

Messy Play Toolkit

Introduction

All children learn through play. There are many different sorts of play. Messy play is a fun and interesting way for children to explore and learn about the world around them. Hopefully this toolkit will help you to reflect on what you class as messy play, how you view it, how you provide opportunities for children to access it and give you some ideas of other resources to support it.



Links with Statutory Duties / Policies and Procedures / EYFS Welfare and Safeguarding

Early Years Foundation Stage (2017) Learning Outcomes and Statutory Framework

Policies: Partnerships with Parents; Adult Interactions with Children; Equal Opportunities / Inclusion Policy; Learning and Development; Health and Safety.

The Early Years Foundation Stage : Characteristics of Effective Learning

Playing and Learning

Messy Play Supports Children To....

- Show curiosity about objects and events
- Use senses to explore the world around them
- Engage in open-ended activity
- Show particular interests
- Pretend objects are things from their experience
- Represent their experiences in play
- Take on a role in their play
- Act out experiences with other people
- Initiate activities
- Seek challenge
- Show a 'can do' attitude
- Engage in new experiences, and learn by trial and error

Adults can help children to experience messy play by:

- Playing with children. Encourage them to explore, and show your own interest in discovering new things.
- Help children as needed to do what they are trying to do, without taking over or directing.
- Join in play sensitively, fitting in with children's ideas.
- Model pretending an object is something else, and help develop roles and stories.
- Encourage children to try new activities and to judge risks for themselves. Be sure to support children's confidence with words and body language.
- Pay attention to how children engage in activities -- the challenges faced, the effort, thought, learning and enjoyment. Talk more about the process than products.
- Talk about how you and the children get better at things through effort and practice, and what we all can learn when things go wrong

Adults can provide the following to support messy play activities:

- Provide stimulating resources which are accessible and open-ended so they can be used, moved and combined in a variety of ways.
- Make sure resources are relevant to children's interests.
- Arrange flexible indoor and outdoor space and resources where children can explore, build, move and role play.
- Help children concentrate by limiting noise, and making spaces visually calm and orderly.
- Plan first-hand experiences and challenges appropriate to the development of the children.
- Ensure children have uninterrupted time to play and explore.

Active Learning

Messy play supports children to:

- Maintain focus on their activity for a period of time
- Show high levels of energy, fascination
- Not be easily distracted
- Pay attention to details
- Persist with activity when challenges occur
- Show a belief that more effort or a different approach will pay off
- Bounce back after difficulties
- Show satisfaction in meeting their own goals
- Be proud of how they accomplished something – not just the end result
- Enjoy meeting challenges for their own sake rather than external rewards or praise

Adults can help children to experience messy play by:

- Supporting children to choose their activities – what they want to do and how they will do it.
- Stimulating children's interest through shared attention, and calm over-stimulated children.
- Helping children to become aware of their own goals, make plans, and to review their own progress and successes.
Describing what you see them trying to do, and encouraging children to talk about their own processes and successes.
- Being specific when you praise, especially noting effort such as how the child concentrates, tries different approaches, persists, solves problems, and has new ideas.
- Encouraging children to learn together and from each other.

- Children developing their own motivations when you give reasons and talk about learning, rather than just directing.

Adults can provide the following to support messy play activities:

- Children will become more deeply involved when you provide something that is new and unusual for them to explore, especially when it is linked to their interests.
- Notice what arouses children's curiosity, looking for signs of deep involvement to identify learning that is intrinsically motivated.
- Ensure children have time and freedom to become deeply involved in activities.
- Children can maintain focus on things that interest them over a period of time. Help them to keep ideas in mind by talking over photographs of their previous activities.
- Keep significant activities out instead of routinely tidying them away.
- Make space and time for all children to contribute

Creating and thinking critically

Messy play supports children to:

- Think of ideas
- Find ways to solve problems
- Find new ways to do things
- Make links and notice patterns in their experience
- Make predictions
- Test their ideas
- Develop ideas of grouping, sequences, cause and effect
- Plan, make decisions about how to approach a task, solve a problem and reach a goal
- Check how well their activities are going
- Change strategy as needed
- Review how well the approach worked

Adults can help children to experience messy play by:

- Using the language of thinking and learning: *think, know, remember, forget, idea, makes sense, plan, learn, find out, confused, figure out, trying to do.*

- Modelling being a thinker, showing that you don't always know, are curious and sometimes puzzled, and can think and find out.
- Encouraging open-ended thinking by not settling on the first ideas: *What else* is possible?
- Always respecting children's efforts and ideas, so they feel safe to take a risk with a new idea.
- Talk aloud helps children to think and control what they do. Modelling self-talk, describing your actions in play.
- Giving children time to talk and think.
- Valuing questions, talk, and many possible responses, without rushing toward answers too quickly.
- Supporting children's interests over time, reminding them of previous approaches and encouraging them to make connections between their experiences.
- Modelling the creative process, showing your thinking about some of the many possible ways forward.
- Sustaining shared thinking helping children to explore ideas and make links. Following children's lead in conversation, and thinking about things together.
- Encouraging children to describe problems they encounter, and to suggest ways to solve the problem.
- Showing and talking about strategies – how to do things – including problem-solving, thinking and learning.
- Giving feedback and helping children to review their own progress and learning. Talking with children about what they are doing, how they plan to do it, what worked well and what they would change next time.
- Modelling the plan-do-review process yourself.

Adults can provide the following to support messy play activities:

- In planning activities, ask yourself: *Is this an opportunity for children to find their own ways to represent and develop their own ideas?* Avoid children just reproducing someone else's ideas.
- Build in opportunities for children to play with materials before using them in planned tasks.
- Play is a key opportunity for children to think creatively and flexibly, solve problems and link ideas. Establish the enabling conditions for rich play: space, time, flexible resources, choice, control, warm and supportive relationships.
- Recognisable and predictable routines help children to predict and make connections in their experiences.
- Routines can be flexible, while still basically orderly.
- Plan linked experiences that follow the ideas children are really thinking about.
- Use mind-maps to represent thinking together.
- Develop a learning community which focuses on **how** and not just what we are learning.

The Early Years Foundation Stage : Areas of Learning and Development

Prime Areas

- **Personal Social and Emotional Development**

Messy play supports children to develop their self-confidence and self-esteem, supports social development including making relationships and emotional development including self-control through sharing resources. Messy play builds on children's curiosity and encourages a positive approach to new experiences. Children display a high level of involvement and can select and use resources independently. In messy play, children can develop concentration, problem-solving, planning and seeing things through to completion. Working with others fosters self-respect, and respect for others. It helps children to share, interact, observe others and to understand that there needs to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups to work together harmoniously. Messy play also offers children opportunities to represent experiences, feelings and thoughts.

- **Physical Development**

Messy play supports movement and using equipment, tools and materials. Children can develop and practise fine motor control and co-ordination through using and handling tools, objects and malleable materials safely and in a meaningful context. They are also developing body control, poise, balance, co-ordination and control in large and small movements through messy play on a large scale, such as transporting water and sand around the garden.

- **Communication and Language**

Messy play supports language for communicating and listening. It also offers opportunities for children to speak and listen, for example, when sharing resources. Children use words and/or gestures to communicate and the informal context encourages confidence. Such play provides meaningful opportunities for children to talk through activities, reflect and modify actions, negotiate plans and activities and to take turns in conversation.

Specific Areas

- **Literacy**

Messy play supports reading and writing by understanding the process of representation through making marks with materials and ascribing meanings to them leads to understanding the symbolic nature of written language. Messy play develops the fine motor skills needed for writing, for example, hand-eye coordination. The narrative skills necessary for storytelling are developed as children start to tell stories using materials

- **Mathematics**

Messy play supports counting, calculating shape, space and measure. It offers meaningful opportunities for counting. For example, in sharing out resources and responding to questions such as, 'Who has more/ fewer?' Children learn about concepts of shape, size, line and area as they sort objects and develop their interest in shape and space by playing with shapes or making arrangements with objects. They can explore spatial concepts and use everyday words to describe position. Sequencing events and objects, for example, when creating a pattern on a piece of clay, help children to understand patterns. Children use language such as heavier or lighter to compare quantities and methods to solve practical problems.

- **Understanding the World**

Messy play supports exploration, investigation, designing and making skills. It fosters children's interest in the world in which they live and offers them opportunities to investigate when presented with unfamiliar resources with differing properties. Children can observe, select and manipulate objects and materials and identify simple features, similarities and differences, using all of the senses as appropriate. Messy play encourages children to set their own challenges, to problem solve and find out about cause and effect.

- **Expressive Arts and Design**

Messy play exploring media and materials, imagination and responding to experiences. It fosters children's interest in and allows them to respond to what they see, hear, smell, touch and feel. They notice what adults do and can imitate what is observed. They can explore and respond to different media and sensory experiences. As materials become familiar, they use them in representational play. They express and communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings and explore colour, texture, shape, form and space in two or three dimensions.

Effective practice

Well-planned messy play brings benefits to all children's learning. It can support all children to explore materials fully. It promotes and supports children's innate curiosity about the world around them and encourages them to use all their senses without having a set focus about making or producing an end product.

Messy play is important for young children, giving them endless ways to develop and learn. All types of play are crucial for children's development and early learning. Play helps children to; improve physical skills and co-ordination, work co-operatively and collaboratively, use all their senses to discover and explore their environment, and develop their imagination, creative thinking and ability to problem solve. Playing with toys alone can limit opportunities to develop imagination, creativity and critical thinking. Messy play is inexpensive and open ended. Children will discover enormous numbers of opportunities for learning and play, through timeless and accessible messy play activities.

Messy play as a name for an activity can literally paint a picture of confusion, mess and untidiness. All adults in the setting, including parents need to understand why messy play should be provided and how it can support a wealth of learning and development for the children. Constantly mopping the floor, wiping the tables, washing children's hands and re-arranging the resources can take away the pleasure of the sensory play from both children and adults.

Give enough time for the children to explore the resources provided fully – ideally messy play should be a regular free-flow activity, encouraging children to return again and again, building up their confidence each time to try the tactile resources provided. Also ensure that enough time is given to tidying up the activity at the end of the session, making sure that most resources are bagged up and thrown in the dustbin and not poured down the sink. A regularly blocked drain can severely strain relationships within the staff team and owners!

Ensure that plastic sheeting is put under the table or on the floor if it is set up indoors or on a wipeable surface. Be prepared for the children to get jelly in their hair or cornflour on their clothes. Provide a bowl and towel for the children to wash their hands and if necessary aprons or old shirts to put over their clothes. Babies could be undressed to their nappies if you feel that this is appropriate to enable them to really explore the resources with their whole bodies but ensure that the resources aren't freezing cold – sitting a baby in a tuff spot full of cold jelly can have the opposite desired effect, instead of looks of surprise and wonder, can usually turn into tears!

Exploration & Discovery

Tuff spot trays are an ideal container for certain types of messy play, as they are large and shallow and easily accessible to large groups of children and offer a great opportunity for exploring and discovering together or for small children and babies to actually get in it! Leaving the activity on the floor in a tuff spot for a longer period of time makes the experience more accessible and allows them to watch others at play and become curious themselves, slowly building the confidence to join in. They may choose to use a spoon or other tools to start with before they gain the confidence to explore with their hands. Smaller containers and trays are ideal for cornflour gloop, cooked pasta or finger painting. Other resources can also be put with the pasta, dough or shaving foam, especially if they are hidden well, as they can encourage reluctant children to find them and can be used as a game – how many animals are there in the foam? Who do you think is hiding in the play dough?

Sensory Experiences

Introducing babies and young children to sensory experiences is extremely valuable to their learning and building of new concepts. Some children are not always keen to join in with **messy play** and need a little time and encouragement to get used to the idea. Cooked pasta of all sorts is ideal for developing hand and finger control – it's also great fun for children of all ages. Try to find different sorts (tubes, spaghetti, noodles, stars, sheets, animal shapes). Cook the pasta in boiling water till it is 'al dente' and let it cool before using. Add a bit of oil to stop the pasta from sticking together. Noodles are quick and easy to baby play material as they only need boiling water (cool them under a cold tap before using). Offer young babies a couple of strands of spaghetti or noodles to hold and feel in their fingers. Stay with them and talk as they play. Put a shallow bowl of cooked pasta near a laying baby and let them reach for the sensation. You could also put some cooked pasta on the tray of a high chair or a table top.

Note – **Ensure that any jelly cubes used with young children are always melted before use as this can be choking hazard.**

There are many types of dough which can be safely used with babies and children. Dough is a great learning experience for babies and young children, meeting both emotional and physical needs. Dough needs to be experienced for its own properties before adding tools for modelling.

Creative activities

For a more “confined”, large scale art activity, tuff spot trays are the ideal holder. Shallow enough to make them easily accessible, and large enough to allow a small group to work together. The fact that they can be used indoors or out, on the floor or on a table, makes them versatile enough to suit your needs and the needs of the children. Children can use the tray to mark make, build or design with a variety of materials such as paint, chalks, glue, boxes, fabric, cartons, paper, food colouring, ribbon etc.

Links to the child's home learning environment

The importance of working in partnership with parents is a key theme in the Early Years Foundation Stage, and having parental support is particularly important when it comes to messy play. Some parents can be confused by practitioners' views that making a mess is important, especially when it involves doing things that are often actively discouraged at home. Hands-on workshops for parents and children are a good way of introducing parents to messy play and enabling them to experience at first hand the pleasure that children get from these materials and the possibilities for learning that occur.

Reflecting on Practice / Self Evaluation

Before you go any further, you might find it useful to evaluate how good your practice is right now.

The questions below may help you to review your current practice and ensure that everyone is fully aware of your policies and procedures. We have provided suggested questions for the leader/childminder, staff and parents. You may choose to use all of these or just one or two sections, depending on your provision and how confident you feel about your policies and procedures. You can use the questions as individual questionnaires or use them informally through staff meetings, chats with parents etc.

When you answer these questions, don't just answer yes or no – think about the question and ask yourself:

- How do I know?
- What is my evidence?
- Is that always the case?
- Is that true of everyone using the provision?

The column for **“Any further development needed”** on each questionnaire is best completed by the whole team or by the childminder. This becomes part of the development plan for your provision so it's important that it is thought about and completed by the person/people who will be responsible for carrying it out.

Consider if it would also be helpful to ask parents and children their views and feedback to your provision, and how you might do this.

Questions for the leader / manager / childminder

Consider	Our current practice	Examples of evidence of this within our setting	Any further development needed Date to be completed by:-
<p><i>Do you encourage staff / assistants to expand their knowledge of how to develop messy play activities?</i></p> <p>Do staff attend training around expressive arts and design, especially messy play? e.g. when was the last time you or a member of staff attended a training session around messy play?</p>			
<p><i>Is messy play part of your continual provision within your setting?</i></p> <p>Is there a messy play activity provided every session? e.g. how long is messy play provided for each session? Is it a timed activity or is it left out all the time?</p>			
<p><i>Do you have a statement about messy play incorporated into your Learning and Development Policy?</i></p> <p>Are parents aware of the importance of messy play in children's development? e.g. do you encourage parents to bring children with spare clothes or 'everyday' clothes that do not matter if they get dirty?</p>			

Questions for practitioners

Consider	Our current practice	Examples of evidence of this within our setting	Any further development needed Completed by:-
<p>Is messy play a popular activity within your provision?</p> <p>Do children show sustained interest in the activity? How do you know? <i>e.g. do observations show that children use the tray for extended periods of time?</i></p> <p>Is messy play always accessible and attractive to all children? <i>e.g. consider children with additional access needs – can they always access the activity?</i></p>			
<p>Do the resources that you use for messy play cover targeted areas of learning?</p> <p>Is this clearly evidenced through planning? <i>It may also be evidenced through observations, and photographs etc</i></p> <p>Does the main area of learning change regularly? <i>For instance from Expressive Arts and Design to Understanding of the World</i></p>			

<p><i>Is there a good balance of child initiated and adult initiated activities with messy play?</i></p> <p>Consider the past months' planning – what is the balance of child and adult initiated activities with messy play?</p> <p><i>There should have been opportunities for both types of play but more toward child-initiated.</i></p> <p>How do you enable children to initiate their own activities?</p> <p><i>e.g. accessible resources that they can choose to play with themselves</i></p>			
<p><i>Do you watch and listen to children playing with the resources and use your observations to extend the activity?</i></p> <p>When was the last time you added something to messy play spontaneously because of a child's interest that you observed?</p> <p><i>For instance, burying 'treasure' under some sand, or adding spoons to cornflour gloop</i></p> <p>Is there a clear link between your observations and your planning for messy play?</p> <p><i>For instance, your observations may show a child who was making tracks with a bike in the puddles outside and your planning may show how this was extended with toy cars and paint in the tray</i></p>			

<p><i>Do you encourage children to add to the resources that you provide for messy play?</i></p> <p>Are other resources available close by for children to choose?</p> <p><i>Are there other relevant resources available?</i></p> <p>Do practitioners ever discourage children from adding resources to messy play? If yes, why?</p> <p><i>Children often choose to combine resources in a way that we haven't considered – this can sometimes result in great learning opportunities</i></p>			
<p><i>Are children able to play with the activities individually, in small groups and in larger groups?</i></p> <p>Do children play co-operatively in the groups?</p> <p><i>Do children interact and work together towards common goals? Do they share resources and discuss what they are doing?</i></p> <p>Are there always enough resources for children to follow their own lines of play?</p> <p><i>Are children able to play with equipment on their own or do they need to share?</i></p>			

Activity 1

Aim: To complete a tracking observation on messy play.

Over the course of a session, make a note of the children who play with the activity, how long they play and *how* they play – different children are likely to use resources in differing ways. Repeat this observation on a few separate occasions. For instance, observe large scale messy play outdoors, and smaller scale activities indoors.

Look at your observations and ask:

1. Did the activity attract different children according to the resources that were provided?
2. Did children come back to the activity to continue their play?
3. Did children have sustained periods of play?
4. Were children able to extend their interests by bringing any extra resources?
5. Was there evidence of any special friendships between the children?
6. Did the activity attract small or large groups?
7. Did the children play together, independently or alongside each other?
8. Were the children able to develop their personal and social skills through the activity?
9. Was the activity in the best position within the provision for this type of play?
10. Were all children who chose to take part in the activity able to access it?



Activity 2

Spend some time talking to the children about what creative/ messy play activities they like to play with. Note down the variety of activities that they enjoy and compare this to your planning over the past few weeks/term. Do you cater for each child's preferences?

Activity 3

At a staff meeting, divide into groups and set each group a theme for instance, painting, dough, and food based products. How many different activities relating to their theme can each group come up with? If you share these lists with all the staff you should have lots of new ideas to use in your tray. You could use observations of children's interests to give you a starting point for ideas.

In action

Because of the holistic nature of exploratory messy play, resources should be stored together and be available for use in all aspects of play or stored in discrete areas, the way in which they are organised will be determined by the amount of permanent space available and whether the resources have to be tidied away. Wherever possible the activities should come from your observations of children. Of course we all need a bit of inspiration at times, and hopefully the following will give you a few ideas of how to transform their interests into activities:

Painting (You don't just need brushes and an easel. Be inventive!)

- Use sponges, fingers, hands, feet and other various objects to make marks.
- Roll out old wallpaper in the garden and encourage children to make footprints across – mix colours, compare feet sizes etc.
- Use washing up bottles filled with watery paint to squeeze and spray across paper.
- Flick brushes across paper to make patterns.
- Bubble painting - Blow bubbles in pots of watery paint and lay paper across the top of the pot to catch the pattern.
- Marble painting - Dip marbles in paint and roll them over paper in a tray to explore lines and patterns.
- Blow painting - Make up different coloured runny paint to drop onto paper, Use a straw to blow the paint in different directions. Watch what happens when two colour's mix.
- String painting - Drop string in paint then pull it across paper like a snake in different directions.
- Mirror image painting - Paint one half of paper, then fold it, press down and open to create a mirror image. This is good for butterflies and other symmetrical objects.
- Potato prints - Great effects can be achieved by printing with potatoes. Cut the potato in half and cut patterns into the flat side before you dip it into paint. This is great for encouraging repeating patterns.
- Welly boot printing – place roll of paper or wallpaper lining paper and put the paint in large trays, then let children make their mark.
- Magic painting – draw over white paper with a white candle. Make the picture appear by painting over with watered down paint.



- Icing sugar painting - mix up a small amount of icing sugar with a little water, paint over paper then drop different colored paint on, either with a flick of a paintbrush or use an eye dropper- the result is a fantastic marbled effect, Be warned these pictures need to dry overnight.
- Paint lollies – Use small yoghurt pots, mix a small amount of poster paint with water and freeze for around an hour, then put a lollypop stick in and return to the freezer overnight, remove from paint pot and paint, best on large pieces of paper, ideal for little ones, always make sure paint is non toxic, in case the lolly is accidentally licked!

Cornflour

Cornflour is very cheap to buy and you can get it from most supermarkets. Put some cornflour into a bowl and gradually add water. Gently mix until you get the consistency you want. You can add food colourings and mix colours together. Pour the cornflour onto a tray or plate and encourage the children to move their fingers and hands or other objects through it.

Great objects to use include: • plastic cars; • Lego blocks; • marbles; • blunt pencils; • sticks; • spoons; • forks; or • scoops.

Dough

Play dough encourages children to touch and explore textures. It provides opportunities for the child to develop movement, learn how to be creative and express themselves. There are many types of dough which can be safely used with babies and children. Dough needs to be experienced for its own properties before adding tools for modelling.



- Use soft, very pliable dough with young babies. This will allow them to touch it, squeeze it, poke it and make it move through their fingers. Sensory experience will be increased if you add colourings, perfumes and safe textures. Try: orange, lemon or vanilla flavouring; aromatherapy oils; food colourings; porridge oats, rice grains, pasta stars.
- Encourage young children to model the dough by using their hands, fingers, thumbs, wrists, palms, outsides of their palms. Let them further explore by patting and rolling it into shapes with their hands. Once children begin to develop their modelling

skill they can start to use simple tools to explore the dough: sticks, smooth rolling pins, stones, nail brushers etc. Encourage and praise the experience and not the product.

- With adult help, older children can begin to mix their own dough. Add glitter, pasta or colourings to dough recipes. Begin to offer a variety of tools such as plastic scissors, sieves, combs, sticks. Introduce cutters. Children can now use the dough to add to their role play – ‘baking’ cakes or pizzas in the home corner, or making salt dough decorations for the garden. As the children talk about what they are doing, dough play will help extend their vocabulary. Using a variety of simple recipes, children can make a variety of dough’s completely independently. They will be able to talk about the differences between doughs, some are stretchy, some stiff, some watery, some last longer, some go hard. Adding colouring with the liquid or kneading it in later, or adding texture such as glitter, pasta and lentils and perfume can enhance the experience.
- Try some dough’s that bake hard and make role play props or models for small world play.
- Remember: Dough harbours bacteria – if in doubt, throw it out!

Compost

Older children will love compost as a new and different medium for their play. Be especially careful when using compost with babies – buy new compost and make sure you supervise the experience at all times, so the babies don’t eat too much!

Play ‘hide and find’ with small world people and animals or natural objects such as polished stones, shells, driftwood, glass beads, nuts and acorns.

Shaving foam (be aware of allergies and sensitive skin)

Put in shallow containers and use fingers to make patterns. Using a large tray will allow baby/toddler to sit or stand in it and experience through feet or body.

Cereals

Put some in a small bowl and allow baby to use hands to scrunch it. Lift cereal up and let it trickle through your fingers so baby can listen and watch. Older babies and toddlers will enjoy stamping on it in bare feet or pouring and scooping it in and out of cups and bowls.

Jelly (ensure that you only use melted jelly, and not pure jelly cubes)

Mash up green jelly to make a swamp and add toy animals.

Custard, mashed potato, baked beans

All provide different tactile experiences.

Shredded paper, cut up space blanket

Put lots of this in piles in the tray and hide toy animals, heuristic resources, etc. Also provides sensory resources with different noises: rustling, scrunching, etc. and develops language acquisition.

Supporting Information and Resources***Useful Links***

Department for Education

www.gov.uk

Ofsted

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>

4Children

www.4children.org.uk

PLA

<http://www.pre-school.org.uk/document/7855>