

Woolly thinking

Exploring wool can spark babies' curiosity and help them learn about the world around them, explains nursery owner *Emma Graham*

Exploring materials is instinctive to children and supports them in developing an understanding of the world around them. Even the youngest baby is curious and will turn to try to reach out for an object. So at our nurseries, we have developed a wide range of treasure baskets to support babies in their exploration.

As with many of the treasure baskets we use in nursery, 'wool' baskets are inviting to babies and satisfy their natural curiosity. The colours and textures appeal to them and seem to spark their interest in different ways. They can often be observed slipping into a deeper level of concentration. We recognise this as one of the fundamental life skills that we try so hard to develop within children.

AGES AND STAGES

The age and stage of the baby usually affects how they play and, consequently, how we present the wool to them.

Sitters

It goes without saying that for most of the babies, sitting next to a ball of wool can help scaffold new skills as they solve problems, develop their mathematical thinking and extend much needed fine motor skills.

We find that 'sitters' tend to engage better with a large ball of wool on their laps, as it means they can use both hands to grasp and poke the ball and unravel it more easily. They manage to pull individual strands and enjoy seeing them getting longer and more tangled. They notice how the ball rolls as they pull, so they start to

develop an understanding that pulling wool unravels the ball.

Crawlers, cruisers and walkers

Once on the move, children gain great satisfaction from plucking small strands of wool from a box, bag or basket. It seems that their exploration is more about fine pincer movements and emptying the contents of the basket, rather than focusing on the wool as a material.

The fact that wool is light, malleable and adaptable and that strands can be manipulated guarantees a certain level of success for those children who begin to post with wool. They soon discover that it fits into most things.

Balls of wool also offer a good opportunity for practitioners to engage children who are shy and reserved. Nothing is more intriguing than a moving ball. Often, they use one strand to pull the ball out of the basket and across the floor. The

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children are amazed and come over to explore, and for a moment the practitioner feels like a magician.

SOURCING SUPPLIES

Sourcing wool is normally a job for me, as I live near a market. It is a cheap, easy-to-use resource that has endless possibilities. In addition, staff, parents and grandparents can often be relied on to donate interesting supplies. The many varieties of yarn available means our stock ranges from the fine and natural in colour to the thick and brightly coloured, so providing a true sensory experience.

We incorporate a variety of traditional knitted dolls in our baskets. Jean Greenhowe collections





(see www.jeangreenhowe.com) are incredible for any practitioner keen to take on the challenge of creating imaginary opportunities (the scarecrow family is one of my favourites). The detail in the dolls, small birds, flowers and so on provides exciting avenues for discussion and play with babies, and the fact that they are made from wool means they are soft, washable and robust.

Pompoms of different sizes and colours are easily made and another wool basket favourite (www.molliemakes.com has excellent instructions). They are great for exploring texture and we value them hugely when supporting individual children who are beginning to throw. They are light, easy to hold and are great for damage limitation as they fly through the air. Babies enjoy nothing more than watching a practitioner throw things in the air and this

provides a great distraction for those who may be unsettled or fractious.

Baskets are ideal for presenting wool to babies as they are easily accessible. Shallow natural woven baskets are excellent (www.communityplaythings.co.uk supplies baskets and has several informative linked articles).

FURTHER IDEAS

Wool does not always need to be presented in baskets.

- Grabbing strands of wool from a shallow water tray can encourage larger movements, helping to hone the physical strength required for pulling, cruising and walking.
- Pile up a mound of wool for crawlers to explore. They will soon notice how it hooks to their clothes and can get trapped around their hands and between their fingers. Observe their growing concentration as they attempt to unravel themselves.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

As with all explorations of materials with babies, there are health and safety risks to consider:

- Ensure that babies are always supervised, as wool can be a choking or strangling hazard.
- Wash all donated wool before use.
- Change or wash the wool baskets and their contents regularly, as they will be visited and revisited by many small hands and mouths.
- Make sure your baskets have no sharp edges. Any rough edges can be overcome easily by inserting a cotton drawstring lining. ■

Emma Graham is proprietor of Busy Bears and Busy Bees Nursery, Durham. She spoke to Jean Evans



NEW NW POSTER SERIES: MATERIALS

Sensory exploration is central to early learning and our new series of posters will explore materials that feature regularly in our daily lives but may pass largely unnoticed, such as plastic, wood and glass.

The series will focus on activities for children within the three to five age range,

and will outline display ideas, suggestions for exploring the materials, tips on how to incorporate them into your continuous provision, and recommendations on resources and books.

Part 1, to be published with *Nursery World* on 13 January, will focus on wool.

Through the letterbox

For early years experts, it is not the teaching of phonics to young children that is the problem, but the dull resources that often accompany it. Addressing this are two specially collated packs of books, which not only combine phonics with rich storytelling but are inclusive as well.

The packs, one for early years and the other for primary, are available from Letterbox Library and have been assembled by the bookseller's team of volunteer reviewers, all education professionals and teachers.

The chosen texts include stories, songs and poems that encourage a good knowledge of phonics through rhyme, repetition, rhythm and onomatopoeia within a rewarding reading experience.

Director of Letterbox Library Kerry Mason says, 'At a time when teachers are under huge pressure to meet rather dry and soulless targets concerned with high-frequency words and CVCs, our carefully selected book packs show that phonics know-how and reading for the sheer joy of reading need not be mutually exclusive.'

There are ten books within each pack, and as well as featuring rich and rhythmic language, the texts incorporate characters and settings that counter stereotypes and promote inclusion and diversity. So, Rudolph and Dasher scamper across a West African landscape; a child scrambles through an Indian marketplace; a princess scoffs at dragons; and a chaotic fairy happens to wear a hearing aid.

INDIVIDUAL TITLES

Some of the titles making it into the Reading Enjoyment and Phonics Pack – Early Years (£50 for members; £57.90 for non-members) are:

- *Farmyard Jamboree*, with music and an animation CD, by Margaret Read MacDonald and Sophie Fatus
- *Never Ask a Dinosaur to Dinner* by Gareth Edwards and Guy Parker-Rees



- *Snug!* by Carol Thompson
- *To Market! To Market!* by Anushka Ravishankar and Emanuele Scanziani.

The Reading Enjoyment and Phonics Pack – Primary pack (£68 for members; £78.90 for non-members) includes:

- *Jack and the Flumflum Tree* by Julia Donaldson and David Roberts
- *The Worst Princess* by Anna Kemp and Sarah Ogilvie
- *Leave Me Alone: a tale of what happens when you face up to a bully* by Kes Gray and Lee Wildish.

For more information, visit www.letterboxlibrary.com/acatalog/Book_Packs.html.