



All About...Messy Play

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A Fine Mess

Despite appearances, messy play can make an enormous contribution to babies' and young children's cognitive and creative development.

What do we think about when we hear the word 'messy'? Untidy, muddled, disorganised, confused, cluttered, shambolic, disordered, disarray or perhaps the instruction, 'Don't make a mess'. The word messy is often given negative meanings and calling an important aspect of play 'messy' can lead to it being undervalued. This guide aims to reclaim messy play as an important part of early years provision and demonstrate its importance for young children's learning and development. In this article I will be sharing the work of the Thomas Coram Centre for Children and Families, a partnership between Coram Family, one of the oldest children's charities in this country, and the London Borough of Camden. The centre works with children from birth (and before), their parents and the wider community.

Importance

To mess about is to play with something and it is through play - which is part of the creative process (Duffy 1998) - that children learn and develop. Children are being creative when they use materials in new ways, combine previously unconnected materials and make discoveries that are new to them, and messy play enables children to do all these things. It is this aspect of messy play that we want to emphasise, and our definition of messy play at Thomas Coram is: play that emphasises the active exploration of materials and their properties.

Messy play involves:

- children using all their senses in the process of exploration, especially the sense of touch
- offering children plenty of opportunity to mould and manipulate materials
- not having a focus on making or producing something.

This sort of play is important because its lack of a focus on making or producing something leaves the child free to explore all sorts of possibilities. It taps into children's innate curiosity about the world around them and their strong desire to explore and find out more.

By giving children messy play opportunities, we give them the opportunity to explore materials fully. Messy play is also enjoyable; we have only to look at children freely exploring water and paint to see their enjoyment and, as the Primary Strategy document Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES 2003) stresses, enjoyment is a good thing and something to aspire to and encourage in all early years settings.

Cognitive Development

One word associated with 'messy' is 'confused', and it seems to me that confusion can be a very good thing. The creative process is characterised by risk taking, trying things out and



experimenting, and an insight often occurs at the very moment when we are confused and have to look deeper. For me, there is a strong link between the process involved in messy play and Piaget's concept of cognitive disequilibrium. Cognitive disequilibrium is when thinking has to change to incorporate new information. Children's interpretation of the world is challenged when they take on new information and find that they now have two contradictory views of the same event. Here are two examples:

Bubbles intrigue the babies at Thomas Coram and watching their first encounter is fascinating. Their previous experience has led them to believe that spherical shapes such as bubbles are solid and can be held, so as the adult blows the bubbles they reach out to catch them. But as soon as their hand closes on the bubble it vanishes. The look of surprise on their face as they puzzle on this new insight is a moment of cognitive disequilibrium.

Three-year-olds experiencing cornflower for the first time can experience a similar reaction. They see what appears to be a solid surface and reach in to take a handful. At first the cornflower stays solid but then it turns into a powder and falls through their fingers, causing them to rethink their understanding of materials.

Special Benefits

Messy play, therefore, brings benefits to all children's learning. However, it has particular benefits for particular groups.

It offers [children new to a setting] a way to become involved and get to know other children. As this sort of play does not rely on words, children who are in the process of acquiring English as an additional language can join in and use the materials with their peers. There is no 'right' way to play with cornflower or dough and children with special needs and disabilities are able to use these open-ended materials in their own way as part of the group.

Addressing the Obstacles

Despite all the contributions messy play can make to children's learning and development there does seem to be a reluctance to promote messy play in some settings. One reason may be the associations with such words as muddled, confused and shambolic. This has led to this type of play being seen as unimportant and undervalued.

The neglect of such play may be connected with our own and other people's anxieties about children making a mess - what will other people think? How will the caretaker react? Will parents be cross if their children's clothes are spoiled?

The lack of focus on an end product may also deter some people. As someone asked me recently, 'Can I really put "exploring materials" as a learning objective on my plan? Wouldn't people want to see more?'

Lack of control and things getting out of hand is another worry for some practitioners. Allowing children to explore freely needn't lead to anarchy if the adults are well prepared, actively involved in supporting the children and leave plenty of time to tidy up - something I know from personal experience.

Many years ago I decided to introduce a group of one-year-olds to body painting. I mixed a range of colours, undressed the children and left them to explore as they wished. Once they overcame their initial reluctance, the children explored freely and were engrossed. However, I had severely underestimated the amount of time it would take to tidy up.



Perhaps predictably the paint went everywhere - all over the floor, walls and children. The children were easier to clean than the room, but by the time we had bathed them all, they were tired and hungry as their lunch and naps had been delayed. The room took much longer to clean. A little forward planning would have given the children the opportunity to explore but avoided the chaos that followed!

Using Food

Using foodstuffs for messy play can be controversial. It is important that each setting takes time to discuss their position and reach their own conclusions. Our position is that food is part of the world around the children and something that they need to explore. For us concerns about world hunger are best addressed by encouraging the children's sense of responsibility to others. We also think that it is important to encourage a respect for food by incorporating growing food and cooking into the day-to-day life of the centre.

Safety

Always remember to check materials for potential dangers and do not leave children unsupervised. For example, check for chemicals in wallpaper paste, think about the size of materials such as lentils to avoid choking. When using foods, check for allergies and dietary requirements.

Parents and Carers

The importance of working in partnership with parents [was] a key theme in both Birth to Three Matters and Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, and having parental support is particularly important when it comes to messy play. Some practitioners express concern, and on occasion annoyance, at certain parents' unwillingness to allow their child to explore freely materials such as paint, clay or water. In turn, some parents are 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.

The Adult Role

For creativity to flourish, children need to be actively involved in the process of learning (Prentice 2000), and our role as practitioners is to make sure that this happens.

As practitioners, we need to use our imaginations, take risks and leave the security of structured lessons. Sometimes there is a tendency to prepare the materials for messy play and stand back while the children explore, but children will gain so much more from the experience if we engage in the process with them. We need to learn from and with the children as they engage in messy play.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (EPPE 2003) stresses the importance of adult-child interactions. Children's freely chosen play offers many opportunities to promote learning when practitioners recognise its importance and interact with children while they play. We can support learning through 'modelling', that is, when the practitioner shows the children possible ways to explore new materials and equipment.



Open-ended questioning is also very important, as are pondering and thinking aloud. For example, 'I wonder why that happened?' or 'I wonder what would happen if I add more water?' Such comments draw the children's attention to the possibilities for exploration without putting them under pressure to find a right answer.

It is also important for practitioners to know when to be silent, when to pause before speaking and when to give the child the opportunity to speak first.

These adult behaviours are often associated with periods of sustained shared thinking, when practitioners and children 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, or extend a narrative, and it is one of the best ways to encourage learning.

Outdoors

The outdoors offers all sorts of wonderful possibilities for messy play.

Children can make the most of natural resources and work on a bigger scale than indoors. For example, children can:

- dig deep in sand and soil
- make and explore mud, in particular making mud pies
- splash in puddles and explore water in paddling pools
- move water using guttering, pumps and pipes
- mix large amounts of sand and water.

Documentation

Messy play is about exploring a process and in most cases does not result in an end product. It is vital, therefore, that we find ways to record this process for the children to reflect upon their experiences and to share with others.

Digital photography is a great way to record the process, and the photographs can be added, with accompanying notes, to a child's portfolio, or used to create a display complete with the children's comments on their learning.

If you have access to a video camera, record episodes of play to reflect on with the children, in team meetings and with parents. Video offers practitioners the opportunity to see the 'bigger picture', to see things that we may have missed at the time.

Promoting Messy Play

The following observation from my godson Matty, for me, best describes someone who promotes messy play. Some years ago practitioners from his nursery came to a conference and heard me speak. When they returned to their nursery they tried to explain to him what I did for a living.



The next time I saw Matty he looked at me accusingly and said, 'I know what you do.' Surprised I asked what he meant. 'You're one of them...You're a head mischief!' Like messy play I think being a head mischief is to be encouraged in early years settings.

Points To Consider

- Make sure that you are clear about and can articulate the value of messy play.
- Do not assume that parents and colleagues share your opinions, and make time to talk to them about your views.
- Allow plenty of time for messy play - children need space and time to explore.
- Prepare well. Colleagues, especially cleaners, deserve consideration.
- Cover floors and walls with plastic sheeting. Define the area available for messy play and ensure that the children who do not wish to be involved have the space for their choices.
- Protect children's clothes from the materials. Remove as much clothing as possible to enable the children to explore freely and provide aprons and overalls as appropriate. Make sure that there is a space ready to wash off materials such as paint when the children have finished.
- Use retrospective planning - leave your learning objective open, observe the children as they play and interact and record their learning at the end of the session.
- Document the process to share with others.

Birth To Three

When organising messy play for very young children, practitioners should think carefully about the sorts of materials offered and how the provision reflects children's interests.

Water is always a favourite and bath times offer an ideal time for babies to explore water, so leave time to play as well as wash. Meal times are another opportunity for messy play, so allow children to explore with their hands as well as their mouths.

Accessibility is important and, as with most activities, messy play for the youngest children should be at their level on or near the floor. Water is much easier to explore when it is in trays on the floor and offers the opportunity to explore without wobbling. Sand is more accessible spread on a large thick plastic sheet, such as a pond liner, with a boundary of blocks to keep it in place.

Children at this age cannot make their preferences known through words so observe the children carefully to decide how long a session should be.

Sometimes they will be engrossed for 20 minutes while on other days they will want to end much earlier.

As children get more mobile they like to transport materials and mix them together. We can either spend our time trying to get them to stop or organise the room to support this interest. For example, place sand and water trays near to each other to allow for easy mixing and show the children how to use the dust pan and brush.



As children become more independent they will start to use the taps - an endless source of fun and learning. Again leave time for the children to play with the water as well as wash their hands when they use the bathroom.

Paint can be explored with the whole body and fingers are much easier for children to manipulate than brushes.

Build plenty of opportunities for messy play into the daily provision to reflect the children's growing interest in this sort of play.

In stages

Some people assume that by three years old children should have left messy play behind and be doing something constructive such as making things.

However, messy play continues to offer [older] children many opportunities for learning.

Personal, social and emotional development

Includes self-confidence and self-esteem, social development including making relationships, and emotional development including self-control.

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.

Communication, language and literacy

Includes language for communicating and listening, reading and writing.

Messy play 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.

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 co-ordination.

The narrative skills necessary for storytelling are developed as children start to tell stories using materials.



Mathematical development

Includes counting, calculating shape, space and measure.

Messy play 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.

Knowledge and understanding of the world

Includes exploration, investigation, designing and making skills.

Messy play 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.

Physical development

Includes 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.

Creative development

Includes exploring media and materials, imagination and responding to experiences.

Messy play 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.



Further Reading

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