

The beauty of Clay



Using clay can connect children to an important natural resource that has been used for the creation of objects for thousands of years.

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The benefits of Clay

Clay has so many endless possibilities and can be a really helpful indicator of children's level of development in manipulative skills, confidence, vocabulary, concentration and imagination.

Clay has slow-burn learning benefits compared to other materials. By this I mean that children can access it at their own level of confidence and development. For some, the experience of gaining the confidence to handle clay is a big step, while others may be ready to get stuck in and stretch, squeeze, roll and fully immerse themselves in the tactile exploration. It's a gentle approach of exploration and observation and a fantastic material to learn about how individual children comfortably work best.

The objects we put with the clay are as important as the clay itself for young children. Using open-ended loose parts and small world objects can both trigger imaginative play and also engage children who aren't confident with the texture of the clay. Once imagination takes over, clay soon becomes a means to a creative pursuit and the newness of the material is forgotten.

Clay is great for messy play and combines construction with the exploration - a valuable resource as a learning material especially if it's on hand for children to access on a regular basis.

Clay has a calming and a grounding effect on many children. Because of its nature, children can change it, manipulate it in a range of ways. It's possible to create endless ideas that suit the transient ways that children develop, alter and re-visit their ideas and so concentration levels can be significantly increased. No idea has a finite end.

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Children learn and experience a great deal from using real tools, rather than plastic imitations, wherever safe and wherever possible. Real tools are often well-crafted and have a quality, a feel and texture that has been developed to hold and manipulate by years of experience of artists, potters, and craft workers. Enabling children to experience tools safely means respect and self-care naturally becomes part of the process.



Clay - The 3 I's; Intent, Implementation, and Impact.

Intent

The use of Clay helps the child touch, smell and play with a flexible and responsive texture in an environment with little pressure or expectation. As the child develops trust and understanding of the textures of Clay, they build positive pathways in their brain which say it is safe to engage with it.

Help to build nerve connections in the brain.

Encourage the development of fine motor skills and upper body strength.

Support language development - introduce new vocabulary / action and describing words.

Encourage 'scientific thinking' and problem solving.

Involve sensory / mindful activities which are beneficial for all children.

Implementation

It is not essential to provide children with expensive specialist tools and equipment. The best tools are the hands, these are what are needed to develop skill with using clay. However, other tools to assist can be simple as rolling pins, knives, forks, scrapers, bowls for water, graters (which children love using to produce hair and moustaches), sponges to smooth clay surfaces and cracks, pens, pencils, tooth picks, bamboo picks and lollipop sticks which can be used to do detailed work on clay or to add marks and textures. Clay can be modelled onto any hard surface, such as a desk, or a wooden plastic board, so your tables are the best.

Where possible encourage the children to stand during the activity - this way they can press down hard and build upper body strength.



Most young children when given a piece of clay are instinctively motivated to explore its inviting soft responsive sensory qualities. Therefore, to begin just provide clay - you can add tools later! Children need lots of time working with clay and their hands. Pounding, pushing, rolling, squeezing, poking, pinching and twisting. It is almost like using the language of their hands to realise the effect of clay and how it responds to their manipulation.

Each time children act on the clay, the clay adjusts and responds, these changes for a child are magical. Children are naturally fascinated, motivated, and empowered to then keep experimenting. They are learning how clay behaves and how they can use it to make their imaginings take shape and form - imaginative expression. They also learn that the heat of their hands can quickly dry the clay out. This is the beginning of the technical skill of hand-building.

Along with children exploring clay and the various hand building techniques, it is vital for them to be engaged in discussion too. Engage children in a discussion about clay.

Ask children if they know what it is.

Ask children where they think clay comes from, seek out prior knowledge and dispel any myths.

Discuss the uses of clay in both art and everyday living.

Talk about and explore the different cultures that use clay.

Have a lump of clay on the table, give children the time to look at the clay under a magnifying glass or microscope and discuss it before they handle it.

Leave a lump of clay in a glass bowl with water, leave another lump of clay next to the bowl on the table. Encourage children to observe what happens to both the clay in the water and the clay drying out on the table. Record their responses.

While using the clay, employ expressive language to describe what the clay feels, smells, looks like. Encourage children to do the same, to verbalise their response to the clay - is it sticky, hard or cold? "It's cold, it's wet and squishy, and it's heavy!"

Discuss what happens when we put water on the clay.

Talk about what happens when the clay dries out.

When using tools or objects to make impressions in the clay, ask children to describe the marks they make, the textures or patterns formed.



Encourage them to talk about what they have done, to describe what they have made.

As practitioner, demonstrate and teach children how to care for clay.

Clay of the right plasticity should be stored by wrapping tightly in plastic bags and sealing thoroughly or it will dry out.

The best thing to do when you open a bag of clay to pass around to the children, is to have a separate empty bag to collect the clay they don't need. The clay will be out in the air all during the session and many children will over work the clay drying it out.

When they return the clay to the empty bag, blast it with a spray bottle with water in it. Close the bag and let it sit overnight. Use this bag first the next time you need clay.

Clay is a magical material in the eyes of children, it can become anything they choose to make. It is also one of the few things children get to control from start to finish.

Practitioners must work alongside children to scaffold developing skills. Use rich language with children when discussing their clay work, form, texture, colour, line - technical terms coiling, modelling, sculpting, wedging, pinching, poking, etching, decorating, slip, glaze, firing, and kiln. Teach them the relationship between two dimensional shapes and three dimensional forms.

Always get your hands dirty alongside children!



Impact

Developmental growth:

- Manipulating (squishing, squeezing, pulling, pushing, etc.) a piece of clay helps develop the child's large and small muscles - improving dexterity, builds upper body strength.
- Fosters eye-hand coordination.
- Builds a child's ability to focus/builds attention span.

Mathematical Understandings:

- Fosters beginning pattern making
- Builds an experiential understanding of 3-dimensional shapes
- Tactical experience of size and weight differences.

Literacy growth:

- Builds vocabulary - pound, pinch, roll, flatten, poke, tear squeeze, coil, stretch, squash, twist, and bend
- Creative storytelling with clay pieces.