

DESIGNING MESSY PLAY FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Messy play is the open-ended exploration of materials and their properties. Activities like squishing clay, pouring sand, and sorting stones allow children to repeat and experiment as they like. Children are naturally curious, and messy play engages their senses at a developmental level that is appropriate for them. They learn foundational cognitive principles as they exercise motor, language, and social skills. Messy play offers one of the best integrated learning experiences young children can have.

THE TAKE HOME:

1. Messy play builds foundational skills across ELOF domains.
2. The open-ended quality of messy play allows children to explore and learn at developmentally appropriate levels.
3. Messy play activities are fun and engaging, easy to set up, and not always messy!



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

- **Children who explore with their senses learn physical principles more quickly.** This is especially important for infants and toddlers, who must learn foundational skills upon which more complex learning is built. Research demonstrates that early visual and motor skills are related to later math and language skills. Simple activities, like playing with playdough or shredding paper, build fine and gross motor skills. But they also support learning related to cause and effect, number sense, and other important cognitive skills.
- Open-ended activities like pouring sand or water, smearing foam, and making patterns with loose parts provide children with opportunities to experiment at their own developmental level and pace. Allowing children to direct their own exploration this way leads to superior learning. Research also shows that responsive adults improve children's learning through exploration.
- Messy play harnesses children's spontaneous exploration to help them learn. Children develop curiosity, initiative, focus and persistence through messy play. These are foundational skills in the 'Approaches to Learning' domain of ELOF, which identifies learning strategies. Messy play activities develop children's autonomy and provide safe environments in which to practice these crucial learning skills.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- Messy play is best done in an organized space. The activity may be messy, but the environment should not be. This requires preparation. Materials should be clean and ready to be explored, tools should be laid out and orderly. An organized environment is not only safe, but it also helps children feel welcome and helps them understand what to do.
- Messy play works best in a defined space. We want to give children cues that will help them understand what behaviors are appropriate, and defining the space is one way to do this. For example, spread out a tarp before playing with sand indoors. This lets even very young children know that this is a contained activity. A space was prepared for it. When you enter this space, you are welcome to engage with this material in a way that isn't always allowed. You can step in the sand, sit in it, or pour it on your legs. When we clean up and the tarp goes away, that's a cue that the messy play is over. Having a defined space that communicates where and how to play can support children who are dual language learners in understanding the expectations for messy play. Of course when you're working with older infants and toddlers, you'll need to be more flexible in your definition of space as they like to carry their materials from one area to another – a quintessential and important toddler task – so within your defined space be sure to allow for some traveling about too!

- Children engage more when they are in an inviting, comfortable environment. This means thinking about the amount of space, the lights and sounds, the colors, and the decorations. It means creating a space that will be comforting. Too many tools or too many different materials might be overwhelming to children, so consider starting simple. Material exploration is often a slow process. Be sure to plan enough time to allow individual children to engage at their own pace.
- Children and adults also benefit when messy play is done in an environment that is easily cleaned. Tarps are effective, as are other temporary floor or table coverings. Shower curtains work great too – and they are inexpensive. If you are doing messy exploration that will require water for cleanup, consider doing the activity near a sink, a cleanup area, or outside. Don't forget smocks for the children. And remember we can help children learn cleaning skills, too. For older infants and toddlers, leaving time for cleanup at the end of messy play is a great way to transition to other routines or play opportunities. It helps children learn responsibility and provides a helpful cue that the messy play is finished.
- Individual children have different levels of interest in and tolerance for messy play, and it is important to observe and respond to those preferences. Some children may be extra sensitive to sensory input and won't like getting their hands or feet messy or wet. Support children's exploration by staying close and offering to clean or dry messy hands right away. Offer messy play materials such as paper, loose parts, or natural materials that do not require hands to get sticky or wet.



TRY THIS!

- Help families create sensory bins. A simple plastic bin can be used like a sensory table to keep material engagements contained. These handy bins are easily cleaned, and they can facilitate all kinds of wet and dry material engagements. Start infants with dry materials such as paper, balls or large pom poms. Older toddlers might enjoy beads or sand. Make sure the materials are safe and age appropriate.
- Encourage families to set a regular time for messy play. Many children thrive with routines and having a routine can provide a helpful reminder that messy play and sensory engagement can be a part of every day.
- Exploring materials is usually done with hands, but don't forget the rest of the body. Walking barefoot on grass, sand, or paper can be a wonderful sensory experience. Can you make patterns with your feet? What else can you explore with your feet?
- Encourage families to go outside. Nature offers plenty of materials for messy play. Children delight in scooping water, squishing mud, and sorting leaves. Outside time can be wonderful family time too.

LEARN MORE

- ELOF2GO Mobile App: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>
- Loose Parts on the Playground: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/loose-parts-playground>
- Nature-Based Learning and Development for Teachers: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/nature-based-learning-development-teachers>
- Outdoor Play Benefits: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/outdoor-play-benefits.pdf>
- Sensory Play Activities: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/perception-do>
- Teacher Time: Take It Outside!: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/teacher-time-series/take-it-outside-adventures-nature-steam>

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Messy play is the open-ended exploration of materials and their properties. It allows children to use their natural curiosity and engage their senses at the developmental level appropriate for them. They learn foundational cognitive principles as they exercise motor, language, and social skills. Messy play offers one of the best integrated learning experiences children can have.

PLAY WITH PATTERNS

Children love making patterns, and you can help! Set out some loose materials for your child - tiles, blocks, sticks, stones. Sit back and see what your child does with the materials. Describe what you see. If your child is reluctant to take part, make a pattern of your own and describe it as you do. Children can learn a lot from your example.

CHILL OUT WITH WATER

Warm water in a bath is great, but so is ice! Ice is easy to use and clean up, and it's so versatile. You can explore a piece in the bath, but you'll have to work fast! For longer ice exploration, let your child play with it on a food tray or draw with it on sun-warmed cement. If you plan ahead and freeze some cubes with a bit of food coloring, color can be a part of the fun.

BATH PLAY

Bath time is a natural time for messy play. Children naturally explore the water, and you can help by narrating what you see. Sponges and shampoo bottles make fun and interesting tools to explore floating and sinking. If you have shaving cream, spray a bit on the wall and help your child spread it around.

ROLL OR FLOW

Children enjoy making things go, and you can help by setting up a small ramp and some loose materials. Let your child roll or pour different kinds of materials down the ramp and explore how things move. Older children might enjoy bumps, jumps, or tunnels, which can be made with tape and discarded paper towel rolls.

