

## MESSY PLAY



Messy play contributes enormously to the development of a child's physical, cognitive and creative abilities. It allows a child to explore their senses by providing the opportunity to pour, mix, squeeze and squelch materials not normally available to them. Also, not having to work towards a final product leaves a child free to explore all sorts of possibilities. It taps into a child's curiosity about the world around them and feeds their irresistible urge to try new things out and experiment.

Most children are happy to join in the endless opportunities for messy play that are available in everyday environments. However, some children are overly sensitive to different textures, and this can stop them from engaging in messy play activities that can help with their development. See [Using my Senses](#) for more information about this. For these children, a graded approach can be used to encourage their participation and acceptance of different textures.

Children who are sensitive to textures often have difficulty developing their fine motor skills, including the formation of pencil grip, as they are reluctant to participate in the activities needed in order to practice the underlying skills.

### Graded messy play

Before beginning messy play activities, help your child to reduce sensitivity by participating in proprioception activities such as:

- Weight-bearing through arms by pretending to be a cat/dog or playing static wheelbarrows where the child's trunk is supported over a bench or low chair, and they are taking the weight through their arms.
- Hand hugs where an adult gently presses their open palms around the child's flattened fingers, then hands and slowly working up to the shoulder. Work back down to the hand. Then do the other hand and arm. Allow the child to also do this to you in order to increase their co-operation.
- Hand massages using hand cream or under running water if the child likes water play.

Begin messy play with hard solid textures e.g. Lego, Duplo, large uncooked pasta and encourage the child to explore a tub of it with their own hands.

- Add small hard toys for the child to find
- Play games with plastic animals in the pasta jungle
- Carefully sprinkle the pasta over the child's hands (like a light shower of rain)

Gradually introduce softer textures such as mixing cooked pasta to dry pasta, adding smaller hard texture e.g. lentils, soup, pasta or softer objects to find e.g. rubber/foam shapes.

When the child is confident slowly add some flour/sand to the pasta/lentils, gradually increasing the percentage of flour/sand to pasta/lentils.

Once the child is happy with playing in flour/sand, you could gradually introduce water to it but literally a few drops at a time, gradually increasing the water until they are able to play with wet sand (perhaps colour the water to be dragon juice!). Eventually the child should be able to play with a variety of standard playschool and preschool messy play activities.

Simple baking activities are useful to assist in developing child's messy play i.e. kneading dough, mixing cake mix, making pastry.

It is really useful if you keep a record of messy play tried and the child's level of participation.

Use lots of imagination and weave a story while you are playing. Keep positive, reinforcing achievements. Most importantly – have fun!

### **Messy play to help with feeding**

All children begin feeding themselves with their fingers and if they are sensitive to food textures (either by touch or in their mouth) then this can impact on their ability to self-feed. Allow children to explore and have fun with their food, beginning with dryer textures (as above) and moving onto softer textures using foods like:

- Cornflakes
- Wheat-a-Bix (dry)
- Oatmeal
- Crumbled digestive biscuit
- Tinned rice pudding
- Tinned semolina pudding
- Gloop (custard powder and water)
- Jelly
- Yoghurt
- Jam/marmalade with no bits
- Any other safe food similar to the above