

Why is Messy Play Important?

PRIME AREAS

Physical Development

One of the most obvious adjustments to the revised EYFS has been the refocusing on prewriting skills under the Physical Development banner. With mark making now under this area and not Literacy, we can focus clearly on providing activities to build the physical skills children need to develop before they even pick up a pencil, let alone learn to control it properly. Messy play offers an amazing opportunity to develop these early motor skills, whether it is building muscle strength and control in fingers, wrists, arms and shoulders by squishing, squashing and squeezing playdough, or developing muscle control by making marks in shaving foam, clean mud, sand mousse or paint. As well as plenty of opportunities to develop fine motor skills, messy play offers lots of ways to develop gross motor skills, many of which can be based around children's interests. Why not try flinging paint-coloured spiderweb spaghetti at paper as you practise being a super hero, or throwing green alien sponges at your Ben 10 alien targets? Try mark making big scale using large brooms in puddles with bubbles, or mixing witches' soup in a paddling pool-sized cauldron with a child-height wooden spoon?

Sand and water offer plenty of tried and tested opportunities to develop hand-eye coordination: children can pour them into containers, squirt water from play syringes and spoon sand into jars. In early years, though, the key to building skills is to offer a wide variety of situations in which to explore them. The skills that can be learned with sand and water are easy to transfer to other materials, giving children the chance to visit and revisit learning whilst keeping their experiences exciting and child-centred. Why not try pouring fairy rice (pink rice with loads of sequins, stars and petals) into fairy bags (voile wedding favour bags)? Spoon fine coloured sand into miniature bottles and jars, or squirt purple alien slime (coloured water with glitter in) into ooze buckets outdoors?

Communication and Language

Messy play allows children to work together to explore the sensory opportunities you provide whilst building vocabulary as they discover the specific attributes of a 'slimy dinosaur swamp' or crunchy cereals or autumn leaves. It also helps to build confidence and communication skills as children roll car tyres to each other through paint or fill rubber gloves (with holes in) for each other in the water tray. When role-play opportunities are combined with messy play, children build their imaginative language and get plenty of chances to communicate their ideas through their play.

Personal Social and Emotional Development

As mentioned above, many messy play offerings can be planned to actively encourage cooperative play, to help children to build their social skills as well as to develop their own confidence in approaching unfamiliar situations. By supporting children in their explorations, we help them to explore their feelings about different materials, their likes and dislikes and to build their confidence to express their own ideas and feelings.

SPECIFIC AREAS

Understanding the World

Alongside Physical Development this is one of the main areas of learning embraced by messy play. It is the means by which young children explore the characteristics of materials and the impact of their explorations and mixings. Early science skills come through lots of exploration using all senses and not through staged, sterile experiments. It is about children making sense of the world around them by play and exploring. What better way to explore

the characteristics of melting than by exploring frozen paint ice cubes on paper or in shaving foam, or to develop an understanding of forces by rolling footballs, tennis balls and marbles through paint and then swirling them around in a paddling pool lined with paper? Again, messy play allows us to place learning within the interests of the children and offer them the chance to squish green playdough monsters with googly eyes or mix a recipe in your mud kitchen. By delivering a wide variety of unusual opportunities, children's enthusiasm is maintained and their confidence to ask questions and follow their own explorations can continue to build.

Mathematics

Messy play presents countless opportunities to explore measuring and capacity; children can fill containers with an array of exciting materials. Sand can be moulded and tipped out when wet, whilst dry sand and water both offer lots of chances to scoop and pour as children explore the concepts of full, empty, one more or one less, as well as counting. Hiding numbers of objects in your messy play tray gives children the chance to take part in a fun, sensory treasure hunt, whilst counting and marking numerals in shaving cream rainbows (shaving cream coloured with food colouring or paint) offers a chance to build number recognition and formation. Why not have a go at swapping sand for other materials which you can scoop and fill with? Try cereals, cooked tapioca, leaves, compost, mud or wet sawdust. How about swapping water for gloop (cornflour and water), slime (cornflour, water and soap flakes), rainbow coloured rice, popcorn kernels, dried tapioca or baby oil for some pouring fun and exploration?

Literacy

As with Mathematics, messy play is perfect for supporting early letter exploration and formation. From forming letters with black dough worms with wiggly eyes to mopping extra big letters in foam outdoors, the possibilities are restricted only by your imagination. As well as the physical processes of letter formation, messy play offers a chance to hide and look for items beginning with specific sounds: hunt for 'mmmm' words as you dig for items in a tray full of cornflour (dry it has a lovely feel to it!) or explore 'ssssss' words as you experiment with soggy socks in sand. One note of caution: using messy play recipes as a base for imaginative play is great for developing imaginative language and storytelling (after all, children need active confident imaginations if they are to have anything to finally write about), but make sure you don't do it at the expense of offering sensory and manipulative skills elsewhere in your setting.

Expressive Arts and Design

The biggest opportunity here is imaginative role-play, both large and small-scale. Adding green jelly to your dinosaur swamp or glitter to your witches' mud kitchen will all help to spark children's imaginative play. Don't forget that it is possible to access music and design as part of messy play too. Try floating metal dishes in your water tray and hitting them with metal spoons for a floating music centre, or chopping up swimming pool noodles to form floating building blocks.

By embracing the fantastic array of learning possibilities offered by this type of play, I hope that both you and the children in your care can have some fun and most of all enjoy getting messy!

Making a mess

TRY SOME OF THESE IDEAS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL SAND, WATER AND PLAYDOUGH...

SAND MOUSSE

You need...

- Sand
- Water
- Washing up liquid

Squirt a really big dollop of washing up liquid into the sand. Mix in water a bit at a time until you end up with a frothy, whipped consistency. Adding powder paint can help to colour the mix and is fun for children to mix.

CLEAN MUD

You need...

- A bar of moisturising soap (grated)
- Roll of white toilet paper (unused!)
- Warm water

Tear the toilet roll into lots of tiny pieces, add grated soap, and then add warm water a little at a time until you get a frothy, white, mud-like consistency that smells really lovely! Add glitter for extra appeal.

CLOUD DOUGH

You need...

- Packet of flour (any type)
- Baby oil

Mix the baby oil into the flour until you get a breadcrumb consistency which stays in shape when squeezed. Smells and feels great! Add food colouring for extra special effect.

Find out more

Kirstine Beeley is co-author with Alistair Bryce-Clegg of a new range of 50 fantastic books from A&C Black. The newest additions to the range include: 50 Fantastic Things to do With... Sand Tray, Water Tray, Squishy Stuff and Paint, which are packed full of ideas to expand your messy play. Visit bloomsbury.com