

Early learning Messy play

What does messy play entail, how do children benefit from it, and what can you do to help them take part in such activities? By **Annette Rawstrone**



It's a typical but frustrating scenario for parents – you take your bathed and neatly dressed child to nursery and return with one who is grubby. Their hands, clothes and sometimes their hair too can tell a story of their day – mud under their finger nails, thick paint on their top and glitter in their hair.

Rest assured, childcare practitioners don't deliberately make your washing machine work overtime, but they do want to enable

your child to explore a wide range of textures and materials. This form of play is called 'messy' – or 'sensory' – play.

WHAT IS MESSY PLAY?

The main feature of messy play is giving your child the freedom to investigate materials. This can include playing with sand and water, digging in mud or investigating porridge oats, shaving foam or

'gloop' (cornflour and water mixed together resulting in a fascinating substance). Nursery

practitioners will try to keep your child protected by providing aprons, overalls and opportunities to wash their hands, but it is impossible to keep young children totally clean without inhibiting their important investigations.

BENEFITS OF MESSY PLAY

'Messy' often has negative connotations for parents, but there are many positive reasons why this form of play is offered in early years settings. It may seem to lack a particular focus as there is often not an end product, but the benefits of getting hands-on through messy play include:



- **Exploration and independence** as children are free to investigate what they choose – from digging a hole with a twig to pouring water into different containers. It's an opportunity to take responsibility for their own play, rather than being told what to do.

- **Development of co-ordination and body control** as children practise hand-eye co-ordination and develop their motor skills. Big movements, such as drawing in sand, can help to build large muscle groups which can enable the smaller muscles in the hands to make more precise movements.

- **Stimulating their senses and imagination** as they feel the sensation of shaving foam squidging through their fingers, hear cornflakes crunch under their feet or smell petals in their magic potion.

- **Building curiosity and concentration** as they have the freedom to experiment with different substances and investigate cause and effect: What happens when you push your finger through gloop? Why does sand stick together better when it's mixed with water? How can you stop your playdough creation from collapsing?

- **Developing prediction skills** as they start to learn that their model needs a firm base, or putting too much liquid into a bucket will make it overflow.

- **Nurturing early writing skills** by encouraging mark-making, such as using their fingers to make patterns in shaving foam or dragging a piece of chalk across the playground.
- **Nurturing early numeracy skills** by introducing them to concepts such as bigger and smaller, heavier and lighter, along with sequencing, patterns and problem-solving.
- **Encouraging social interaction** such as turn-taking, negotiation and conversation skills as children work together.

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

- Dress your child for nursery in outfits that you don't mind getting messy or stained, plus provide the nursery with spare clothes. It's also a good idea to tie back long hair in order to reduce the risk of it dangling in paint or sticky substances.

- Ask your child's nursery for messy play ideas that you could do at home – maybe get their playdough recipe, put funnels and tubs in the bath, try finger painting, invest in a sand pit or let your child dig in a muddy patch of the garden.

- Avoid directing your child's play, but get involved by playing beside your child and occasionally asking open-ended questions, such as 'What else could you add?' or 'What would happen if...?'

- Reassure yourself that it's unlikely that your child will become ill from messy play. Coming into contact with the bacteria in mud can actually help to build young children's immune systems.



Persil's Dirt is Good website has information on how to remove a range of stains from clothing and the benefits of 'embracing dirt'. Visit: www.persil.com/uk/home.html

A recipe for making slime out of household items, including troubleshooting tips, is available at: www.bbcgoodfood.com/howto/guide/how-make-slime

Information sheets and advice on messy play activities have been produced by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and are available at: www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/resources/ot-activityinformation-sheets/messy-play-activities

The Little Book of Messy Play by Sally Featherstone is packed with great ideas for sensory and exploratory play.

Washable or wipe-clean aprons or tabards for your child to wear while engaging in messy play and waterproofs for outdoors are available from a variety of stockists, including: www.elc.co.uk, and www.muddypuddles.com

Wipeable tablecloths for protecting the table or putting on the floor during messy play are available from stockists including: www.wayfair.co.uk and www.wipeeasytablecloths.com