

Messy Play

(Nursery World)



One of the most remarkable things about children is their ability to make an inordinate amount of mess from quite an early age. While as a parent, you may be trying to find ways to cut down on sticky hands, it may seem ironic that your child's nursery, childminder or playgroup is likely to be planning for 'messy play'. So what is 'messy play' and how can it help your child to learn?

First of all, it is worth understanding that the term 'messy play' is not universally used. Some practitioners use the term 'sensory play' while others might say 'play with natural materials'. Regardless of the term being used, the main feature that messy play activities have is the way in which children are allowed to enjoy a lot of freedom to explore and play with materials. These can be anything from the conventional sand, water and dough to playing with shaving foam, mud, gravel and a sticky substance known as 'gloop' (a mixture of cornflour and water).



Building concentration

Messy play teaches children many things and it is now seen as vital in helping children to learn skills.

First, children learn to become independent and to follow through with their own ideas. A child may, for example, decide to start building sandcastles or to dig down in a heap of peat as far as they can go. Through these actions they learn to focus and also to persevere as they overcome problems on their way, say when they find that the sandcastle sticks inside the bucket, or that their tunnel caves in.

Interestingly, adults who work with children usually report that children involved in these types of activities show huge amounts of concentration.

Developing co-ordination

As well as building concentration, messy play activities also encourage children's co-ordination, especially their hand-eye skills. These skills are essential later on in order that children can hold pencils properly and gain the fine control they will need to form letters. These types of activities encourage this type of control, because children practise these fine movements over and over again without even knowing it.



Learning to think

A key feature of messy play is that children should be given freedom to explore and play in their own way. This helps children to make their own decisions and to take responsibility.

They learn about the consequences of their actions, for example what happens if you add too much water when making sandcastles. This type of play also helps children to develop prediction skills - as they become older, we can see that children begin to plan their play with others.

A traditional type of play

While you might be forgiven for believing that messy play is a new phenomenon, nothing is further from the truth. Children have always wanted to play outdoors with mud and water and in the past they were often given pieces of dough to keep them quiet in the kitchen. The main difference now is that we are beginning to understand the importance of such play and are making sure that all children get the opportunities to play in this way.



Time of their lives!

One of the best ways in which parents can help their child to enjoy and learn from this type of play is by dressing them appropriately. While staff work very hard to put aprons on children, it is inevitable that they will get marks on their clothes, have wet sleeves, or worse. As most settings use natural materials such as sand, water and even mud, you should find that marks can be brushed off or washed out.

Precious clothes may make children look cute, but sadly, they often make their wearers worried in case they get into trouble. As this type of play is one that children remember later in fond memories, look out for clothes that are practical so that your child can have the time of their life!