

# No messing?

Not all children like to take part in messy activities, but this type of exercise has value. *Kay Mathieson* explains why it is important and how participation can be encouraged

**Q** We have a child who seems to have a complete aversion to anything messy. She gets really upset when we try to include her. Does it really matter if she doesn't take part in messy activities?

**A** All activities in an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) setting are planned with the child's learning in mind, as adults strive to offer a range of opportunities for experiential learning through play. The adult role is about scaffolding that learning and enabling each child to be included in those activities in an appropriate way. This child is showing signs of distress that must be responded to sensitively.

Starting from our knowledge of the child to date, including her Characteristics of Effective Learning, we should be able to identify her preferred approaches and context for learning. For example, does she prefer to watch an activity before taking part herself, or explore things in a small contained way before on a larger scale? Does she feel more at ease with her learning inside, outside, alone or with others? Gathering this kind of knowledge from parents and our own observations enables us to offer new experiences in a way that offers 'best possible chance' of learning and enjoyment.

The world is undoubtedly a messy place, whether we think of our settings, homes, outside or inside. Although not everyone will relish getting covered in mud, paint or glue, it is important that as individuals we can be at ease with mess and muddle, at least to some degree. So it is useful to support children to be able to tolerate a range of situations without experiencing high levels of anxiety.

## WHAT IS MESSY?

'Messy' for many adults has negative connotations linked with being unclean or dirty rather than clean and



tidy, which tends to be perceived as a 'good' thing. Sometimes, of course, it is – but to be constantly clean and tidy would exclude opportunities for creatively combining things not usually put together or experiencing subtle differences in texture of materials. Messy activities are many and varied, but would include:

- planting and digging
- water and sand play
- papier-mâché
- playdough and clay
- junk modelling
- gloop
- paint
- glue
- cooking.

As the list grows, the importance of helping children tolerate a range of 'messy' experiences becomes increasingly obvious, and this list is by no means exhaustive.

There are many reasons why such activities are included in early play opportunities, not least because they help children explore their world in very specific ways. The use and value of developing the sense of touch to differentiate between different textures, processing the sensory information and making connections

**Messy activities, such as the use of playdough and clay, can help children explore the world**

**It is important that as individuals we can be at ease with mess and muddle**

between the way things look and how they feel is obviously important.

In addition, through these same experiences children build muscle control, dexterity skills and refine the ability to hold fragile things gently, squash playdough and swish their hands through water. The tactile experience in most of these situations is a pleasurable one, especially if those around us are enjoying it too.

So if we accept that getting messy is both inevitable and unavoidable in many situations and that the learning related to the 'messiness' is in fact valuable too, then we need to become advocates for that messiness.

## STRATEGIES

Several things need to be taken into consideration before we can select our strategy to support this particular child. We have already mentioned the importance of the Characteristics of Effective Learning and engagement with parents. We can add to this our shared knowledge of the successful and enjoyable learning experiences this child has had recently. We now have the beginnings of a possible sensitive and responsive way of engaging with her and messy activities.

Some possibilities include consideration of the following questions.

- Who does she like to be with and feel most at ease with? Identify specific children and adults.
- What form of messy activity is she least upset by? Cooking and eating the result is very different to sticking your hands in a gloopy slime for no apparent reason.
- Where is she most relaxed in her learning generally? Observe her to determine whether she prefers inside or outside, a large space or a cosy contained area.
- How many opportunities has she had to watch others take part with no pressure or expectation that she has to do the same? Some children benefit from being spectators before participating.

- How small an amount of messy stuff has she been able to explore? Little amounts of anything are much less scary, especially when you are little too.
- How short a time is it realistic to expect her to engage with the messiness? A fleeting touch in a relaxed happy context is much more constructive than a prolonged tense experience of trying to make yourself touch something you perceive as unpleasant.
- As we put this information together, we build a picture of a messy activity that will give this 'best possible chance' of a relaxed, pleasant repeatable experience.

### RESPECT AND SENSITIVITY

It is at times when children are anxious and struggling that we need to be most aware of the principles and effective practice of the EYFS. Our understanding of the Unique Child requires our respect, sensitivity and positive response to each individual child's needs. This includes being their advocate and demonstrating that we are striving to see the world from their perspective to help and support all areas of their learning.

Equally, maintaining positive relationships between their special adults both at home and in the setting must be a priority.

Parents' concern about messy play can range from getting clothes dirty to conjuring up images of children constantly looking dirty, which may in their thinking equate with 'uncared for.'

Also, of course, it may be that parents or practitioners themselves find messy things distasteful and unpleasant. Going on a slow but steady journey together, combining increased understanding of each other's perspective, practical compromises and the valuable learning opportunities is the mostly likely road to success. ■



- 'All about... messy play' by Bernadette Duffy (2004), [www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1101073/aboutmessy-play](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1101073/aboutmessy-play)
- *Sensory Play (Play in the EYFS)* by Sue Gascoyne, Practical Pre-school Books



## POLICIES

# Focus on family

### A set of early years briefing papers for political parties ahead of the next general election has 'parents and families' among its themes

Produced by TACTYC (the Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators) and the early years section of BERA (the British Educational Research Association) the papers also cover play, pedagogy, professionalism, assessment, school readiness. Here is an extract from the parents and families section.

### PARENTS AND FAMILIES Immediate concerns

- Develop professional development opportunities for all graduate practitioners working with children aged birth to six, so that they are better able to lead practice that supports and empowers parents and families from different backgrounds.
- In particular, identify ways to support key persons working with two-year-olds, so that they are better able to carry out the two-year-old progress check and share it with parents and health visitors.
- Investigate ways to support parental choice of childcare options. This could include revising taxation/parental leave structures so that non-working parents can transfer their tax allowance to a working parent at any point during the first three years of a child's life, so that the carer receives a small wage, funded by transferred tax allowance.

### Mid-term issues

- Ensure that all early years practitioners have a core understanding of social inequalities and cultural difference and their impact on families, and that they are able to look at the world

from a parent's point of view while still maintaining fully professional relationships that allow them to carry out safeguarding functions.

- Ensure that practitioners are able to work in genuine partnership with parents and carers, avoiding a 'deficit model' of parenting that constructs the practitioner as the 'expert' and the parent as the 'learner/junior partner'.
- Continue to revise taxation/parental leave structures in innovative ways to help parents and their close relatives to work together to provide home-based care for children under five, where appropriate. For example, enable parents or grandparents to share a period of 36 months leave from the workplace to care for the child in a flexible fashion.
- Continue to fund children's centres to provide a family hub for local communities. Extend their role by integrating services for the elderly with services for children and provide a venue for people of all ages to work together in various ventures.

### Long-term aspirations

- Find out more about how parents and families from a variety of different backgrounds understand 'quality' in early years provision.
- Identify how different understandings of 'experienced' quality are related to quality as constructed in policy; that is, do measurements and judgements of quality capture what parents and families think is good about settings and what they would like improved?

### MORE INFORMATION

Early Years: policy advice and future research agendas *is at* <http://bit.ly/1nD8kUP>