoning
What do you think might happen if we put in more sand/more dinosaurs/more ...?
Can we sort them in a different way?

Opening out
What could you put into that sock instead?
What do you think will happen? Why?
The Mathematical Journey

Shape, space and measure
- Using their own language to describe shapes
- Talking about patterning and design (how a pair match)

Same and different
- Developing the use of language to compare and contrast, for example, a sock filled with dinosaurs compared with a sock filled with sand

Counting
- Counting actions
- Saying one number for each object (e.g. when counting dinosaurs in a sock)
- Estimating the number of objects and checking by counting
- Beginning to use vocabulary involved in adding

Development and Variation

This playful situation could lead to a variety of mathematical conversations, depending on what the children choose to do. Counting may play a part (cupfuls of sand to fill a sock/number of small dinosaurs to fill a sock) but equally, a sock filled with sand can lead to the use of interesting words to describe its shape.

Some children may be keen to pair the socks and/or sort them in various ways and you could set up scenarios to encourage this if that is where their interest lies, perhaps by involving characters from recently-read stories/rhymes or toys in the setting.

The NRICH Early Years activity ‘Washing Line’ could be linked to this one.

Resources

A collection of socks, including some ‘odd’ ones.
A sand pit/tray with objects that could be used as scoops.
Small dinosaurs/small world toys etc. that could be used to fill up a sock.
Equipment to record what children say/discover.

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