

Lesson Guide: Mutton

Vocabulary:

- Mutton
- Lamb
- Wool
- Loom
- Weaver

See the attached vocabulary sheet in the Educator's Guide.

Engage:

- Read the Story attached to the Educators Guide entitled: *T'aa Dibé: A Navajo-Churro Story*.
 - Explain to the students that the Navajo-Churro was a gift from the Navajo Holy People.
 - Then, have students complete the Sheep ELA activity. They'll need to give the story title, summary and four key story details.

Explore and Explain:

- **Activity 1:** Remind students that the Navajo-Churro is a very special breed of sheep. They're used specifically for their wool and meat.
 - With students, read or listen to [Wisdom Weaver](#).
- **Activity 2:** Review the attached PowerPoint presentation. Then, let students choose and complete one of the Weaving Fun Choice Board Activities. Let students choose the activity they like best from finger weaving, paper plate weaving, and cardboard weaving, and then complete it.

Elaborate:

- Explain to students that there are many kinds of sheep breeds. The Navajo-Churro is a heritage variety.
 - They are one of the oldest sheep breeds in the U.S., and they have been documented in the U.S since the 1500s.
 - Sheep are frequently referred to as mutton among the Navajo.
 - They have distinctive traits (long wool, multiple natural colors, sometimes multiple horns) that set them apart from modern commercial breeds.
 - The sheep's meat plays an important role in Diné food traditions, linking community, family, and culture at the table.
 - Optional: Complete Churro Word Search

Evaluate:

- After concluding the lesson, have students think about the following key concepts:
 - Navajo-Churro sheep, called *T'áá Dibé* ("the first sheep"), are central to Diné history, stories, and traditions.

- Their meat is used in traditional meals, supporting community and ceremonies.
- Their wool is strong, colorful, and used for rugs, blankets, and clothing that preserve stories and culture.

Suggested Lesson Activities:

- Indigenous Vocabulary
- Sheep ELA
- Read/Listen to *Wisdom Weaver* by Jann A. Johnson
- Navajo-Churro Word Search
- Weaving Fun Choice Board and PowerPoint

Additional Educator Resources:

[Navajo-Churro Sheep Association](#)

[*Wisdom Weaver*](#) by Jann A. Johnson (Book/Web Reading)

[The Navajo Sheep Project](#)

T'aa Dibé: A Navajo-Churro Story

For Grades K–5: Please feel free to modify these lessons as needed to fit the needs of your students.

Long ago, when the world was still new, and the Diné people were learning how to live in harmony with the land, the Holy People gave them a precious gift. This gift was T'aa Dibé, or the First Sheep. These sheep were unlike any other. Their wool shone like soft sunlight, and their calm eyes watched over the people with kindness. The Diné treated the sheep with respect, using their wool to weave warm blankets that wrapped families in comfort.



Photo Credit: M. Benanav/Navajo Sheep Project

As time passed, people grew careless and forgot the humility and balance that kept them close to their sheep. The First Sheep gathered and left, promising, *“We will return when you are ready to care for us with gratitude again.”* And just like that, they were gone.

Generations came and went. Children grew up hearing the story of T'aa Dibé, always wondering when the First Sheep might return. Then one day, in the wide desert valleys, families noticed new sheep moving gracefully across the land — sheep that looked familiar, as if they had stepped out of the old stories.

They were small and deer-like, with bright eyes and wool in every natural color, white like clouds, brown like earth, black like night, and spotted like shadows under the juniper trees. The Diné looked at them carefully and felt their hearts lift.

“The First Sheep have come home,” they said.

These sheep became known as Navajo-Churro sheep, and the people welcomed them with songs, prayers, and open arms. The Navajo-Churro quickly proved how perfectly they fit into the land. They danced up rocky hills on sure hooves, leaping from stone to stone. They wandered across desert grasslands, finding food where other animals might give up. They were tough, clever, and calm — just right for the dry winds and sunbaked earth of the Southwest.

Their wool was long, silky, and strong. When the Diné touched it, they felt a connection to their ancestors. This wool could be woven into rugs and blankets so sturdy that many lasted for hundreds of years, treasures passed from family to family.

Every spring, the ewes (mother sheep) gave birth to lambs out on the open range. The birth of a lamb was a joyful sight. A newborn lamb might wobble for only a moment before popping up on tiny legs, blinking at the world. The mothers were gentle but determined, murmuring soft, loving sounds that only their babies could understand. The lambs stayed close, learning their mother's voice and smell, following her through sagebrush and sand.

The people often smiled as they watched the lambs bounce, hop, and race one another in circles — little puffs of woolly energy chasing the wind.

But the story of the Navajo-Churro sheep is also a story of courage. There were times in history when it seemed these sheep might disappear again. During the Long Walk, when Diné families were forced from their homes, some shepherds risked everything to keep their sheep safe. Later, when the government ordered the stock reductions, many flocks were taken away. Yet some sheep survived, protected by families who refused to give up. These strong, determined sheep are the ancestors of today's Navajo-Churro.

Today, if you visit the Navajo Nation, you might see Navajo-Churro sheep grazing under the blue sky, their wool shining in the sunlight. Some may have two horns, some four, and some even more, a rare and special trait found in only a few sheep around the world. They move gracefully across mesas and valleys, just as their ancestors did long ago.

And every time a new lamb is born and takes its first brave, bouncing steps, the Diné remember the promise of the First Sheep. The Holy People's gift returned not just because the time was right, but because the people had learned once again to care for their animals with respect, gentleness, and harmony.

Navajo Churro: A Heritage Breed

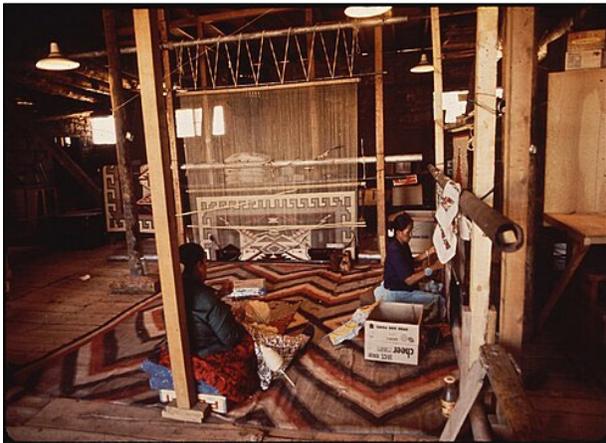
Navajo-Churro sheep are a unique and ancient breed that has been residing in the Southwest for centuries. They are tough, strong animals with long legs and lean bodies that help them travel across dry, rocky land. Navajo-Churro sheep come in many natural colors, including white, brown, black, gray, and even spotted. Their wool is easily recognizable. It has two layers: a soft inner coat that keeps them warm and a long, protective outer coat that helps keep them dry. Their wool is not very greasy, which makes it great for washing, spinning, and weaving.

These sheep are also very important to Diné (Navajo) people. In Navajo stories, they are called *T'áa Dibé*, meaning “the first sheep.” Often, they are called mutton. It is important to note that, sometimes, Indigenous people borrowed words from English to describe new practices, foods, or tools introduced through contact that are still utilized today.

For many families, Navajo-Churro sheep are more than animals; they are part of their history, culture, and way of life. Today, people continue to protect and raise Navajo-Churro sheep so their traditions can live on. The sheep are also an important food source. Their meat is used in many traditional dishes, helping families celebrate community meals, ceremonies, and everyday life.

Because their wool comes in a wide range of beautiful natural colors and has strong, long fibers, it is ideal for creating traditional rugs, blankets, and other woven art pieces. Navajo-Churro sheep help keep the weaving tradition alive, connecting today’s artists with the stories and skills of the past.

Weaving with Churro Wool



Navajo weavers at work, [Hubbell Trading Post](#), 1972

keeping the art of weaving alive, just as their ancestors did.

Navajo-Churro wool brings together the sheep, the people, and the art, transforming fibers from the flock into beautiful works that tell a story, celebrate tradition, and honor the land.

The wool from Navajo-Churro sheep is very special and has been used for hundreds of years to make beautiful textiles. Because it has two layers, a soft inner coat, and a long, strong outer coat, it is both warm and durable, making it perfect for weaving. The wool also comes in many natural colors, such as white, brown, black, gray, and spotted, which gives weavers numerous ways to create colorful patterns without using dyes.

For the Navajo people, this wool is more than just material. Families use Churro wool to make rugs, blankets, and clothing that have been passed down through generations. Today, many weavers still spin and dye wool by hand,

Weaving Fun Choice Board

Explore the art of weaving with Navajo-Churro wool! Choose one activity to complete. You can try all three if you would like.

Paper Plate Weaving

Materials: Paper plate, yarn or paper strips, scissors

Steps:

1. Cut small slits evenly around your plate.
2. Wrap one color of yarn around the plate to make the “warp.”
3. Weave another color of yarn or paper strips over and under.
4. Keep weaving until your plate is full of colorful patterns!

Food for Thought: How do the colors remind you of Navajo-Churro sheep wool?

Finger Weaving

Materials: Strips of yarn in different colors

Steps:

1. Take two or more yarn strips.
2. Braid or twist them together with your fingers.
3. Make patterns with the colors.
4. Keep weaving until you have a long, colorful braid!

Food for Thought: How does weaving colors together help tell a story, like in Navajo rugs?

Cardboard Yarn Weaving

Materials: Cardboard, yarn, scissors

Steps:

1. Make 6 small cuts across the top and bottom of the cardboard, finger width apart.
2. With a small piece of tape, tape the yarn on the back of the board.
3. String the yarn through every cut, back and forth to create a warp (vertical yarn on your loom). Tape the yarn on the back.
4. Start your weaving by taking the color string you'd like to use. Go over, under, to start your weaving, leaving a tail.
5. Go back and forth, continuing the over-under, under-over until your yarn is used or you want to switch colors.

Food for Thought: How do the patterns in your collage remind you of blankets made from Navajo-Churro wool?

TEACHER EXAMPLE

Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (K-5)

Directions:

- In Column 1, rewrite the word in English.
- In Column 2, rewrite the word in your own Native language (if available). If it's not available, you may use the Native language of a neighbor, friend, or community member.

Vocabulary Word	English Rewrite	English Rewrite	Navajo
			Language Rewrite
Sheep			dibé
Lamb			
Weaving			
Wool			
Loom			

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Name: _____

Date: _____

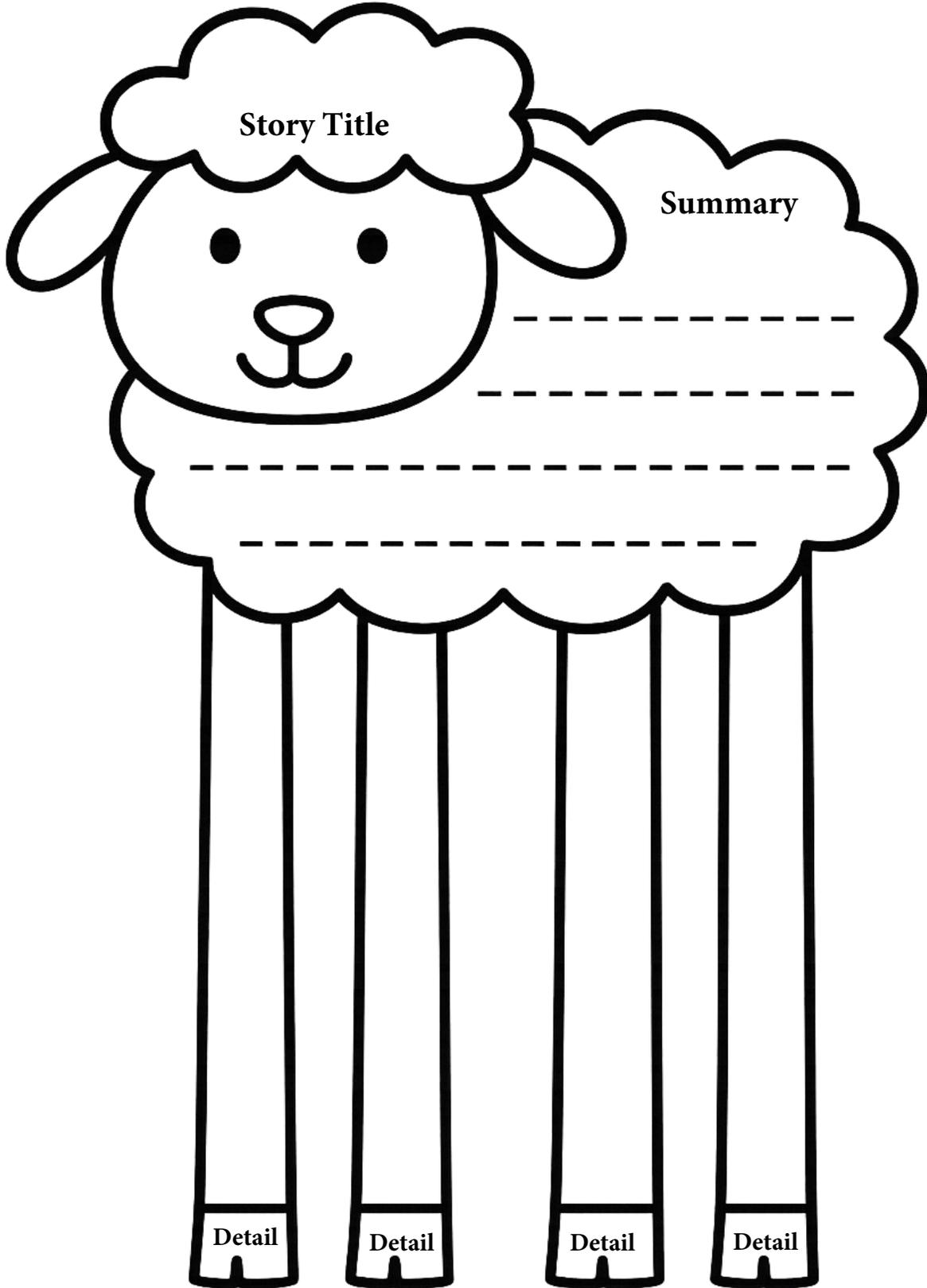
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Vocabulary Word	English Rewrite	English Rewrite	Language Rewrite
Sheep			
Lamb			
Weaving			
Wool			
Loom			

Name: _____



Name: _____

Date: _____

The Navajo-Churro

N W R E W W K Z R Z J Z U W M E W F Z I A I H N
Y D G S N R O H U S J D Y W N R L R M N I X E E
B T H D I I R O H P G J N J P E F V B C W N X O
V N J A W L F B U T W M Y N C Y A F N Y T N N T
A D W O Y Z N R A T O A G Q C C Y P B J O E X A
O Q F K E V W R A G E M L H Q I H I N X G K A O
V P B P Z W N J R B A R E M L E U V E L C J H C
S A J B C C S Y A F D R C I E Y L A M B K Z A R
L D G T H O V S W B I R B O F S A J R L S D Z E
P E J E W X N Q U T X U W F A S F D A T U Q U N
V Y L W K X M J A Q N W U Y G T M U R J F R X N
E X P X K Z L G K R G N Z X X U E A Q N L N O I
T W W H Y G E J N M X U F R T G V K H N V M S U
B R E E D A M Q H L W W X M T M H M S V C Z B B
T K H S D S W U X N S X I E M E A T R B Q C L D
A U O H W A D Y J P B I F V H Y M N N F H R R U
P R K K U H N U Y Q V J C H B K K C R B L M H X
F H I V M O O L E Z Y U W M A Y F Q F O Y C T O
G C R X F Z G E W A P A N S M Z C D B A Y X H B
B N I D M L A I O I X T A J Y T F C C L U G U M
X W E L G K K T C L C V I G A R C S D X B G M R
Y R C A Y P Y T R X T H S K P D Y W T A W O O L
S W M D W T D E G D J B S R Y K Y M N P V G M V
V P O J W Q K V I L A Y Z U W U S E U S R X C W

loom

dye

heritage

lamb

outer coat

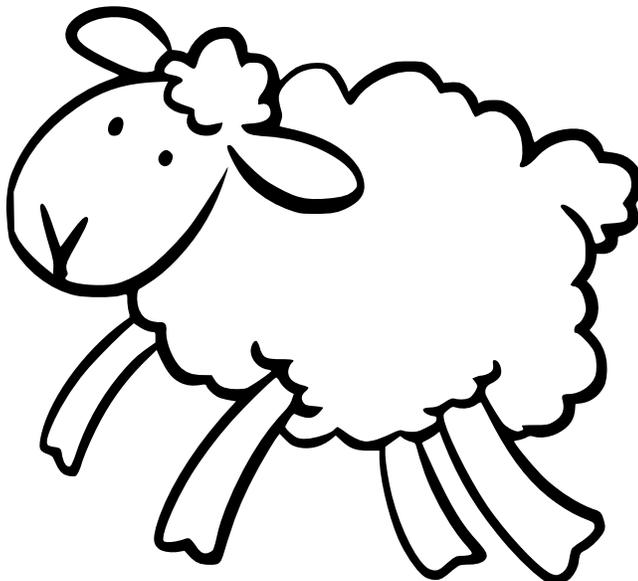
inner coat

ewes

meat

horns

wool





Weaving Fun Choice Board Activities





Finger Weaving

- Finger weaving is how you make fabric with your fingers instead of a loom.
- Native people used plants and animal fibers, then later used wool and beads from European traders to weave.
- People made colorful sashes (belts), garters, and bag straps. Voyageurs (fur traders) wore these sashes, and they were given as special gifts between Native and European leaders.
- Each finger woven sash takes hundreds of hours to make by hand. In the 1800s, machines in England started making cheaper sashes, which replaced the handmade ones in many places.
- Today, the arrow sash is an important symbol for French Canadians and Métis people, and Native people still make them by hand for pow wows and ceremonies.



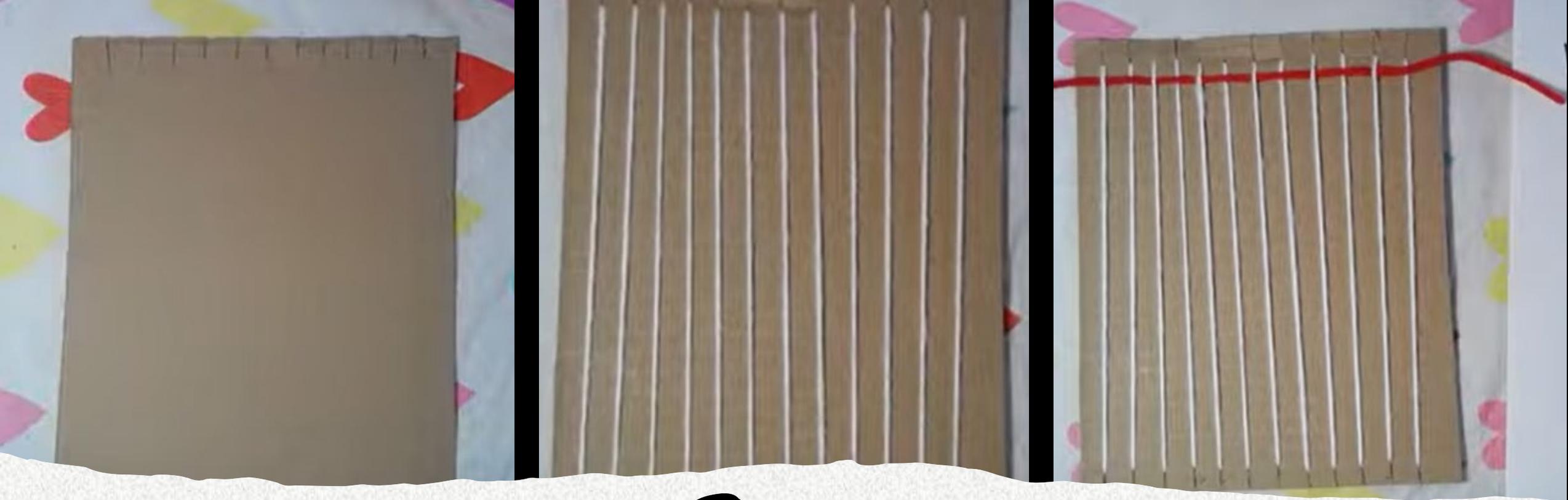
Finger Weaving Images

Paper Plate Weaving Examples



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Cardboard Yarn Weaving