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ABSTRACT

A first-grade teacher included her students in her planning of a unit of study. The teacher explained to the students how she planned a unit and invited the students to volunteer ideas for the topic. The topic chosen was space and aliens. The teacher and students discussed what they already knew about the topic, what they wanted to learn about it, and how they were going to sequence the activities in the unit. The theme was incorporated into specific lessons (numbers, phonics, and reading). The children were quick to bring in books, videos, and posters on space, and as the unit progressed they also brought in reports, rockets and space pictures made at home. The first week was devoted to the planets, the second week focused on the sun, the third week on the moon, and the last week-and-a-half on aliens. The children decided to end the unit with an alien party. Children liked the unit because it was fun and they learned new things. The teacher liked the unit because it removed some pressure from her to think up units, and because she did not have to motivate the students to work since they had been part of the planning. (A list of the things the teacher and students already knew about space and aliens, a list of children's ideas for activities, photographs, and examples of worksheets are attached.) (RS)

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A JOINTLY-PLANNED UNIT:

EXPANDING THEMATIC UNITS BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK

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1993

THE QUESTION

Can first grade children help to plan a teaching unit? I was sure they could tell me what they were interested but could they go further than that? Irujo[1] laid-out a simple plan for including your students in the planning of a teaching unit. I decided to try this out in my class.

THE PLANNING

I started out by explaining how I went about planning for each unit we had done in class. I described the process: deciding on a topic; listing what I wanted the class to learn from my topic (my goals); listing activities that help reach these goals; then ordering the activities and planning for each one. Then I asked them to help me go through this process for a unit to be worked on for the next month.

The children were excited and many volunteered ideas for topics. The ideas included plants, trees, different kinds of people and countries, insects, water, aviation, space and aliens, and mammals. The children voted for their favorite. The winner was space and aliens.

Next I asked them to tell me a what they already knew about space and aliens. We came up with a list of seven concepts (see Appendix 1). From there we talked about what we did not know or would like to know about space and aliens. Using a procedure suggested to me by the Grade 2 teacher in our school, the children and I created a diagram of our new unit (see Appendix 2). Our next step was to brain-storm for ways to find the answers posed on our diagram.

Once this was done we only had to sequence to our activities[2] before we could begin working on our unit. I suggested that we learn first about the planets, then the sun, the moon, and finally aliens (This way the unit built up from fact to fiction and each step led into the next nicely). Though they were keen on talking about aliens, the class did agree to follow my suggestion.

In addition to this initial planning, which took place over several days, we added new activities as we went along. In addition I incorporated our theme into my specific lessons (numbers, phonics

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[1] Irujo, Suzanne, "How to Plan Content-Based Teaching Units for ESL", Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, San Francisco, March 1990.

[2] A list of activities suggested by the children can be found in Appendix 3.

and reading)

THE IMPLEMENTATION

This was the fun part! The children were quick to bring in books, videos, and posters on space and as the unit progressed they also brought in reports, rockets and space pictures made at home. I also brought in some space books[3] from my own home collection as well. And later in the unit I found an article in the local paper on Mars and one on aliens in the 'International Newsweek' both of which I brought in and shared with the class. The fifth grade gave us a rocket they had constructed out of newspaper and the sixth grade lent us a mobile of the solar system. Our Learning Disabilities Teacher taught us a song about aliens.

On our next library day we had our librarian show us where the space books were kept and I selected a number to take to our room. Over the next several weeks some of the children chose to take out some of the space books as their library selection.

We started our unit by reading The Magic School Bus: Lost in Space. It was a good overview of the solar system and a funny book too! We read the book over a period of three days, stopping to discuss each planet. During this week we coloured-in and labeled a picture of the solar system, wrote stories about trips to various planets, counted the number of aliens, rockets and comets on our planet worksheet and wrote a story about Mars (these were all teacher-planned activities). At this time we started watching the video "ET". We watched it twice a week for about 45 minutes, giving us time to discuss what we watched and to try to predict what was going to happen.

During the second week we focused on the sun. We read several books (and parts of books) on the sun. Then we took up one child's suggestion and made a huge sun out of paper, paint and newspaper and hung it from our ceiling. The children painted the sun and included the "chicken pox" (sunspots) that we had read were on the sun. We then jointly planned some 'sun' experiments: we left water, paint, crayons, and paper in the sun. The children predicted that the water and paint would dry-up, the crayon melt and the paper burn-up. They were right about the water and paint but the crayon though hot was not melted and the paper not burnt. They said that we needed to leave the latter two out longer but we hadn't time. We also talked about shadows and paired-off and tried to draw around the shadow of our partners hand.

The third week we studied the moon. One of the children brought in a book, Moonwalk: First Trip To The Moon, which we read chapters from each day. A third-grader wrote a report on the moon and

[3] A complete list of books used in our unit is found in the bibliography.

presented it to my class. After his presentation I put the report on our Science table. This started a rash of home-made reports from the children in our class. At this time we started a 'moon-watch'. Each night the children would check the moon to see what phase it was in. We also did comprehension and math worksheets which incorporated our moon theme.

Our last week and a half was spent on aliens. At first we talked about what exactly we meant by aliens and whether or not they really existed. From previous weeks we had learned which planets could and could not sustain life as we know it. But one child was quick to point that aliens might not "be life as we know it". We read some short stories about fictional aliens, drew pictures of aliens and wrote newspaper stories about "The Day the Aliens Arrived". Finally we planned and made our alien planet. We drew pictures of how we thought our planet might look. Together we decided that the planet was like and it needed: aliens, rockets, space vehicles and homes. We then divided into groups: one working with papier mache to make the planet, its craters, mountains and valleys; one working with plasticine making aliens; one working with Legos to make rockets and space houses and a last group with other building materials to make space vehicles. As a final touch each child made a rocket out of a toilet tube and an egg carton.

The children had decided that to end the unit we would have an alien party. We made alien hats out of paper and pipe cleaners. We also used green icing, jelly caps, raisins, and cheese twists to decorate cookies to look like aliens. At the party we played Pin The Eye On The Alien.

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of our unit I asked the children to evaluate it. I explained that we needed to decide what was good (so that we could include these things if we did this unit again) and what was bad about our unit (things that we would not include).

The children decided they liked our unit because it was fun. They especially liked making the sun, the alien planet and the rockets and of course they liked the alien party

The unit was good also because they learned many new things. Each child told of something he or she had learned. The list contained items such as: the sun had chicken pox (a book's description of sunspots); the sun was so very hot, there are nine planets in our solar system.

I then asked the children to tell what they did not like about the unit. A few children found the video, "ET", to be scary. Many felt that tracing their shadows was too difficult. A girl said that the papier mache was too messy and another said that writing reports about space was hard.

APPLICATION SUMMARY

The answer to the question asked at the beginning of the application is a definite yes! First graders can pick an appropriate subject to study, they can think up activities relating to that subject and they can plan and implement these activities. But they need guidance.

After our initial brain-storming session I organized the unit into its four parts: planets, the sun, the moon, and aliens. The children were able to suggest activities for each part. Most activities suggested were art or science related. Most needed teacher guidance and support.

Activities such as the sun and the village were their own idea but they needed help deciding how to carry-out these activities. They brought stories, videos, and tapes from home. But many of the books were beyond their reading level. They did enjoy the pictures but I did the reading.

I did not encourage the children to think up ideas for number and phonic work. Because I had certain concepts to cover in both areas. But I did create worksheets (see Appendix 4) and games using the space/alien motif. Retrospectively I feel that I didn't know how to guide them in these areas but I should have tried.

I do think that our unit was a success. We covered the topic in many varied and interesting ways. The children enjoyed it, perhaps more so because it was their unit, their ideas. And the children agreed that they learned a lot!

I too learned a lot. I like this method of teaching. It takes some of the pressure off me to think up ideas for units; to plan activities, and to find the needed resources and equipment. The children are a valuable source for all kinds of ideas and things, including books, pictures, videos etc; Also I don't need to motivate the children to work when they have been part of the planning!

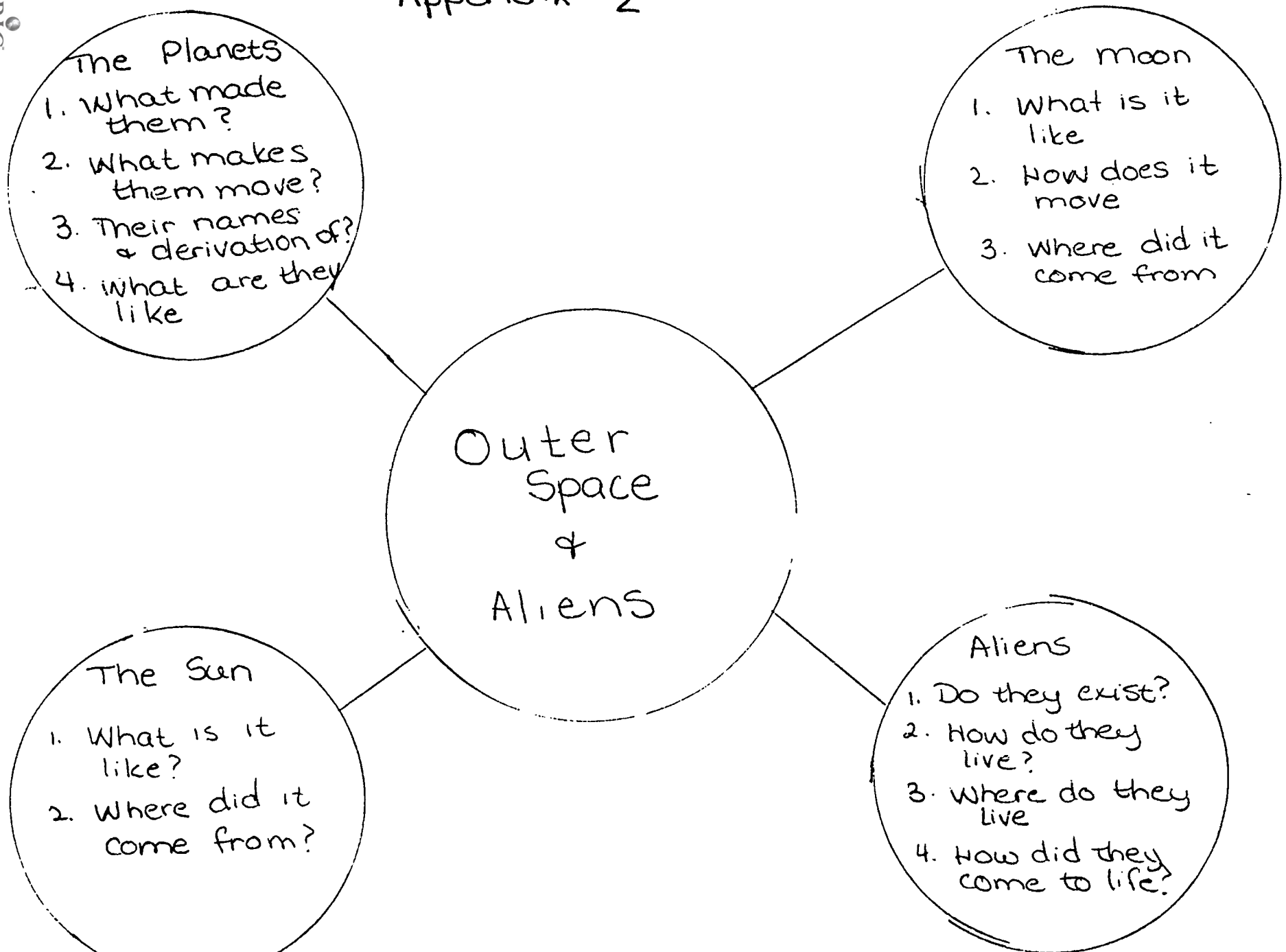
I do wish it wasn't the end of our school year because I would like to try another jointly-planned unit with this class. Now that the children and I have done it once it would be easy and fun to do again.

APPENDIX 1

What We Know About Aliens and Space

1. Aliens are strangers from space.
2. Aliens are different from us.
3. Aliens are friendly, they are scary.
4. No one has ever met an alien.
5. They might live on one of our planets.
6. There are nine planets and a sun and our moon in our solar system.
7. We can't walk in space but we could go there by rocket.

Appendix 2


The Planets
1. What made them?
2. What makes them move?
3. Their names & derivation of?
4. What are they like
The Moon
1. What is it like
2. How does it move
3. Where did it come from
Outer Space & Aliens
The Sun
1. What is it like?
2. Where did it come from?
Aliens
1. Do they exist?
2. How do they live?
3. Where do they live
4. How did they come to life?

APPENDIX 3

Children's Ideas for Activities

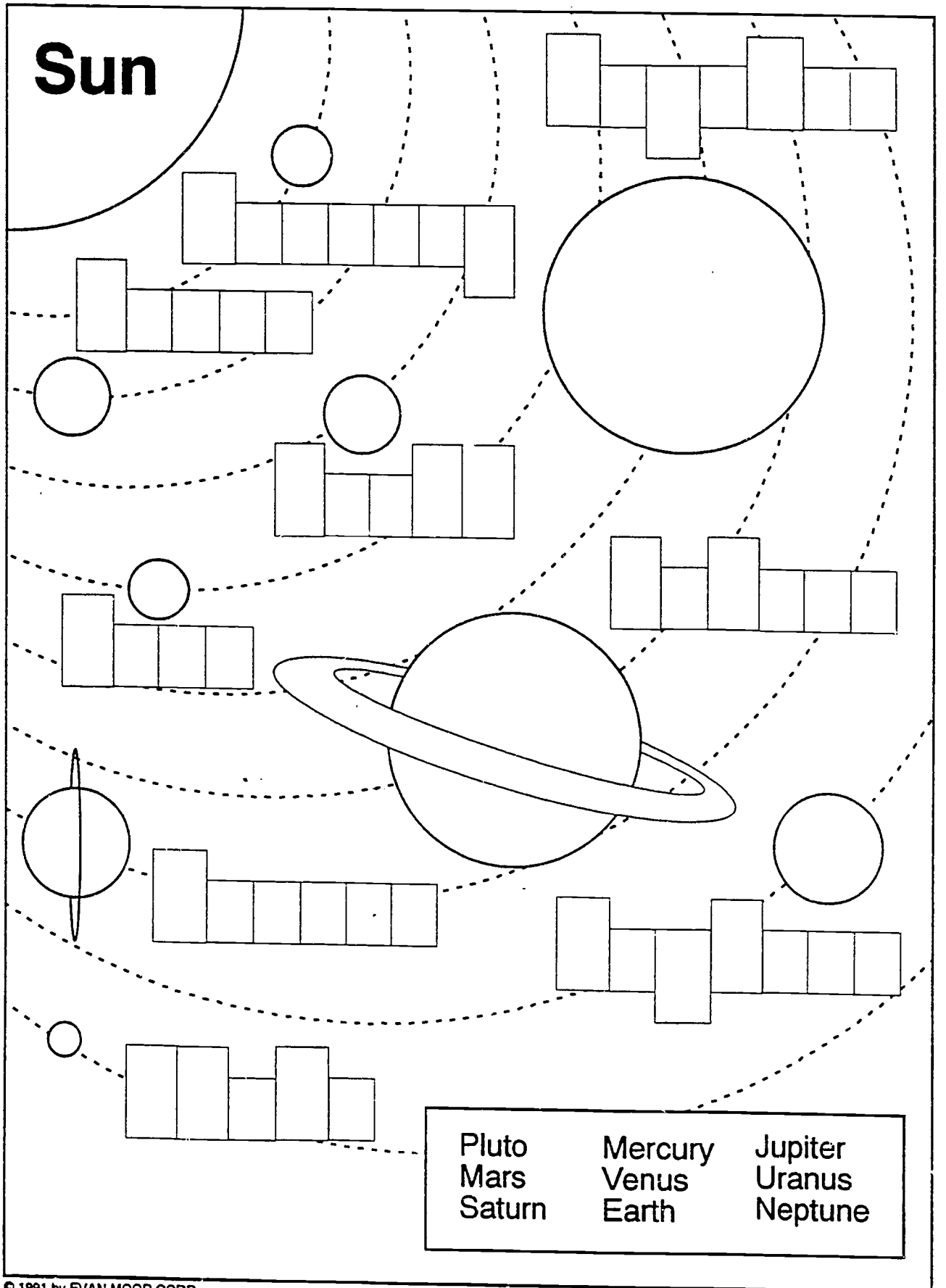
1. Ask Granny Price (our librarian) for books on space and aliens.
2. Bring in materials from home.
3. Get videos about space and aliens (from home or video shops).
4. Make rockets from boxes or toilet tubes.
5. Make models of solar system.
6. Make drawings and models from clay of aliens.
7. Make a model of an alien's planet.
8. Have a halloween party and dress-up like aliens.

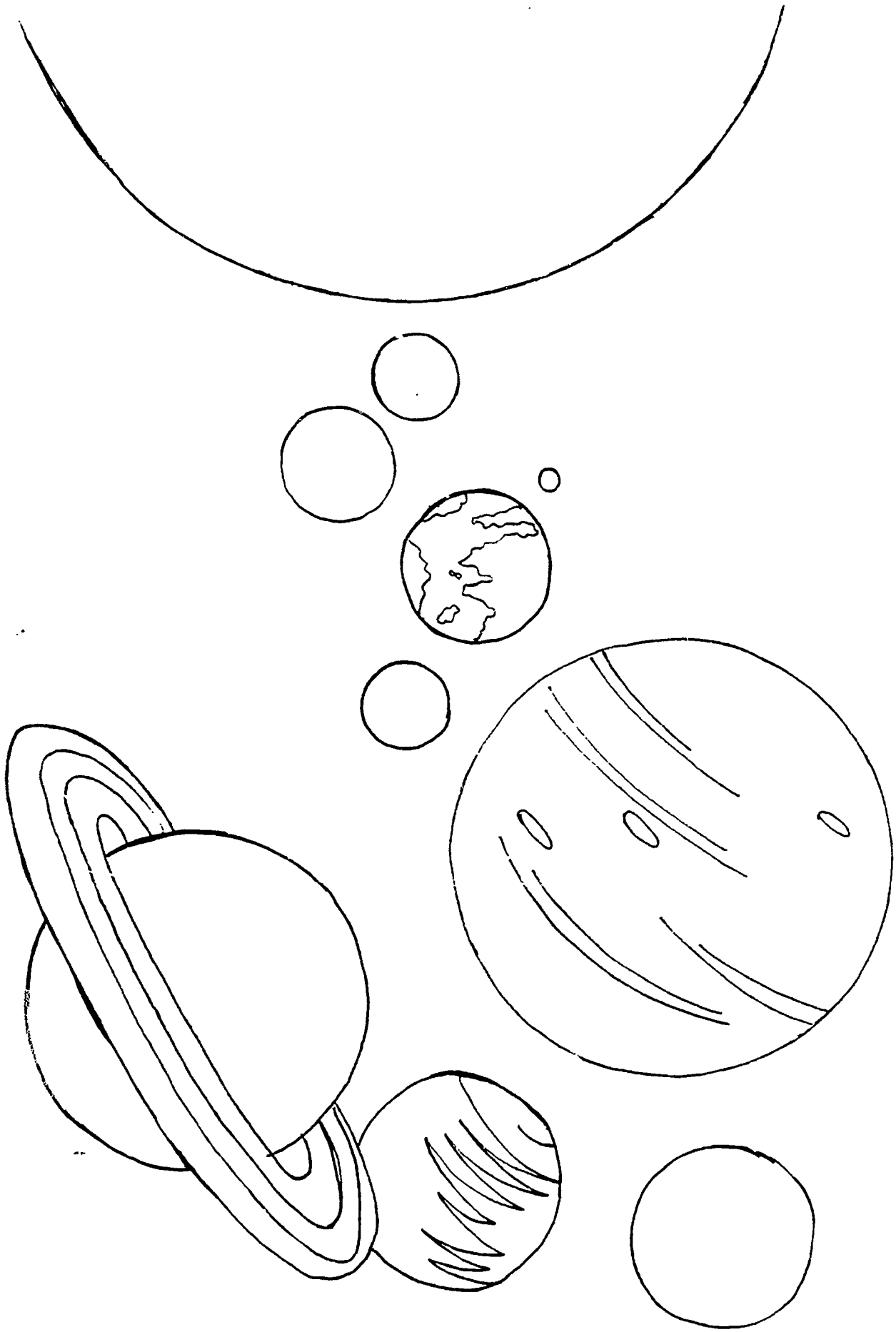
Suggested as we began to study the sun:

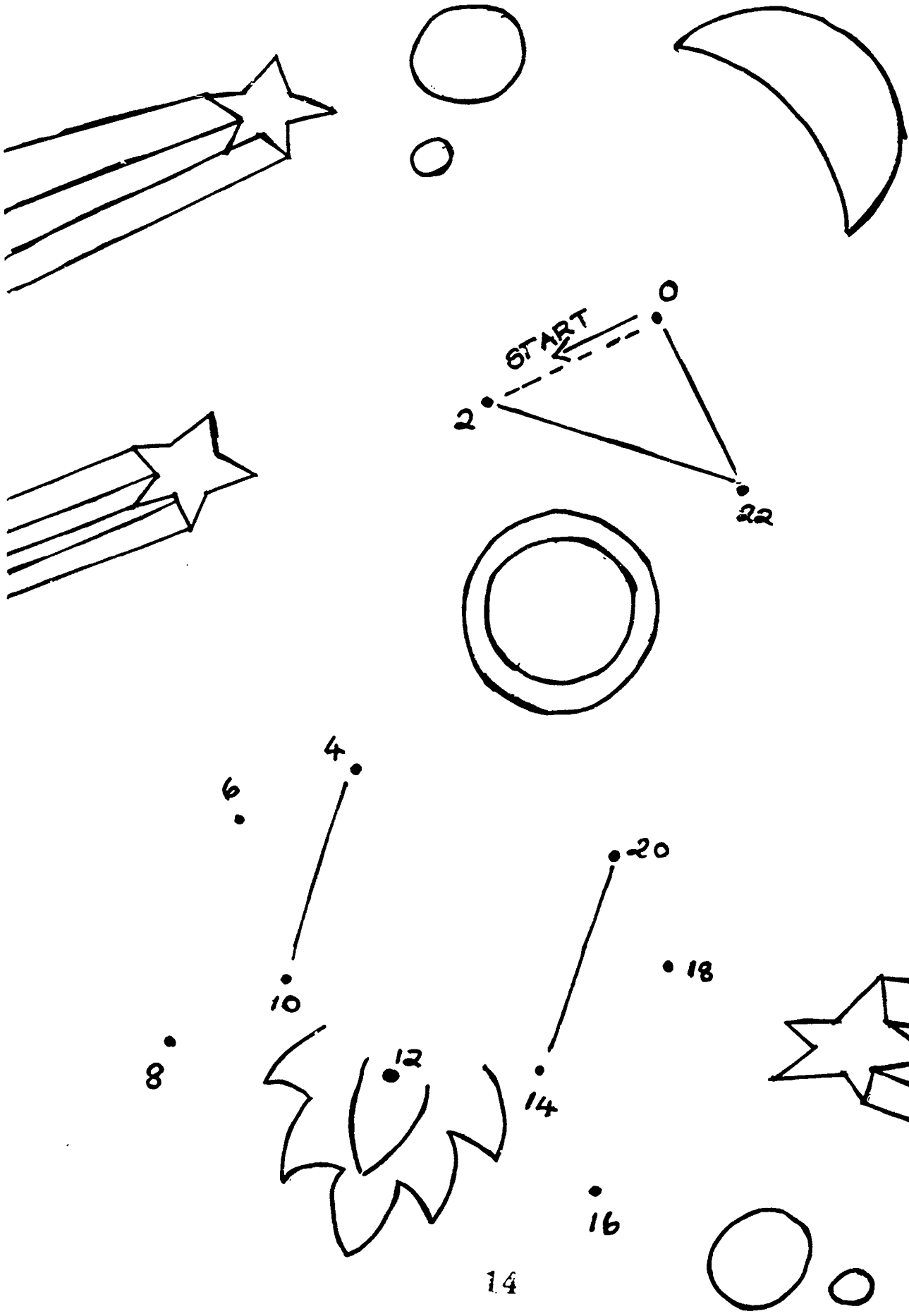
9. Make a sun out of paper.
10. Leave water, paint, crayons and paper in sun as an experiment.

Appendix 4

Worksheets






START
0
2
22
4
6
10
8
12
14
16
18
20

Name _____

The Sun

The sun is far away in space
The sun is a star
It gives us light and heat

1. What is the sun?

The Sun is a ~~sear~~ star

2. Where is the sun?

The Sun is in Space

3. What it give us?

it gives us heat and light

The Moon

We have one moon.
It reflects the sun's light
When the moon is like
a ball we called it a
full moon.

1. How many moons do we have?

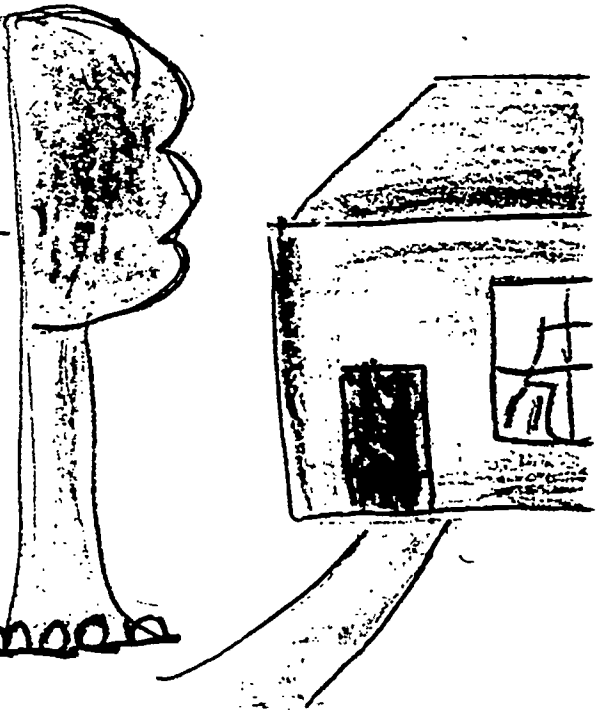
We have one moon

2. Where does the moon get its light?

It reflects the sun

3. Is the moon in the picture, a full moon?

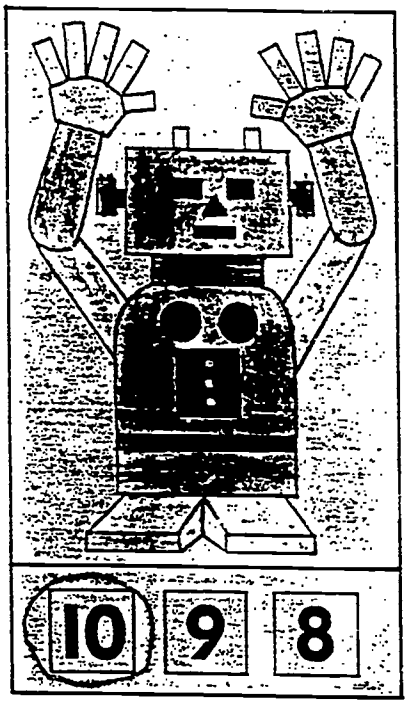
on it. Not a full moon



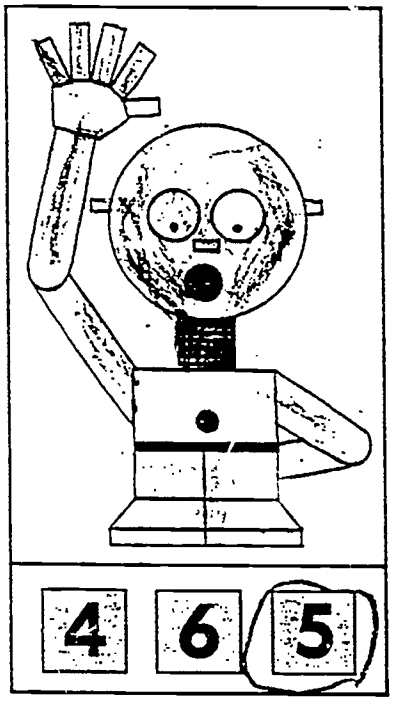
Write the number sentence and circle the correct answer.

Shan

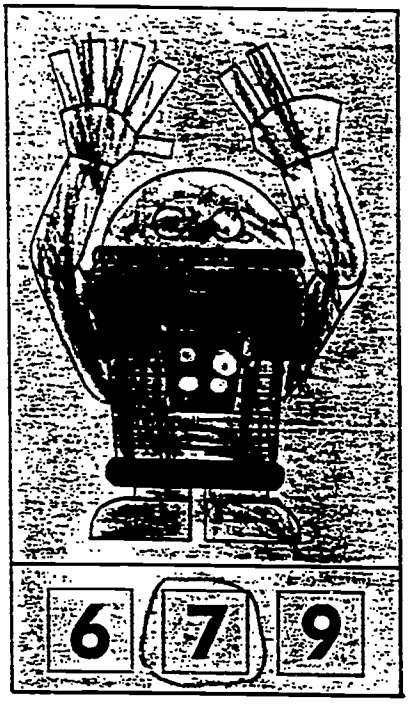
5+5=10



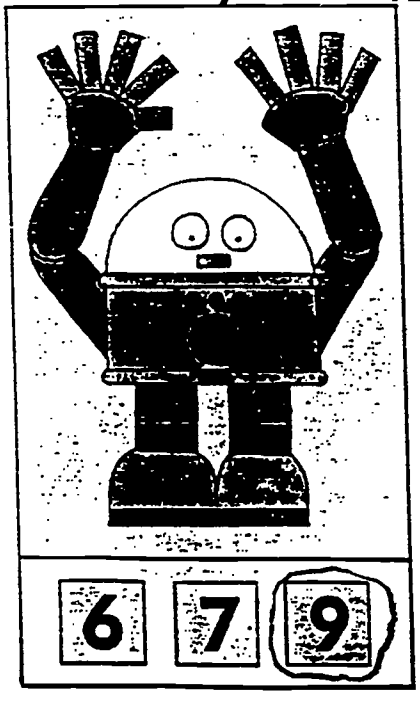
5+0=5



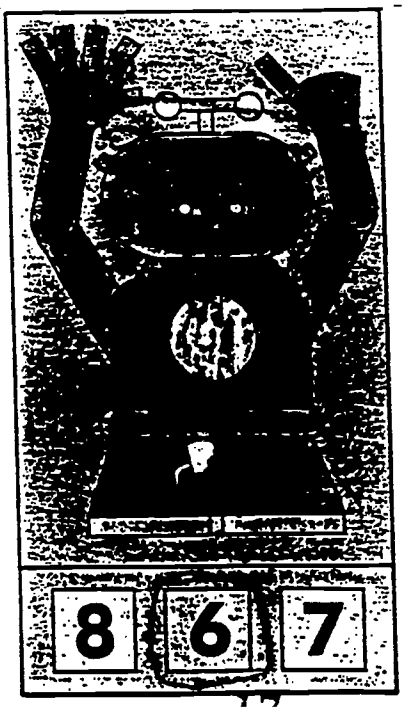
5+2=7



5+4=9



5+1=6



5*3=8

The ALIENS Are Here!

The Aliens

Came to my

house I got

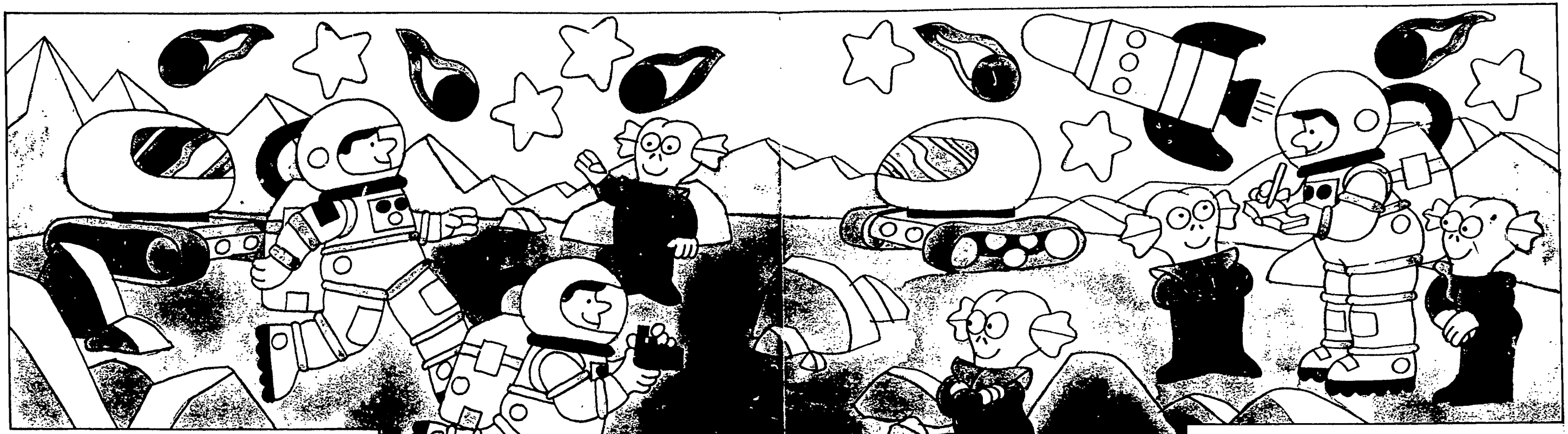
scared and I

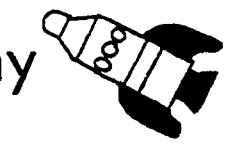
saw them outside

my [illegible]

A Galaxy Far Away

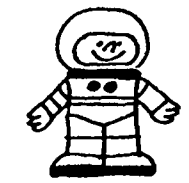
Look at the picture. Press **Questron** on the square that has the correct answer to each question about the picture.



How many  ?

How many  ?

How many  ?

How many  ?

How many  ?

How many  ?

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Appendix 5

ALIENS & SPACE