

# Parenting Together

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 4

## The Importance of Messy Play

You might have seen the terms 'messy play' or 'sensory play' when you search online. Both can be used interchangeably and mean the same thing. So what exactly is messy play? In short, it is an activity that engages a child's senses including eyes, ears, nose, mouth, touch, balance, and/or movement.

According to Piaget's theory of development, children from the age of zero to eight are in two different stages of development: the sensorimotor stage from ages zero to two and the preoperational state from age two to around seven or eight. In both of these stages, play through experimenting and exploring their environment is critical for development.

The sensorimotor stage from birth to two is all about using the senses to explore this brand new world. How things feel, taste, sound, look like, and how your baby moves in order to explore these things aids in their cognitive learning. They quickly learn how much strength they need to pick up a block or if something feels soft or hard.

As a child grows and enters school, this learning through play and exploring is still a vital part of their cognitive development. They build on the



sensory experiences they had as a baby and toddler to produce symbols and language and other academic skills. It is important in these early stages that we don't forget to just let children play!

**"Tell me and I forget.  
Teach me and I remember.  
Involve me and I learn."  
- Benjamin Franklin**

There are several areas of development that messy play promotes and encourages that we will go over in this newsletter.



### Physical Development

You may have guessed already, but using all our senses to explore and play leads to great physical development skills. Using hands and fingers promotes fine motor development such as finger dexterity, hand strength and shoulder strength. These skills are the building blocks for future handwriting. Using the senses of balance and body awareness enhance gross motor skills.

Messy play also helps children understand textures and temperatures. They also learn body awareness, personal boundaries, and how to respect each other's space. They can even develop great pre-writing skills through pouring, scooping, and grasping all while improving hand-eye coordination.



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University**

## Language Development

Messy play can lead to some amazing discussions with your child. Does it feel hot, cold, soft, scratchy, hard, smooth? Is it large or small?

It is also a great way for children to engage in pretend play and using symbolic language. Shaving cream can become an ocean, play dough is suddenly a huge mountain or an elephant. Children also tend to talk more with pretend play. It gives them a chance to practice their vocabulary and use more complex language such as descriptive adjectives and verbs. Letting the imagination run wild through messy play can lead to some great stories!

## Cognitive Development

Children utilize messy play to learn about the different environments and items they are exposed to. Math skills are learned and honed through things like size, timing, matching, classifying and sorting. Science skills present themselves through things like cause and effect, gravity, problem-solving, and the beginnings of the scientific method.



For your local parenting resources visit us at:

[orparenting.org](http://orparenting.org)

**“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning.”**

**-Fred Rogers**

## Social and Emotional Development

I have seen first hand the way messy play can be used to help a child calm down and focus on a task. My 2½-year-old is especially fond of kinetic sand and his focus during that activity always amazes me!

According to Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, a child’s greatest self-control occurs in play. He proposed that pretend play, in particular, could be a leading factor in the development of the child’s ability to self-regulate. And messy play is a great way to encourage this pretend play.

Messy play is also a great way to encourage children to work together and cooperate in group play or one-on-one play. They learn about personal boundaries, understanding someone else's ideas and views, and they have the opportunity to express their own.

## Creative Development

Through messy play toddlers can learn to express themselves and to explore. Being creative and imaginative can help children to try out new ways of doing things, since there is no one way or one right way to messy play. It leaves the child in control of the outcome and they have the freedom to explore and test different theories in order to get the desired response. This can boost their self-confidence and also encourage them to find new ways to do things by using their imagination and creativity.

***Now...go get messy!***

### The Book Nook

*Mix It Up!*

by Hervé Tullet

*Pinta Ratones*

by Ellen Stoll Walsh

*Edward Gets Messy*

by Rita Meade

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## References

Designing Messy Play for Infants and Toddlers

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/designing-messy-play-infants-toddlers>

Exploring the Benefits of Sensory Play for Children

<https://www.oac.edu.au/news-views/sensory-play/>

4 Benefits of Imaginative Play for Young Children

<https://www.horizoneducationcenters.org/blog/benefits-of-imaginative-play>

Messy children make better learners

<https://now.uiowa.edu/2013/12/messy-children-make-better-learners>