



Messy Play – Ideas for home



What is messy play and why is it so important?

Play through experimenting and exploring their environment is critical for development. Using all 8 senses to explore and play leads to many great development skills:

- **Physical:**

- *Using the hands and fingers promotes fine motor development such as finger dexterity, hand strength and shoulder strength: Foundations for handwriting and other tool use.*
- *Messy play also helps children to understand how things feel, such as textures and temperatures.*
- *They also learn about body awareness and personal boundaries or spacial awareness.*
- *Children can develop many great pre-writing skills with messy play through pouring, scooping, and grasping while perfecting eye-hand coordination skills.*



Continued: What is messy play and why is it so important?



Language:

- You can introduce new vocabulary in messy play and ask questions/model language e.g. hot, cold, soft, scratchy, hard, smooth? Is it large or small?
- Pretend play e.g. Shaving cream can become an ocean, play dough is a huge mountain or a forest or incorporate their special interests

Cognitive:

- **e.g.** Math skills topics such as size, adding, taking away, matching, classifying and sorting
- Science skills such as cause and effect, problem-solving

Social and Emotional Skills:

- Messy play can be used to help a child calm and focus on a task – it can help some students with self regulation
- It can encourage children to cooperate in group or one-on-one play e.g. turn taking, boundaries, expressing views

Creative Development:

- There is no one way or right way to messy play. The child can feel in control and it encourages them to find new ways to do things by using their imagination and creativity.

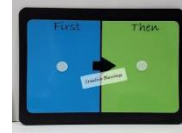
Sensory Input:

The most obvious benefit of messy play is added sensory input, you can introduce your child to lots of different sensory input in a fun way.

For sensory avoiders:

*(children who tend to avoid getting their hands dirty and become distressed by this
e.g. they may have a fight, flight or avoid response to tactile input)*

- Use a visual (e.g. a 'first, next' board or visual timetable) so that your child knows that the activity will end.



- If your child is very anxious, motivate them by having a favourite activity after the messy play

- Prepare your child's body prior to any messy play activities using proprioceptive (heavy muscle work) and deep pressure activities

e.g. sensory circuits, hand/arm squeezes, making a firm fist with the hands and releasing, pushing hands together in a prayer position, squeezing a ball, rubbing hands together, crawling, rolling on floor, wheelbarrow walks etc. These can be calming for the nervous system and help to better prepare them for messy play activities.



- Use a timer to show your child when the activity will end e.g. a stop watch on phone, sand timer/time timer



Continued - Sensory avoiders:



- If your child is very avoidant, start with dry materials e.g. dry pasta, lentils, peas, spaghetti, sand, cereal etc. and very slowly introduce more wetter textures
- Give your child a choice in which materials they want to play with, this will help them to feel in control
- Reduce the expectation to use the hands if your child is very anxious e.g. use a spoon, fork, cooking utensils, rolling pin, paintbrushes
- Model how to play with the messy materials to your child and show them that it's fun and not dangerous
- Do not pressure your child to touch any materials they are avoiding, give them praise for being near the materials and for any attempts they make to play. Let them explore in their own time.
- Allow your child to wash their hands e.g. at sink or have a bowl of water next to them during very messy activities

For sensory seekers:

(children who love to get their hands dirty and seek wet textures)



- Your child may not want to end the messy play so use a visual (e.g. a 'first, next' board or visual timetable) so that your child knows that the activity will have to end.
- Motivate them to finish and transition to the next activity by having a favourite activity after the messy play.
- Some children who love messy play can become over excited by it and then dysregulated if the activity lasts for too long, so use a timer to show them how long the activity will last e.g. a stop watch on your phone, sand timer/time timer etc.
- If your child becomes over excited, use proprioceptive (heavy muscle work) and deep pressure activities after the messy play to help them to calm e.g. sensory circuits (see learning platform), bear hugs, squeezing a ball, ball squashes, calm music/dark den



Feeding difficulties and messy play

For a child who struggles with feeding difficulties and a restricted diet, messy play can be a great way to encourage sensory exploration in a fun and less stressful way. It can support with:

- *Tolerating new food smells*
- *Being exposed to a wider range of flavours*
- *Better managing the visual stimulation of food environments*
- *Exploring a wider range of textures*
- *Becoming used to different temperatures (hot/cold)*
- *Using cutlery to scoop, cut and fork foods without having to eat it*
- *Encouraging students to tolerate having messiness on their hands/feet*



Familiarisation with foods

- Painting with foods
- Food plates
- Make your own Mr Potato Head
- Grow vegetables/herbs
- Messy play (hide & seek motivators)
- Songs about food
- Books & videos
- Involve in making dinners
- Food preparation, cooking and baking
- Supermarket shopping games
- Making our own placemat

