

Fun with builders' trays

Builders' trays (or Tuff spot trays) are an incredibly versatile and reasonably priced resource. They are available from some DIY stores, builders' merchants and early year's resource catalogues. Your builders' tray can be used for hundreds of different activities and in a number of different ways. They are suitable for all age groups, it just depends on what you use and how you present it. The versatility of a builders' tray makes it accessible for all children and you can use it to support them in all areas of early learning, depending on the resources and support that you offer.

There are countless ways of using a builders' tray but we all sometimes need a bit of extra inspiration. Hopefully this toolkit will help you to reflect on how you currently use your builders' trays and give you some ideas of other resources to include in it.



Links with EYFS and Good Practice Include.....

Child development. All areas of child development can be supported through builders' tray activities. This toolkit will give you some ideas to support this.

Inclusive practice. Builders' trays are extremely versatile and can be used by babies and children on the floor, on a table or on a special tray, making them accessible to all children. They can be used for all ages and for any activity.

Respecting each other. Group activities can be supported through builders' trays and working co-operatively helps to build respectful relationships.

Supporting learning. Sensitive adults are able to support children's learning and development through a variety of activities.

Observation, assessment and planning. With such a variety of experiences available through the builders' tray, this is an ideal time for observing children's interests and development.

Supporting every child. By including some planned and challenging activities and experiences you can make sure that each individual child is supported in their achievement.

Play and exploration. The builders' tray offers great opportunities for play and exploration, your only boundary is your imagination.

Active learning. The builders' tray can offer active learning with other people and objects that can engage and involve children for sustained periods of time.

Creativity and critical thinking. A variety of activities and resources in your builders' tray will support children in discovering new connections and concepts - building a better understanding of the world around them.

Areas of learning and development. Your builders' tray can cover all 6 areas of learning, depending on the resources and support given.

Enjoy and achieve. By providing a wealth of opportunities and experiences to babies and young children, we encourage them to play and explore a variety of resources. Through play children learn at their highest level, practicing and building ideas, concepts and skills.

Ofsted self-evaluation form

Links to **Part B, section 4**, - Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Effective Practice

Builders' trays are ideal for use on the floor, making easy access for a small group of children. You can also buy stands for them if access on the floor is a problem for some children, or of course they can be placed on a table. They can be used indoor or out, but if used outdoors always ensure you check for standing water before children access it if it has been raining.

Don't feel that you have to put a 'perfect world' into your tuff spot tray, it can be really interesting to see how an activity develops with the children's input. You can build it up day after day by following the children's interests, this way allowing them to explore every part of the tray bit by bit. Start off with a basic base, such as sand, compost, shredded paper or bark chippings, and then listen to the children as they play, and decide what to add next with your children's input. Or let the children choose – allowing them to 'lead the learning'.

Exploration & Discovery

Since the tuff spot trays are large and shallow, they are easily **accessible to large groups of children** and offer a great opportunity for exploring and discovering together. Magnifying glasses, bug catchers, tweezers, magnets, binoculars, are all great accessories for these types of activities, and a builders' tray can make a great base for indoor or outdoor exploration. A supply of relevant non-fiction books, paper and pencils may encourage older children to record their findings or act out familiar stories.



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, support and encouragement to get used to the idea. 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.

You can fill the tuff spot tray with a variety of objects that will stimulate all of the children's senses and encourage them to explore the objects. Lining the bottom of the tray with silver foil makes the activity more appealing as the objects also reflect on the bottom. For older children, include blindfolds to change the experience and to help develop their descriptive language; don't forget to support senses such as touch, hearing, smell too!

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.

Imaginative Play

To make a specific 'small world', bases can be filled with gravel, sand, bark chippings, compost, water, astro-turf, fake snow, real snow, leaves, and much more. Try filling your tray with compost and adding some fast growing grass seed, or bird seed – you'll have a quick sprouting base in just a few days! Give the children the tools to make / draw / stick / paint their own landscape and ask them to choose what they would like to add to it. They can also prove very useful for role play, for instance a garden in your home corner, or a paddling pool/beach at a holiday destination. You can extend your mini-worlds, by hanging things from the ceiling and decorating the walls around it.

Reflecting on practice

Taking time to sit back and reflect on your practice is always worthwhile. It is easy to get stuck in habits that have always worked well. However, this may sometimes hold us back and stops us from offering new experiences. The following questions are aimed specifically at practitioners who are working with babies or young children on a regular basis. Instead of just answering “yes” or “no” to the questions, spend a bit of time thinking about each one, asking yourself questions such as – “*How do I know that?*”. We have also included some activities that you may choose to do to help you reflect on your practice.

Questions for practitioners

(A Word version of this table is available to download)

Is the builders' tray a popular activity within your provision?		
Do children show sustained interest in the activity in the tray? How do you know? <i>e.g. Do observations show that children use the tray for extended periods of time?</i>	Is the tray always accessible and attractive to all children? <i>E.g. consider children with additional access needs – can they always access the activity?</i>	How could we make it even better?
Do the resources that you use in the tray cover targeted areas of learning?		
Is this clearly evidenced through planning? <i>It may also be evidenced through observations, and photographs etc</i>	Does the main area of learning change regularly? <i>For instance from Creative development to Knowledge and Understanding of the world</i>	How could we make it even better?
Is there a good balance of child initiated and adult initiated activities in the tray?		
Consider the past months' planning – what is the balance of child and adult initiated activities in the tray? <i>There should have been opportunities for both types of play in the tray</i>	How do you enable children to initiate their own activities? <i>E.g. accessible resources that they can choose to add to the tray</i>	How could we make it even better?

Do you watch and listen to children playing with the resources and use your observations to extend the activity?		
When was the last time you added something to the tray spontaneously because of a child's interest that you observed? <i>For instance, burying 'treasure' under some sand, or adding spoons to cornflour gloop</i>	Is there a clear link between your observations and your planning for the tray? <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>	How could we make it even better?
Do you encourage children to add to the resources that you place in the tray?		
Are other resources available close by for children to choose? <i>Are there other relevant resources available?</i>	Do practitioners ever discourage children from adding resources to the tray? If yes, why? <i>Children often choose to combine resources in a way that we haven't considered – this can sometimes result in great learning opportunities</i>	How could we make it even better?
Are children able to play with the activities individually, in small groups and in larger groups?		
	Are there always enough resources for children to follow their own lines of play? <i>Are children able to play with equipment on their own or do they need to share?</i>	How could we make it even better?

Activity 1

Aim: To complete a tracking observation on the builders' tray. Over the course of a session, make a note of the children who play with the builders' tray, 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 when the builders' tray has different purposes. For instance, on a day when it contains small world play, a day when it contains art materials, and on a day when it holds sensory resources.

Look at your observations and ask:

1. Did the tray attract different children according to the activity that was 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 to the tray?
5. Was there evidence of any special friendships between the children?
6. Did the tray 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 tray 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 activities they like to play with in the builders' tray. Note down the variety of activities that they enjoy and compare this to your planning over the past few weeks/months. 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 messy play, small world play, creative play etc. 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

There are no real limits as to how you use your tray and what resources you use, 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:

- Fill the tray with sand, lentils, and/or gravel. Add a few play people, diggers and dumper trucks to turn it into a small world building site
- Fill with lots of sand and a little water, supply some hardhats, builders' jackets and spades, and the children can mix their own 'cement' in a role play builders' yard.
- White rice, flour, fake snow, sugar, can all make an arctic landscape that you can add to with polar animals and play people. Make the most of the snow that falls in the garden for the real thing!
- Some compost, trowels, fake/real flowers or plants, gardening gloves, mini-beasts, watering cans etc, will make a great role play garden or flower shop
- Lay some straw or hay on the bottom of the tray and add some farm animals
- Fill one side of the tray with sand and the other half with water for an instant beach. This could be used to make a holiday playground for play people with mini-towels cut from old face cloths or tea towels, and boats on the sea. Add some pebbles, shells and sea weed, (or the weeds that you can get from pet shops for aquariums) and it becomes a play ground for creatures such as sharks, dolphins, fish, turtles, star fish, crabs etc
- Use the tray for retelling stories and songs, such as the Three Little Pigs, Jack and Jill, Duck in the Truck, The Gruffalo, Five Little Ducks, We're Going on a Bear Hunt, Jack and the Beanstalk. Be creative! For instance, three goats, a troll, a bridge, stream and two nice green fields either side can make a great scene for re-enacting the Three Billy Goats Gruff
- Fill with water and add animals (two of each!) and an 'ark'
- Memory game; use a small number of objects and talk about them with the children. Cover them over and remove one object – can they figure out what is missing?
- Bury metal 'treasures' in some sand and the children can search for them with metal detectors. You could turn the tray into a desert island with trees and rocks, and add treasure maps and spades. Hand held metal detectors can be bought from some early years suppliers and make an excellent IT resource
- Make a nice big mud bath with compost and water, add some hippos or pigs and enjoy!
- Fill the tray with compost and use sticks to build fences. Add farm animals and machinery such as tractors, ploughs etc.



- Compost, moss or sand with some ferns or houseplants, and large stones makes a great dinosaur land or African plain for wild animals
- Modroc is great for creating lunar landscapes – add some play people and challenge the children to make some space rockets to go with it. This one is especially good in a dark corner with a dark voile canopy over the top, and stars that the children have made hanging from it
- Make an “island” in the middle of your tuff spot with sand or compost, and surround it with water. Add a few rocks, trees etc as landmarks and a pirate ship in the sea. Encourage the children to bury some ‘treasure’ on the island, and ensure there are plenty of mark making resources near by so that they are able to make their own treasure map
- Fill with a strong solution of water and washing up liquid, and use different sized hoops to blow / make bubbles. Use a hula hoop and invite a child to stand inside (wearing wellies!) and pull the hoop up around them to make an enormous bubble tube

- You can build a fantastic Ice Mountain in your Tuff spot tray. Cover the bottom with tin foil and then cover with cornflour for snow. Add lots of big blocks of ice and a few drops of food colouring at the top so that the children can watch as the ice melts. To start the ice melting process a bit quicker, sprinkle some salt on the top. Use the opportunity to predict what will happen, observe and take photographs that the children can later sequence. Again, mark making materials should be available for the children. To turn it into a small world scene, add play people and polar animals
- For more ideas with ice that the children can explore and observe, try using different containers to freeze the water in. Larger cups, beakers, latex gloves, balloons, construction toys etc. Use food colouring, glitter and fruit juice to vary the smells, colours and opacity. You can also put things inside before the water freezes, such as play animals, petals, leaves, buttons or 'gems'. Try dissolving some salt in water – add food colourings and pour into spray bottles for the children to use (under supervision) to melt the ice quicker
- Use some sponges, bars of soap and a shallow pool of water to see how many bubbles you can make. You can add straws to this activity for the children to blow, and a few sprinkles of dry powder paint to make patterns. Ensure your children know to blow and not suck! A small hole near the top of a straw will mean that if they do suck, they will take less of the solution into their mouths
- For a great sensory experience, fill the tray with fluffy sand (sand and washing up liquid whisked up together). You can even bury items in it for the children to find
- Make use of all those old tea bags, and include your parents in the collection to make it a speedier process! The tea is sterile once the boiling water has been added (*so long as no milk or sugar has been added*). You can dry the tea bags out and then cut the bags open to use the leaves as a wonderfully smelly sensory activity!
- If your children are fascinated by mini-beasts, try an exploration around the garden on a dewy morning to look for spider webs and take some photos if you find some. Cover the bottom of the tuff spot with greaseproof paper and grease the back of it to make it more see-through. The children can draw their own spider web on the paper and then use pva glue in a squeeze bottle to draw over it, before sprinkling with glitter to give it that dewy morning look. Add a toy spider, and once it is all dry you can display the web on a window
- Fill with natural objects that have been found on walks, in the garden, or brought in by the children and supply them with magnifying glasses, bug viewers etc to investigate, ensuring there are plenty of mark making resources available for them
- Pour in some dry couscous for the children to play with. After a while you can add some warm water and observe the changes.
- Cooked noodles or spaghetti is a lovely sensory activity, add some chopsticks, tongs etc to develop the children's manipulative skills

- For an English wildlife scene, autumn leaves make a great base, add some conkers, beech nuts, acorns, fir cones and pieces of wood to turn the tuff spot into a forest. You can then add some of our native wild animals or even some fairies to make the scene come alive:



- In Autumn, put some recently collected fallen leaves into the tuff spot – you're bound to have a few real mini-beasts in there that the children can investigate with bug catchers, magnifying glasses etc. Supply mark making materials and non-fiction books about bugs so that the children are able to identify whatever they find
- At other times of the year, you can use pebbles, compost, bark chippings, reindeer moss (available from craft shops) and add a few plastic mini-beasts for a creepy crawly world
- Large glass beads make nice sparkly gems for children to find buried in sand, compost, shredded paper etc

- Fill the tray with coloured sand - add transparent funnels, small clear plastic bottles (i.e. food colouring size) and teaspoons. Children will enjoy filling up the bottles but can also use the funnels for mark making - tapping the edge of the tuff spot makes the marks disappear!
- Green jelly and a few short plants makes a great swamp for crocodiles, frogs etc
- Fill the tray with water; add some big stones, frogs and ducks for a pond. Give the children some straws or some homemade paper fans and the children can 'race' the ducks across the pond!
- Sugar cubes make the perfect building tool for igloos. Cover the bottom of the tray with silver foil, then sprinkle with sugar for snow and the children can build houses and igloos for play people and animals. The children may choose to add glue to the activity to help strengthen their buildings and make them permanent. Add some food colouring and a few pipettes for rainbow coloured igloo's:



- Crazy soap (or soap flakes mixed with water) sprinkled with glitter makes a lovely snowy landscape, and due to its malleability it would work well with a book about snowmen, to enable the children to try and make their own mini versions
- Cover the bottom of the tray with paper, and supply the children with paint, sticks, leaves and other unusual objects to make a lovely, large creative piece of art

- Don't feel that you have to put a 'perfect world' into your tuff spot activity, you can build it up over the week by following the children's interests, this way allowing them to explore every part of the resource bit by bit. Start off with a basic base, such as sand, compost or bark chippings, and then listen to the children as they play, and decide what to add next with your children's input
- Your usual sensory/messy activities will work well in your tray too, activities such as:
 - ★ Playdough (add flavourings, herbs, spices, colour, glitter, substitute plain flour with self raising for stretchiness)
 - ★ Custard powder and water
 - ★ Cold (set) custard
 - ★ Jelly (ensure this has been melted first and is not the solid jelly cubes) (add jelly sweets, plastic toys etc before it sets)
 - ★ Mashed potato
 - ★ Baked beans
 - ★ Cooked pasta
 - ★ Angel delight
 - ★ Crazy soap
 - ★ Squirry cream with hundreds and thousands
 - ★ Hand and foot painting
 - ★ Fruits and vegetables – both to play and print with
 - ★ Slime – (soap flakes whisked into water and left over night to thicken)
- Fill the tray with a dry mix of lentils, rice, pasta etc, and provide small pots and tools such as teaspoons and tweezers for sorting
- Encourage the children to build their own miniature garden by providing compost, stones, dried flowers, spoons, silver foil or shallow pots filled with water for ponds, twigs, leaves etc
- Make a large batch of cornflour gloop to cover the bottom of the tray. Add some small jugs of food colouring and pipettes so that the children can add colour themselves, and give them some straws to blow patterns, shapes or letters
- Cover the bottom of your tray with paper. At the side, have a few trays filled with paint and different balls (tennis balls, sponge balls, ping pong balls etc). Roll the paint covered balls around the tray to make some patterns
- Cover the bottom of your tray with silver foil, and pour on some yoghurt for the children to move around and reveal the reflections
- In winter, try half filling your tray with water and leaving outside overnight, covered loosely to stop animals using the tray. In the morning (if it's cold enough!) you will have a ready made ice rink for your play people

- Wet sand with animals, allows children to observe footprints
- To observe tracks and colour mixing, pour some different coloured pools of paint into each corner of the tray and give the children different sized cars or animals to drag the paint around the builders' tray

Useful resources

"The Little Book of Tuff Spot Activities" and *"The Little Book of Messy Play"* by Sally Featherstone.

"50 Exciting Ways to Use a Builders Tray" by Helen Bromley

Websites including Pinterest which have a whole EYFS section dedicated to the use of the 'Tuff Tray'

www.earlyyearscreators/eyc/enabling-environment

<https://community.tes.com/threads/54-tuff-spot-ideas.221382>