Messy play

Messy play is creative, allowing children to explore their imagination and express feelings.

- **Messy play** can involve sand, water, clay, mud, playdough, glue, paint and other materials.
- Using materials with **different textures** can help children get used to different sensations, and using their hands and fingers.
- Some children may not enjoy the feel of sand or other sensations, or may be uncomfortable around water – be sensitive to this, **encourage play, but don’t force it**.

**When it comes to messy play:**

- **Babies** explore different textures as they start to finger feed. Once they can sit, they also enjoy the feel of grass and sand at the beach, or in a sandpit. Babies enjoy bath time, having fun with gentle splashes, watching floating toys, and hearing familiar words and songs. Constant supervision is extra important at this stage as babies tend to put everything into their mouths.
- **Toddlers** enjoy using tools from the kitchen for poking, prodding, digging, pouring, tipping, hiding and finding toys in sand. Toddlers will have great fun using household objects to fill and pour, as they talk about the water – ‘all gone’, ‘splash’. Toddlers can enjoy messy play alongside other children, but remember they are still learning to share.
- **Young children** can be creative with sand. With some toys (cars, tea sets, animals) they can make roads and tunnels, build castles, or pretend to cook. Young children enjoy using water to wash their dolls, create rivers and lakes, jump in puddles, and run through sprinklers. They enjoy working together, sharing toys, and planning their play with friends.

**What you can do**

- **Include messy play in everyday activities** – baths, meals, cooking, and gardening.
- **Set rules before starting messy play** – ‘We only paint on the paper’ and ‘The sand stays in the sandpit’.
- **Provide a variety of messy play experiences** – sand, water, clay, mud, playdough, paint.
- **Join in with your child’s play** – follow their lead and show your child different things that you can do.
- **Be prepared for mess** – wear old clothes and have a wet cloth for wiping hands. Some messy play is more easily managed outside.
- **Pack away** when you notice children need a rest or a change. Encourage your child to help you clean up.

**Some activities to try**

- **Hide and seek box** – hide small toys in a box of rice, pasta or lentils.
- **Painting** – use fingers, brushes or sponges; make butterfly paintings by blotting paint on one side of paper, fold it over, then unfold it to reveal a butterfly print; use vegetable pieces or leaves as stamps; or make hand or foot prints.
- **Make playdough creations together** – popsticks, a garlic press, and biscuit cutters are great modelling tools. Encourage your child to use their imagination and create something without using tools.
- **Have fun blowing bubbles**.
**Some activities to try CONTINUED**

**Sand play:**
- **Play with toys in the sandpit** – figurines, cars, tea sets, buckets, containers, funnels.
- **Add water** – your child can feel the difference between wet and dry sand, and create rivers and lakes as part of the play.
- **Visit the beach, or set up a sandpit** – buy clean white sand from hardware stores. Cover when not in use.
- **Teach your child to be careful** not to throw sand into other people’s eyes or face.
  - Check sandpits for spiders and animal droppings, and check public sandpits for sharp or dangerous objects.

**Water play:**
- **Water play can suit all ages** – it is a wonderful way to calm a tense or grumpy child, or to perk everyone up on a hot day.
- **Bath or shower time** – talk about different parts of the body; play with flannels, sponges, plastic cups, and sieves; sing splashy songs; blow soap bubbles.
- **Everyday water play** – let your child help wash up in the sink, wash vegies in a bowl, wash the car with a bucket, or wash some socks or toys in a tub.
- **In the garden** – run through the sprinkler, water the plants, digging and mud play.
- **Painting with water** – take a cup of water, some paint brushes and ‘paint’ the fence or path.
- **Rainy day play** – use an umbrella, splash through the puddles, look at the rain drops running down the window, sing rainy day songs.
- **Make ‘boats’** for bath or paddle pool with corks, plastic lids, leaves. Talk about floating and sinking, heavy and light, full and empty.

**Keeping your child safe**
- Supervise your child closely at all times, especially around water (empty buckets or paddling pools immediately after use), play equipment, or when using objects such as scissors, pencils, glue or paint. Avoid flammable or toxic materials.
- Babies, toddlers and young children can choke on small toys and objects.
- Be SunSmart – make sure your child has adequate sun protection when playing outdoors.

**Find out more**

For more information on play, learning, and a range of other topics, visit:
- [www.healthywa.gov.au](http://www.healthywa.gov.au)
- [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)
- [www.bringingupgreatkids.org](http://www.bringingupgreatkids.org)