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# Messy Play





# The Necessity of Messy Play and Exploration in Early Childhood

Messy play is an essential component of early childhood development, offering profound impacts on sensory integration, brain development, and long-term cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes. This type of unstructured, open-ended play allows children to engage all their senses while interacting with diverse materials like sand, mud, water, and paint. Through these experiences, children develop vital neural pathways and sensory processing skills that lay the foundation for future learning.

**Impact on Sensory Integration and Brain Development** Messy play helps children integrate sensory information by allowing them to engage with textures, temperatures, and other physical properties. Sensory integration is crucial for helping the brain organize and respond to information from the environment, which supports motor coordination, attention, and emotional regulation. Early sensory experiences are crucial for fostering neural development that is vital for cognitive and physical functioning later in life.

**Brain Development and Long-Term Outcomes** Engaging in messy play stimulates synaptic growth in the brain, which is essential for problem-solving, creativity, and executive functioning. Research published in the *Journal of Developmental Neuropsychology* highlights that early tactile experiences can enhance memory retention, emotional intelligence, and fine motor skills. These brain benefits translate into long-term positive outcomes, such as higher academic achievement, better emotional regulation, and improved resilience.

# Making Learning Visible...

It can be hard to understand the magic within messes, but these are just a few concepts that can be embraced & explored whenever children are engaged in child-led, messy play.

- **Velocity** – Children learn about speed and movement through experiments like pouring, splashing, and throwing.
- **Gravity** – Dropping or releasing materials introduces the concept of gravitational pull.
- **Texture** – Sensory exploration of rough, smooth, sticky, and soft materials enhances tactile learning.
- **Volume** – Pouring and measuring liquids or solids helps children understand volume and capacity.
- **Cause and Effect** – They discover how their actions (e.g., splashing water) create outcomes.



- **Balance** – Manipulating objects and materials encourages experimentation with balance and stability.
- **Weight** – Lifting and moving different objects allows them to compare and feel weight differences.
- **Absorption** – Experimenting with water and other liquids helps children learn about how materials absorb or repel moisture.
- **Problem-Solving** – Children figure out how to manipulate materials in ways that achieve desired outcomes.
- **Motor Skills** – Scooping, pouring, ripping, throwing, spreading, etc. develop small and large muscle control, balance, and coordination.

- **Spatial Awareness** – As they move and manipulate materials, they build understanding of space and proximity.
- **Pattern Recognition** – Repetitive actions with materials, such as sorting or arranging objects, build early pattern recognition skills.
- **Strength** – Physical tasks like kneading dough or moving larger objects help develop muscle strength.
- **Color Mixing** – Combining paints or other materials teaches children how primary colors blend to form new ones.
- **Temperature** – Touching warm, cool, or cold materials gives an understanding of temperature changes.



- **Pressure** – Squishing, pressing, or pounding materials gives feedback on how much pressure is needed for various effects.
- **States of Matter** – Messy play with solids, liquids, and semi-liquids introduces concepts like viscosity and solidity.
- **Imagination** – Open-ended play with loose materials fosters creativity and imaginative thinking.
- **Risk-Taking** – Through exploration and testing, children learn to assess and take manageable risks.
- **Collaboration** – Shared play encourages cooperative problem-solving and teamwork, as they learn from others' actions.



## Supporting Children with Aversions to Messy Play

Messy play is an enriching experience that fosters creativity, sensory exploration, and cognitive development. However, some children show resistance or discomfort when engaging in messy activities. Understanding why this happens and how to gently support these children can help them feel more comfortable exploring sensory-rich experiences at their own pace.

### Why Do Some Children Avoid Messy Play?

- **Sensory Sensitivities** – Some children have heightened sensory processing, making certain textures overwhelming or unpleasant. Sticky, slimy, or gritty substances might cause discomfort rather than enjoyment.
- **Past Negative Experiences** – A child who has had an unpleasant encounter with messy play (such as paint drying uncomfortably on their hands) may develop an aversion to it.
- **Desire for Cleanliness & Control** – Some children prefer predictability and order, finding comfort in staying clean and avoiding unexpected sensations.
- **Temperament & Personality** – Every child is unique; some naturally enjoy sensory exploration, while others are more reserved or cautious.
- **Parental or Environmental Influences** – If a child has been discouraged from getting messy or has not had exposure to sensory play, they may feel uncertain about engaging in it.

# How to Support Children with a Messy Play Aversion

## 1. Respect Their Boundaries

- Forcing a child into messy play can increase anxiety and resistance. Instead, acknowledge their feelings and allow them to engage at their comfort level.

## 2. Start Small & Offer Alternatives

- Introduce less intense textures first:
- Dry materials like rice, beans, or shredded paper may feel more manageable than wet or sticky substances.
- Use tools (paintbrushes, spoons, tweezers) to allow interaction without direct skin contact.
- Provide gloves or sponges for children who are hesitant to touch materials with hands.

## 3. Model & Play Alongside

- Children feel more comfortable when they see a trusted adult or peers engaging in an activity. Narrate your experience:
- "This paint feels cool and smooth. I like how it spreads on the paper."
- "I'm using a spoon to mix this goopy oobleck. Do you want to try?"

## 4. Offer Gradual Exposure

- Allow children to observe before participating.
- Encourage small interactions, such as tapping a material with one finger before engaging more fully.
- Pair sensory play with familiar, preferred activities (e.g., a favorite toy in kinetic sand).





## 5. Provide Choice & Control

Give children autonomy by allowing them to choose if, when, and how they engage. A child might prefer:

- Washing materials instead of playing directly with them.
- Pouring or scooping instead of submerging their hands.
- Engaging in sensory play in short bursts rather than extended sessions.

## 6. Offer Clean-Up Options

Some children feel more comfortable knowing they can wash their hands easily.

- Keep a damp cloth or water basin nearby.
- Have a designated cleanup routine they can initiate when ready.



## 7. Avoid Pressure or Expectations

Messy play should be an invitation, not an obligation. Celebrate small steps without pushing:

- “You touched the playdough with one finger—that’s great!”
- “You dipped a paintbrush in the foam—how did it feel?”



## 8. Observe & Adjust Based on the Child’s Needs

If a child consistently reacts strongly to certain textures, consider whether their sensory processing needs might require further support. Occupational therapists can provide insights and strategies for children with significant sensory sensitivities.

# 20 Materials to Support Messy Play

1. Finger paint
2. Shaving cream
3. Play dough
4. Sand
5. Water
6. Rice
7. Beans
8. Mud
9. Oobleck
10. Gelatin
11. Colored chalk
12. Bubbles
13. Crayons
14. Natural materials
15. Feathers
16. Sponges
17. Ice
18. Tissue paper
19. Fabric scraps
20. Flour





## 10 Structures and Activities that Support Messy Play & Open-ended Exploration:

- **Mud Kitchen** – A dedicated outdoor space with pots, pans, utensils, and natural materials like mud, water, and leaves for pretend cooking and potion-making.
- **Sensory Table** – A raised bin or table that can hold various messy materials like water beads, oobleck, shaving cream, or kinetic sand, allowing children to scoop, pour, and explore textures.
- **Gutter Waterways** – A setup of gutters, pipes, or tubes where children can pour water, roll objects, or experiment with flow and movement.
- **DIY Car Wash** – A small station with toy cars, soapy water, sponges, and spray bottles for children to scrub and rinse their vehicles.
- **Slime & Dough Station** – A designated area for children to mix and manipulate slime, playdough, or cloud dough with added tools like rollers and natural materials.
- **Painting Wall or Easel** – A vertical surface for finger painting, spray bottle painting, or using unconventional tools like rollers, sponges, or leaves for mark-making.
- **Digging & Excavation Site** – A large bin or outdoor area filled with soil or sand where children can dig, uncover “fossils,” or use toy construction vehicles.
- **Ice Exploration Station** – A play area with frozen colored ice cubes, ice blocks with hidden objects, or ice melting experiments using warm water and salt.
- **Outdoor Soup or Potion-Making Station** – A setup with bowls, spoons, and an assortment of natural materials like petals, herbs, and colored water for children to mix and create imaginary concoctions.
- **Bubble Foam & Water Play Station** – A large bin filled with foam (dish soap and water) allowing children to scoop, swirl, and experiment with floating objects.

*Please don't rush through activities. Children require repetition of experiences to build mastery, confidence, and longterm memory recall. The open-ended nature allows for versatility and evolution in their play, while still allowing the familiarity and mastery to grow.*



## 5 “Do’s” of Managing Messy Play

- **Create a “Yes” Space:**
  - **Tip:** Set up a specific area with materials like clay, paint, or sensory bins where messiness is encouraged. Keep it simple to not overwhelm children, while better allowing them to focus on smaller array of materials.
- **Allow Children to Lead Their Play:**
  - **Tip:** Step back and observe as children navigate their activities. Offer materials without direction, allowing them to freely explore and guide their own play.
- **Provide Extra Time & Include Children in the Clean-Up Process:**
  - **Tip:** Provide clear instructions during clean-up. For example, say, “Let’s put the blue blocks back in the bin,” to help children focus on specific tasks, compared to “clean-up,” which can be too broad and ambiguous on its own.
- **Limit the Materials:**
  - **Tip:** Offer a small selection of materials that can be used in multiple ways. For instance, provide butcher paper with paint, instead of numerous items to avoid overwhelming the children.
    - This concept is also applicable to basic storage of toys and materials. Too many options or overstuffed bins may lead to children feeling overwhelmed, dumping materials, and moving through materials more quickly.
- **Embrace the Process & Remove Expectations:**
  - **Tip:** Engage with children about what they are doing. Ask open-ended questions like, “What do you like about this?” to foster reflection and emphasize the learning experience over a (potential) final product.



## 5 “Don’ts” of Managing Messy Play

- **Prescribe How They Should Engage:**

- **Tip:** Avoid saying, “Don’t paint your arms!” and instead encourage them to explore and use phrases like, “How does the paint feel on your skin?”

- **Avoid Setting Boundaries:**

- **Tip:** While encouraging messiness, it’s essential to establish clear boundaries regarding where and when messes can occur. Communicate these boundaries positively to help children understand expectations without stifling creativity.

- **Rush the Clean-Up:**

- **Tip:** Allow sufficient time for clean-up and frame it as part of the play. Use timers as fun reminders, such as, “We have five more minutes before it’s time to clean up!”

- **Overreact to Messes:**

- **Tip:** Avoid expressing anger or frustration when messes happen. Instead, maintain a calm demeanor and frame messes as a natural part of exploration, which helps children feel safe and supported.

- **Ignore Children’s Feedback:**

- **Tip:** Listen to and/or observe what children express and demonstrate about their experiences. If a child says or displays they enjoy a particular material or actions (ripping, throwing, pouring, etc.), consider incorporating it more frequently in future play sessions.

Messes can be really tough for adults to cope with—there's the emotional challenge of seeing things out of order, and the physical task of cleaning up after. It's easy to feel overwhelmed when your space feels chaotic, but it's important to remember that for children, mess is a natural and essential part of their learning and growth.

These mantras are here to serve as gentle reminders that behind every spill or splatter is an opportunity for creativity, discovery, and development. By repeating these, you can shift your perspective and find comfort in the learning that's unfolding—even if it gets a little messy along the way.

1. "We see a mess, they see magic."
2. "Messes can always be cleaned; creativity lasts forever."
3. "Hands in the dirt, minds in the sky."
4. "Learning is messy, and that's okay."
5. "Each splatter is a step toward discovery."
6. "Through mess, they master."
7. "Messy play today, brilliant ideas tomorrow."
8. "Every mess is a masterpiece in progress."
9. "Stains fade, skills stay."
10. "Let the mess be a sign of their exploration, not a limitation."



# If You Love It Leave it At Home...



To encourage exploration and messy play at school, avoid sending children in clothing they or you love too much to risk getting dirty. School is a space for hands-on discovery, and messy materials like paint and mud are often part of the learning process. Practical, comfortable clothing allows children to fully engage in these activities without worry. Leave special or delicate items at home to ensure children have the freedom to explore without restrictions.



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