

Mess Does Not Equal Stress

Making the Case for Discovery-Based Play

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Children's librarians have no shortage of ideas for getting messy in the library. From paint to Play-Doh to shredded paper, the opportunities are endless.

We, as professionals, know why discovery-based play is important; does our administration, our maintenance department, or our board? I'd like to share some language I use to give stakeholders and staff a framework for the *why* behind the mess. My hope is that you can use these talking points to introduce or enhance messy play programs in your library.

Play is in our DNA. If you watch a baby for five minutes, you notice that exploration comes even before play. Children need to experiment with their surroundings to recognize and comprehend information. When children take in information through their senses, that information is sent to the brain to be interpreted. This creates connections in children's neural networks and our cognitive development forms. Here is a look at the power, and benefits, of messy play.

It breaks down language barriers. At Gail Borden Public Library in Elgin, IL, approximately 45 percent of our population is Spanish-speaking. While we offer many bilingual programs, messy play welcomes all languages. Diverse kids sit down in front of Play-Doh and learn together, talking in their own language or simply sharing through open-ended experiences and exploration. Children acquiring the English language can learn through process rather than product.

It breaks down social boundaries. Messy play is all-inclusive. It is not for any specific child, group, or population. Sometimes we can get stuck on "this is a program for you" and "this is a program for you." While there is a place for age- and

population-specific programs, messy play is developmentally appropriate for everyone. Because of its focus on curiosity, messy play optimizes learning for all abilities and diverse learning styles. Amid a divided United States, it is promising to see children's worldviews shift when they play with someone different from themselves. Something changes in their eyes, and my hope is they are thinking, "Huh, that child is different than me, but just like me."

It is child-led, yet multigenerational. All of us, from nine days old to ninety-nine years old, need play. We also need to practice fine motor skills, imagine and create, socialize, and be body-aware. A storytime can practice these things, too, but often the adults are in the background or more passive participants in the program. When we have messy programs, I notice more phones being put away and caregivers engaging with their kids. Plus, with messy play, it's difficult for parents to "take over." With discovery-based process art or play, unlike a craft, there is no "example" or "correct" way.

It encourages twenty-first-century skills such as physical development, creativity, communication, social and emotional development, and STEAM. Engaged citizens need to be



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Baby Adellayde explores shredded paper with her mom in play pit.

problem solvers and critical thinkers. We no longer live in a worksheets-based, restricted, monochromatic world. Giving kids opportunities to be creative, try and fail, and be hands-on with their world will help them succeed in school and later on. In our ever-changing, technology-centered world, kids need to develop physically and practice large motor movement. They need to have positive experiences so they can build their self-esteem, develop emotional regulation, and tolerate distress. Most of all, they need to build respect for themselves and others.

If you're looking for ideas for messy play, some of my favorite places to look are Pinterest, Little Bins for Little Hands, and the *Busy Toddler* blog. Highlights we have done at the library include potato flake dough, "nature soup" (water with everything from leaves to twigs to acorns mixed in), a shredded paper play pit, "painting" with water (kids love using grown-up paint brushes using just water!), washing doll clothes (using simple soap and water and then hanging the doll clothes on a clothesline), bins of dry or cooked noodles, a "forest" or "jungle" of broccoli with animal

figurines, sand and shaving cream play, all forms of slime, and anything with water beads.

There are challenges to messy play, and those likely won't go away. I am committed to having messy play in the library, but there are still naysayers. I have had patron comments about allergies, such as using flour in Play-Doh, or wasting food products such as dry noodles. We always try to mitigate issues by using "taste safe" recipes, putting up allergy-warning signage, and using materials over and over. One box of dry noodles can last years, and people tend to feel better when we tell them that.

Set-up and clean-up take time. Whenever possible, I advocate for the "all hands on deck" approach. I will never convince every person from every department to help clean, or that messy programs are important. Visual images work. If staff pop into a program and see children and families engaging in play, or if I share a photo with staff, they often see evidence of success.

Mess and noise are byproducts of engaged play. If we don't offer messy play, we are ignoring evidence-based research that getting messy is essential to early childhood development. I would rather spend time cleaning up than going against science.

Here are some words to share with your managers, administration, and board. MESSY PLAY = observing, creating, learning, connecting, building, exploring, imagining, discovering, investigating, interpreting, processing, socializing, and even relaxing!

Whenever I bring my dog to the dog park, I let her tear apart sticks, roll in the grass, and even take a mud bath. Dog owners ask me, "How can you let her do that?" and I always answer, "I've never met a dog that can't get cleaned up."

I have also never met a child, or a library, that can't get cleaned up. &

Note: Messy Play can't be done alone! I'd like to thank the entire KidSpace team at Gail Borden Public Library, especially Early Learning Associate Paula Bosshart, who helps make messy programming possible, and Jennifer Bueche, director of KidSpace.

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