Messy Play
What is messy play?

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.

A wide range of materials can be used for messy play, including:

- paint;
- play dough;
- water;
- sand;
- pasta;
- rice;
- bubbles;
- shaving foam;
- jelly;
- baby oil or lotion;
- paper; and
- cornflour.

We may need to give some children extra help and encouragement to take part in messy play. Young children may sometimes be unsure about touching certain textures and may need support from an adult or other child.
How can messy play help a child’s development?

There are many reasons why messy play can help children learn.

- It helps children become more independent. Children take part in an activity that they create. They are able to decide how they want to play and can use the materials in the way that they choose. This builds confidence because the child is in control.

- It helps develop movement, co-ordination and control. Messy play gives children the opportunity to explore materials using their hands, arms, feet and bodies.

- It helps develop language and communication. Children will learn new words that describe the things they see, feel, hear, smell and taste.

- It helps children to be creative and use their imagination. Regular opportunities for free play allow children to create their own activities in their own way.

- It helps extend children’s knowledge and understanding of the world. Children can investigate objects, textures and a range of materials.

- It helps children use their senses. Children experience different sensations and have the opportunity to respond in a variety of ways to the things they see, hear, smell, taste and touch.

- It helps encourage social play. Children join in activities with other children and learn social skills as they play. They learn to take turns, share and interact with each other.

- It provides opportunities for children to express themselves and their emotions. Various materials can encourage different feelings – for example, corn flour can be soothing and play dough can be used to relieve tension by pressing and squeezing it.

- It encourages children to make choices. When exploring and investigating a range of materials, children have more opportunities to show preferences and make choices.

- It helps children develop concentration and problem-solving skills. Children become absorbed in their activities. Messy play gives children the opportunity to work things out themselves and experiment safely. Young children learn best through practical experiences.
There are three stages of messy play.

Messy play has to be introduced gradually. We need to be very aware of the child's reaction to different textures. This is to make sure that the child does not come across textures they don’t like, which may lead them to resisting and becoming more sensitive to texture. It is also important that we show the child that we enjoy messy play and this will encourage the child to enjoy it too.

Messy play can be divided into three stages. It is important to identify the stage your child is at and work through that stage towards the next.

Stage one – general play

This involves giving the child opportunities to investigate materials that are hard and dry. This stage is comfortable for most children as many have experienced these textures around them already.

Some materials you could use are:
- dry rice;
- dry pasta;
- beans (not kidney beans) dried peas, pulses or lentils;
- sand;
- tinsel;
- shredded paper;
- scrunched up paper;
- chalk;
- sequins;
- pebbles or stones;
- crayons, pencils or pens;
- sawdust; or
- cereal.
Stage two – play using soft textures

This is play that uses materials with a soft texture. Wet materials can be put into zip lock bags or covered with cling film to reduce the effect of the materials and make it easier for children who are sensitive to new textures to start handling them. Make sure these bags are sealed and do not leak.

Some materials you could use for soft texture play are:

- cooked pasta, including spaghetti;
- bread dough;
- play dough;
- wet sand;
- squishy balls;
- soft materials (for example, fur or velvet);
- sponges;
- balloons; or
- bags of different materials (for example, gel, shaving foam or wet cornflakes).

Stage three – messy play using soft and wet textures

This is messy play that involves materials that are soft, wet and really messy. Children may take some time to work up to this stage. You may need to ease a child into these types of activities and be aware of them resisting or becoming sensitive towards certain textures. Always show your child that you are enjoying the experience of handling the materials even if this is difficult for you.

Some materials you could use are:

- paint;
- cornflour;
- water;
- shaving foam;
- baby oil or baby lotion;
- wet mud;
- bubbles;
- papier mâché;
- food; or
- glue.
Why do some children not like messy play?

Some children may become stuck at a certain stage and may be nervous of moving on to the next.

Early negative experiences of texture may cause the child to be resistant and unwilling to try again.

The child may never have had any experience of messy play and may be wary about handling different materials.

How can you help your child to enjoy messy play?

Introduce messy-play activities gradually. Your child may need to work on one stage for some time before moving on.

Join in. Children look to adults as their role models. If you give it a try, this will give them confidence and they are more likely to follow your example.

As well as setting aside some time for particular activities, try to include messy play in everyday life, such as cooking, gardening and bath time.

Make sure that you provide enough time and space for your child to enjoy the activity. Where possible, the child should decide how long to play for. This will be shown by their interest and concentration.

Always gently encourage play, do not force it. Encouraging brothers or sisters to join in the play is a great way for a child to observe what is happening and be more willing to explore.

Whenever possible (and within reason), allow the child to direct the activity. You may have had an idea of what you wanted your child to do but this is their play. Allow your child to explore themselves.
Your child should be comfortable throughout the activity. If the child has special seating or a standing frame, then these should be used.

Make sure that your child is ready to start (for example, if they need the toilet, make sure they have been first).

This is messy play so expect some mess! Dress for mess by wearing aprons – old shirts are great as they cover a big area. Put newspaper or wipe-clean mats on the floor.

Choose activities to suit your child’s level of ability and development. You may have to introduce activities gradually, but they should always be available throughout the activity so the child can choose when to join in. When providing an activity, make sure it is appropriate for your child’s needs and at the right level. You should work through levels gradually – jumping to a higher level when a child is not ready can make them resist activities later.

There are some examples of ways you can introduce activities at the end of this booklet.
Activities

Play 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.

You need the following ingredients to make play dough.

- One cup of plain flour
- One cup of salt
- One cup of water
- One tablespoon of vegetable oil
- One teaspoon of cream of tartar
- Food colouring

Mix flour, salt, oil, cream of tartar and food colouring together in a saucepan over a low heat. Gradually add water. Keep mixing until it becomes doughy. Take the dough out of the pan and let it cool. Knead on a floured surface. Store the dough in an airtight container or cling film. It will keep for several weeks.

Many objects can be used to encourage children to learn from this play, for example:

- food flavourings; (available in supermarkets in flavours such as orange, banana and mint)
- cookie cutters;
- rolling pins;
- plastic forks, knives and spoons;
- glitter;
- straws;
- lolly sticks;
- a garlic press;
- dried rice or dried peas (these are great for adding texture);
- feathers; or
- large buttons.
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. Try out different consistencies to see which your child prefers.

You can add food colourings and mix colours together.

Pour the cornflour onto a tray or plate and encourage your child 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.

Paint

There are many types of painting activities. It is important to provide a range and allow children to explore and create their own play with the resources provided. Children can use their hands, sponges, brushes or other tools. Be creative.

Painting pavements or patios

Use pots of water and brushes to paint outside. Encourage children to paint fences, trees and the pavement. This is great as it provides the child with lots of space and encourages them to use their imaginations. You could also crush up some chalk and add a little water to create a paint consistency. This is great to use as it can be washed away with water afterwards. Some children love this part of the activity as they can use brooms to make it all disappear.
Textured paint
Add different materials to paint to create a new aspect to the activity. Add different textures to thick paint for hand-painting activities. Use materials that have a smell to add more to the experience.

Materials you could use include:
- coffee granules;
- sand;
- cornmeal;
- pulses;
- rice; or
- salt.

Marble painting
Place a piece of paper flat inside a deep-sided tray. Have a few saucers or pots with different coloured paint in each. Add a few marbles to each pot. Take a few marbles at a time and drop them into the tray. Encourage the child to move the tray around, making sure the marbles are moving across the tray. Add more paint to the marbles if you need to. When finished, take out the paper and look at the patterns that have been created.

Many objects can be used to add more to a painting activity.
- Brushes
- Leaves
- Twigs
- Fruit and vegetables (for example, apples, potatoes, corn on the cob)
- Flowers
- Forks
- Fir cones
- Spaghetti
- Hairbrushes
- Scourers
- Toy cars
- String
- Marbles
- Cotton-wool balls
- Scrunched paper
- Straws
- Buttons
- Cotton reels
- Sponges
- Wooden blocks
- Lolly sticks
- Plastic toys or plastic figures
- A turkey baster
- A feather duster
- Toothbrushes
- Rice
- Bubble wrap
- coffee granules;
- sand;
- cornmeal;
- pulses;
- rice; or
- salt.

Children can also use their hands, feet and elbows to make patterns in the paint.
Messy play – stage one

Aim
To confidently explore hard and dry materials

What you will need
The child’s favourite small toys – for example, a car, ball, train, toy figure, animal figures, dry sand or shredded paper

Words you can use during play
Names of objects
Sand, car, ball, train, cow, dinosaur, hands, fingers

Action words
Hiding, finding, digging, feeling, searching, pouring, picking up, dropping

Descriptive words
Hard, soft, gritty, dry, gone, cold

Steps along the way (remember, this may take many weeks)

Step one – your child watches you find the toys

Step two – your child holds your arm while they find the toys

Step three – your child directs your hand to find the toys or uses a tool (for example, a spade)

Step four – your child takes a toy that you have found

Step five – your child takes out toys that they have partly hidden on their own

Step six – your child takes out toys that they have fully hidden on their own

What to do
You should show the child the toys you are going to hide in the sand or paper.

Then search for each toy. Use simple language such as ‘Where’s car?’ When you find the toy, use an excited voice to say what you found. Encourage your child to join in. Never force the child to touch the sand or paper, but follow the above steps along the way. Go at the child’s pace. Finish the activity before the child loses interested or gets distressed.
Ways you can help your child to play

To make the activity easier
• Do not rush through the steps.
• Use a shallow tray and large toys.
• Get brothers and sisters involved.
• Use tools to pick up the toys (for example, a spoon, spade or tongs).

To make the activity harder.
• Increase the number of toys you hide.
• Bury the toys deeper or make the container larger.
• Increase the number of other children joining in the activity.

Other activities you could try
• Making faces using dry foods or materials and a glue stick
• Handling pretend plastic food and real food that is hard and dry (for example, unpeeled carrots, potatoes, apples, bananas)
• Putting hard and dry objects into feely bags
• Treasure hunts
• Linking play into seasonal themes (for example, Christmas, Diwali, festivals and holidays)
Messy play – stage two

Aim
To confidently explore soft and textured materials

What you will need
Texture books (you can make these yourself or buy them), vegetable or sponge shapes, paint in shallow trays

Words you can use during play
Names of objects
Paint, potato, carrot, pepper, broccoli, sponge, star, cotton reel, book, page

Action words
Feeling, touching, printing, pressing, looking, turning, squeezing, stroking, rubbing

Descriptive words
Furry, shiny, smooth, rough, bumpy, warm, cold, squasy, squishy, fast, slow, soft, hard, gently

Steps along the way (remember, this may take many weeks)

Step one – your child watches you print or touch textures
Step two – your child holds your arm while you print or touch textures
Step three – your child directs your hand to print or touch textures
Step four – your child presses or takes away the vegetable or sponge to print, or turns a page of the book
Step five – your child uses a clean vegetable or sponge to print, or touches some textures in the book
Step six – your child uses any vegetable or sponge to print more than once, or touches all the textures in the book

What to do
Show the child the materials and demonstrate how the activity works. Use simple language such as ‘in paint’, ‘press shape’, ‘made pattern’ or ‘ahh, soft, furry cat, and rough crocodile’. Encourage your child to join in. Never force the child to touch the textures, but follow the above steps along the way. Go at the child’s pace. Finish the activity before the child loses interest or gets distressed.
Ways you can help your child to play

To make the activity easier
- Do not rush through the steps.
- Use larger printing materials, and small paint trays.
- Get brothers and sisters involved.

To make the activity harder
- Use smaller printing materials and larger, deeper paint trays.
- Use feely bags, with pieces of different material to find in it.
- Increase the number of other children joining in the activity.

Other activities you could try
- Finger painting
- Hiding objects in cooked rice, pasta or wet sand
- Cooking activities (for example, using spoons and whisks)
- Putting paint in trays, and pushing cars or balls in it
- Mixing cooked spaghetti with paint for printing
- Making shapes in play dough using cutters
- Painting marbles using tongs
Messy play – stage three

Aim
To confidently explore wet and sticky materials

What you will need
Cornflour in a tray, lolly sticks, twigs, toy cutlery

Words you can use during play
Names of objects
Cornflour, stick, twig, knife, fork, spoon

Action words
Feeling, touching, pressing, looking, cutting, squeezing, drawing, pulling, pushing, swirling, falling, dripping, grabbing, letting go, dribbling

Descriptive words
Slippery, wet, shiny, smooth, warm, cold, squishy, squishy, fast, slow, soft, hard, sticky, messy, funny, pattern, gone, disappear, more

Steps along the way (remember, this may take many weeks)
Step one – your child watches you explore the texture
Step two – your child holds your arm while you explore the texture
Step three – your child directs your hand to explore the texture
Step four – your child uses a tool to explore the texture on their own
Step five – your child uses their own fingers to explore the texture on their own
Step six – your child uses their whole hands to explore the texture on their own

What to do
Show the child the materials and how to use them. Use simple language such as ‘make pattern’, ‘fingers sticky’, ‘drip drip’, ‘watch me’, ‘all gone’ and ‘take more’. Encourage your child to join in. Never force the child to touch the textures, but follow steps along the way. Go at the child’s pace. Finish the activity before the child loses interest or gets distressed.

To make the activity easier
• Do not rush through the steps.
• Use a small tray.
• Get brothers and sisters involved.

To make the activity harder
• Only use hands, and use both hands.
• Use a larger tray and add colour.
• Increase the number of other children involved.

Other activities you could try
• Making faces on paper plates or a collage using different textures
• Using fingers instead of glue spreaders
• Putting foam in a tray
• Cooking activities (for example, making fairy cakes)
• Mixing paint with sand and glitter
This booklet has been developed by Barking and Dagenham Portage in consultation with Barking and Dagenham Educational Psychology Service.

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