

Messy play with food

Messy play is fun, can be enjoyed by children on their own or as part of a group and provides countless learning opportunities.

There is no right or wrong way to play, words and language are not necessary. Messy play can appeal to children of all ages and stages of development, is fun and responds to the changing needs of individual children.

Messy play with food

The idea of messy play is to get used to how food, items and drinks look, smell, and feel using hands and faces without any focus on eating and drinking. It is a way of engaging the senses through play.

In normal development touch, especially around the mouth, is associated with pleasant sensations, and eating provides positive reinforcement. However some children become hypersensitive and have limited, or non-existent positive experiences with food and eating which can result in avoidance of certain textures and food types.

It is normal for some children to go through phases of refusing to eat or drink, and this is often a child's way of showing their independence. However children who develop severe fussy eating behaviours may be affected by growth problems, nutritional deficiencies, dental decay, dehydration and severe constipation.

As a guide, messy play has five stages of progression prior to eating:

- tolerates
- touch
- interacts with
- taste
- smells

Messy play activities with food can encourage and support children to climb these steps in a fun, non-threatening and supportive way.



Guidelines for messy play with food

- substances used in Messy Play activities are suited to the child's swallowing abilities, in case they try to eat them
- the child should be comfortable with each stage before progressing to the next

Stages in Food Play Progression

1. **Pretend food play** - play shop and tea party using toy food of different textures - plastic, wood and material. Imaginative play using favourite toys at a tea party.
2. **Dry food play** - progressing from coarse to increasingly fine dry textures - cereals (Rice Krispies, shredded wheat, cornflakes, porridge oats) uncooked pasta, dried beans and peas, hard sweets, lentils, flour, rice cakes.

Transition from dry to wet consistencies can be aided by use of utensils, gloves as required.

3. **Wet food play** - firm wet textures through to liquids and mixed textures. For example:
 - firm wet consistencies (bread dough, marzipan)
 - wet, tacky consistencies (cooked pasta, lentils soaked overnight, semolina added to cold water, instant mashed potato)
 - wet, semi-solid consistencies (set custard, jelly, mousse, angel delight, yoghurt, jam)
 - wet, liquid consistencies (pouring custards, pouring cream, treacle, melted chocolate)
 - wet, mixed textures (pasta and sauce, rice pudding, pizza with a topping, cream, tomato sauce, custard, treacle, chocolate spread and yoghurt mixed with hundreds and thousands, cooked cold spaghetti, biscuits)

Equipment ideas

Common household utensils and simple toys can be used to further develop the possibilities of messy play eg: toy animals, vehicles, moulds, rolling pins, blunt knives, sieves, pastry cutters, measuring jugs, funnels, balls to roll, different sized containers, fruit and vegetable printing shapes.

Top tips for messy play

- sessions should have a predictable beginning and end (collecting materials, and cleaning the table, washing hands)
- prepare and set up the activity to reduce clearing up time afterwards
- help model play possibilities, but support the free play of the child
- allow plenty of time
- wear old clothes or few clothes
- it should be fun and messy in a stress-free environment
- join in!

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