

The Benefits of Messy Play for Infants and Toddlers

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Marley Jarvis: Hello, and welcome to "Research on the Go," a podcast where we explore some of the latest research in the field of child development, its implications, and practical applications. My name is Marley Jarvis, and I'm joined today by Dawson Nichols.

Dawson Nichols: Hi. Marley and I are from the National Center on Early Childhood Development Teaching and Learning, and we're both based at the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Marley: In this podcast today, we want to not only talk about messy play and the research behind it, but also the ways to incorporate these ideas into your work with programs and grantees. So, I wanted to start with defining what we're talking about. So, Dawson, what is messy play?

Dawson: Yes, yes. One researcher defined it in a way that I really like – "play that emphasizes the active exploration of materials and their properties."

Marley: OK.

Dawson: And this is child-directed play, which means that we adults do the setup, but the children get to play however they want to. It's open-ended play.

Marley: OK, tell me a little bit more about what you mean by "open-ended" in this – in this context.

Dawson: OK. Not goal directed. So, the activity itself is the point of the activity.

Marley: Mm-hmm.

Dawson: A child in a sandbox is not told to use the sand in a certain way, or to use a tool in a certain way. She's encouraged to just explore and play however she wants to play.

Marley: Right, OK, I love that. So, children are just naturally playing at the developmental level that is appropriate for them and what they're interested in.

Dawson: Yes. Yes, yes, yes! So, one child swirls her hand in the water at the sensory table, and then that's enough. But then another comes and scoops and pours. They play at their own level and according to their own interests.

Marley: That's great. So, really, teachers or caregivers, they're focusing on setting up a place and the materials, but the actual activity itself, it's really up to the child.

Dawson: Exactly, yeah. And it's a huge advantage, especially for children with expected delays or disabilities. There's no goal, no specific way of doing anything. This is about exploration of the materials, getting to know about the materials and how they work together. And "active" means that children are kneading the clay, ripping the paper, smearing the paint. They're doing it, and these are hands-on activities.

Marley: That's really great. And of course, for the little ones, we have to think about they're gonna put everything in their mouths, so that's an important exploration, too. [Chuckles]

Dawson: Yes, which reminds me that when you're doing messy play, obviously you need to keep the age of your children in mind, that some substances are not appropriate for the youngest infants who, as you say, are likely to put things in their mouth, or get them in their eyes.

Marley: [Chuckles] Yeah. Good – good call there. [Laughs] There are still many materials even for these youngest explorers. So, can you give us some examples?

Dawson: Yeah, I like the simple ones – water and ice, for example. Sand is a great material.

Marley: Yeah. Mud.

Dawson: Yeah, mud, sure. [Chuckles] Crumpled paper.

Marley: And – and Gloop. I don't know if you remember Gloop, but we used to play with that all the time, where you would take corn starch – or even corn flour, and you mix it with water. Have you heard of that?

Dawson: Yeah, I have. You seem to be a wet-materials person. I am more of a dry-materials person myself.

Marley: Well, you know, when you're from Seattle, you kind of have to get used to the wet stuff everywhere, so you kind of – you kind of learn to love it.

Dawson: When you're stuck outside, I guess.

[Laughter]

Marley: Well, I mean, messy play is really fabulous to take outside. You can find and arrange leaves.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: You can sort stones or rocks that you find.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: And – and play in the mud! I mean, children really learn by interacting with natural materials and get so much out of that.

Dawson: Absolutely true, and I love to get children outside whenever I can. But this is a good place to remind people that these materials can also be brought inside. You know, taking leaves and crunching them in a sensory bin inside, that works really well, too.

Marley: Yeah, thank you. That's a really wonderful reminder that we can take what's outside inside, as well.

Dawson: It's warm and dry, too. I'm just saying. [Laughs]

Marley: Yes, absolutely. [Laughs]

Dawson: OK, so wet or dry, inside or outside, exploring materials really is great for children, and we should probably talk about what they learn with messy play, because it really is kind of amazing.

Marley: Great. So, what do children learn during messy play?

Dawson: OK, so first, there is the sensory stuff. Learning about warm and cold, hard and soft, bumpy and smooth. A bin full of differently textured balls is so much fun.

Marley: And don't forget about all the wet and dry materials.

Dawson: Yes, yes, of course. [Chuckles] They're using their fine and gross motor skills and learning about those, as well. So, messy play is all about physically working with the materials. There's a lot of cognitive stuff involved – acting intentionally, building focus and attention, figuring out cause and effect. Research shows that early sensory exploration leads to quicker learning of physical principles like cause and effect. These are activities with rich opportunities for building language, too. And it's easy to bring in other languages if you're working with children who are dual-language learners.

Marley: That's great. And I'm sure that they're working on some social-emotional skills there, too.

Dawson: Oh, absolutely, yes. Kids at a sensory table work together. They learn to share.

Marley: Right.

Dawson: How to control their emotions and express their emotions. Expressing, too. Recent studies show that children from vulnerable populations, they actually use messy play to express and communicate their emotions. The play itself allows children to express things that they may not be able to express in other ways through things like choice of color, how things are mixed, how they're actually doing the playing.

Marley: That's really interesting.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: So, of course, you know, messy play isn't just about physically interacting with the materials. It's really leading to learning across all of these different developmental domains.

Dawson: Absolutely, and as children are playing, there's no need to limit the learning to one domain or another. They all overlap, and they mush together. It's messy, which is fine.

Marley: Right. Right, right.

Dawson: But it is sometimes helpful to concentrate on different learning domains on different days. So, talk to children about tactile stuff one day, and then movements and relationships the next day.

Marley: So, you mean kind of – to – to steer the child's attention to different things each day?

Dawson: Exactly, yeah. And you can even post something for the adults involved to remind them to concentrate on different things on different days.

Marley: Yeah, that's great. That's a really lovely idea. I could imagine doing that with caregivers in the home, as well.

Dawson: Exactly. And that way, the same activity can be concentrating on different things and children can be learning different things with the same activity.

Marley: OK, so these are all some really fantastic activities, Dawson. Thank you so much for sharing them. There's just so much that children are learning in all of these activities. So, I wanted to move next into talking about how we can create environments that really help support all of these activities.

Dawson: Yes, sure. OK, so safety first.

Marley: Right, definitely.

Dawson: You want to think about appropriate materials, but also appropriate space more generally. Could falls be more likely if things get slippery, for example. So plan ahead. Safety is no accident, as they say.

Marley: Right. And I remember you were telling me about the DOE acronym for this. So, "Defined, Organized, and Equipped." I – I love this. DOE. So, can you talk about that?

Dawson: Mm-hmm. Yeah, it's helpful. So, let's start with the "D" – Defined. It is good to mark off an area in which messy play is going to take place. It helps children understand that different behaviors are appropriate in this space. For example, spreading out a tarp before

playing with sand indoors lets every young child know that this is a contained activity. The sand should stay on the tarp. But as long as you're on the tarp, too, you're welcome to play.

Marley: [Chuckles] Right. I love that.

Dawson: Yeah. And the tarp goes away, that's a clue that the messy play is over. Defined space is like this – Oh, can also support children who are dual-language learners in understanding how and where to play with different kinds of materials.

Marley: OK, so all of that defined that letter, it kind of seems like it's around visual and other cues, which I think is really helpful.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: OK, so, "O."

Dawson: Organized. When the play space is well-organized, children feel more welcome, and they'll be more likely to engage in the activity. It's a safety consideration, but it's also important to help children take part. Disorganized spaces can make children feel unclear and uncertain and unsure of themselves.

Marley: So, I am having trouble reconciling this organized but also messy play.

Dawson: Ah, yes, yes. So, it is called messy play. It's a messaging problem because the messy is about how children engage with the material – they mess around with the material. That's why it's called messy play. It is not disorganized.

Marley: So, you're – you're saying that messy play has an image – image problem, there.

Dawson: It does. We're gonna solve that in this podcast.

[Laughter]

Marley: OK, great, so we've got "D," "O," "E," which leads us last to "E."

Dawson: "E" – Equipped. And this just means that the material and any needed tools are there and presented as inviting, and they're ready to go. Tools, of course, are developmentally appropriate.

Marley: Right, and, you know, jackets are ready for going outside if it's cold.

Dawson: [Chuckles] Yes, yes. If you want to go outside. And if you're working with wet materials, the materials are ready, but so are the bibs. And maybe have a few extra dry T-shirts around. You're prepared and organized, equipped.

Marley: Right. Right, right. And all of that kind of just sounds like it goes into that thoughtful preparation that is key for successful and happy messy play.

Dawson: Yes, absolutely. If you want to provide successful learning opportunities, it's important to plan ahead so that it is both safe and organized.

Marley: Great, OK. So, DOE – Defined and inviting, Organized and safe, Equipped and ready to go. This is fabulous. DOE, love it. OK, so – And when the kids are ready to go, what then?

Dawson: Play.

[Laughter]

Marley: So, OK. So, children are playing. What about the adults? So – so, what are some effective practices for making this a rich learning experience?

Dawson: Right. So, my very first response has to be, "Play." Explore the materials. Seriously, explore alongside the children. Research shows that children learn really important skills like focus and persistence when they see adults exhibiting the same skills.

Marley: Right, I love that. So, providing an example is definitely important.

Dawson: Yeah, and not always easy. And, I mean, I think a lot of us forget what undirected exploration feels like.

Marley: Right. Yeah.

Dawson: Everything in adult life is focused on getting things done. [Chuckles] So, this can be harder than you think. And so, I encourage people to include this kind of play in their professional development activities, too. Because not only is it fun and healthy, but it will also help you understand what these children are experiencing when they engage in this kind of material exploration.

Marley: That's fantastic. Yeah, I mean, I would love that kind of professional development.

Dawson: Yeah. Oh, it's really helpful, and it can help convey another great practice, which is being responsive, asking questions, making observations. Research also shows that responding to children's cues really helps their learning.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. So, some of the things you can do here. So, talk to them about what they're doing, sort of narrate it for them, and you can totally practice that during a professional development activity.

Dawson: Yeah. Yeah. And when you're with the children – the one thing I do like to caution against is be sure not to swoop in too quickly and do something that they – the child could be doing for themselves. The more autonomy you can give to children during messy play, the better.

Marley: Right.

Dawson: Autonomy, or making their own decisions about their own play, is one of the things that children really enjoy about messy play, and tackling difficult tasks is where a lot of the learning and the skill-building is going to take place. So, you got to let them do it.

Marley: Right, and that's something you can do in setting things up, as well. So, making sure that children have access to the materials and to those different tools that they can go and get things themselves so that they have this autonomy.

Dawson: Yes, yeah, that's a great point. I mean, it's amazing how much the setup of the space can affect how much autonomy a child actually feels during the play.

Marley: Right, yeah. So, our – the environments that we create can really support and add to that autonomy.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: OK, Dawson, we're – we're running up on time here, so I want to ask you if we can end with something fun.

Dawson: [Chuckles] Yes, because having fun is an effective practice. Genuinely enjoying the experience yourself is the best way to guide children through the experience, too. The more interested you are – and genuinely interested – the more interested they'll be. The more you model curiosity, and creativity, and persistence, and simple joy, the more the children will realize that they can experience those things, too. It's inspiring to them.

Marley: Right, it – it really is. So, it's – it's nice to know that when we're engaged and we're enjoying our work and feeling joy, as you put it – that's a really good indicator that we're doing it well, too.

Dawson: I know, isn't that great? Doing it well is the same thing as being joyful in the work.

Marley: Yeah.

Dawson: Yeah, it's a good job. Messy play. Do it.

Marley: [Chuckles] Yes. So, OK.

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Marley: We're – we're at the end of our podcast episode here, but I wanted to let you know that for more information on messy play as well as other resources that you can use with programs and families, you should visit the ECLKC and search for "messy." You can also find other podcasts like this one there on the ECLKC, as well. So, thanks so much for listening, and we'll see you next time.

Dawson: Yes, thanks. Bye.

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