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Coral Nibbles

When you look up close at a coral reef, it's easy to think that the coral is a plant. But actually, corals are tiny animals. Each coral colony is made up of many individual coral animals, each called a **coral polyp**.

Learn about the parts of a coral polyp as you build your own edible colony of coral!

Materials

1 thick paper plate
1 large banana
1 pack of red Twizzlers or pack of small pretzel sticks
1 straw
1 toothpick
Jam, any flavor
1 pack of round crackers (8–10 crackers)
Green or pink or red sugar sprinkles

Directions

1. Peel your banana and break off a section about 2–3 inches. Stand the banana section up on the center of your paper plate. This is the body of your coral polyp!

2. Like most animals, corals have a mouth and a gut (like your stomach). But unlike humans, both their food and their waste enter and exit through their mouth. Let's make your coral's gut. Take your straw and poke a hole in the center of the banana. Once you have the hole, take the straw out. That hole is your coral polyp's gut and mouth!

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3. Corals eat by capturing food with tentacles that wave in the ocean currents. The number of tentacles your coral polyp has tells you its name. If it has 8 tentacles, it's an octocoral because "octo" means eight. If it has 6 tentacles, it's a hexacoral because "hexa" means 6. How many tentacles do you want your polyp to have? Take the toothpick and poke small holes around the straw. Poke a strand of your Twizzler or a pretzel stick into each hole. These are your tentacles!

4. A coral polyp stays in one place, once it finds a good place to settle. Coral polyps glue themselves to rocks or even other coral polyp skeletons. Glue your coral polyp to a cracker using the jam.

5. Tiny coral animals have skeletons that protect them and give them a shape. Together, all of the individual coral skeletons make up the reef. Coral skeletons are made up of the same material as chalk that you might use to draw on the sidewalk. Corals can escape a predator by hiding inside their skeleton. Let's make your coral skeleton. Carefully break apart two crackers into large chunks and surround the banana with these pieces to represent your coral polyp's skeleton.

6. In addition to eating the food they capture with their tentacles, some coral make their own food by partnering up with tiny organisms called **algae** that live within their bodies. These tiny algae make energy from the sunlight that reaches the coral through a process called **photosynthesis**, just like in plants. The algae share their energy with the coral, and the coral shares its nutrients with the algae. This partnership is called symbiosis. Let's add the algae to your coral polyp. These special coral algae often have bright colors that make the coral colorful. Sprinkle your favorite color of sugar sprinkles onto your coral polyp to represent the algae.

7. For your final step, your coral polyp needs neighbors! Coral polyps live in colonies, with thousands of individual coral animals living right next to each other, making up a reef. For this final step, create 3 more coral polyps and arrange them right next to your first coral polyp, and each other. Enjoy your coral colony, and feel free to nibble away!