



Cultivating Childhood:

Muddy Hands Garden and Nature Play

TEXT: CHARLES MARSH, CO-FOUNDER. IMAGES: MUDDY HANDS



In the outskirts of Taipei City, nestled on the border of Beitou and Shihlin where urban sprawl meets nature's embrace, Muddy Hands Garden and Nature Play stands as a testament to the transformative power of outdoor play and exploration. Founded by two teachers who left the confines of traditional classrooms to create a haven for outdoor exploration, Muddy Hands is a celebration of the simple joys of childhood, where planks of wood, car tires, and oil drums become the building blocks of imagination.

In an era dominated by screens and heavily scheduled, structured routines, Charles and Jeffrey were inspired to action by a growing concern—the diminishing connection between children and the great outdoors. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic only intensified this trend, with children spending even less time outdoors and more time indoors, glued to digital devices. Muddy Hands was born out of a desire to reverse this trajectory, to reintroduce children to the wonders of nature, and to cultivate a generation of young guardians who appreciate nature and will want to protect it. Muddy Hands seeks to rekindle the flame of curiosity and wonder that can only be sparked by spending time outside in nature.

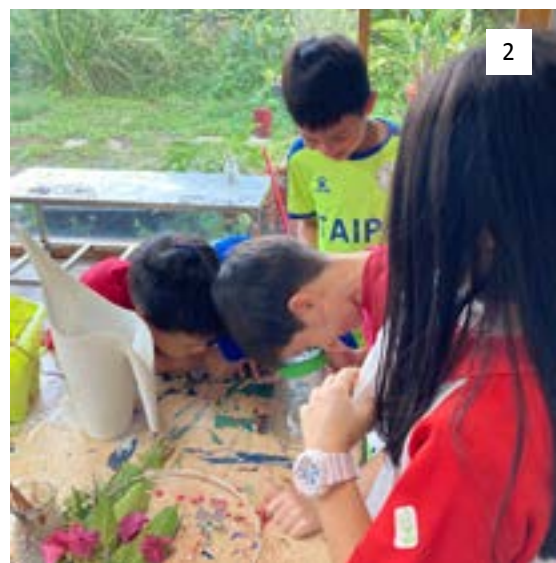
CANVAS FOR EXPLORATION

At the heart of Muddy Hands' philosophy is the concept of "loose parts play." Inspired by their own childhood memories and Charles' young children, this approach encourages children to engage in unstructured play; building dens and structures or creating games or art from materials found in nature. It's a return to the simple joys of childhood, a time when creativity knew no bounds and the outdoors served as an endless canvas for exploration.

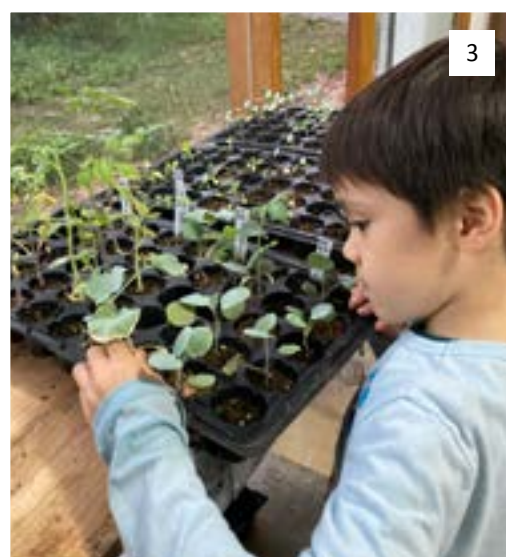
One of the key benefits of spending time outside lies in fostering a genuine connection to nature. Instilling a deep appreciation for the environment at a young age creates the foundation for responsible and environmentally conscious adults. As our planet faces unprecedented challenges, and virtual worlds edge ever closer to normality, nurturing a generation of nature guardians is perhaps more important than ever.



1



2



3

1. A microgreen workshop in full swing

2. Catching bugs is a popular choice. The diversity is seasonal and interesting to observe

3. There's something profoundly satisfying about raising a vegetable from seed!

PLANTING, NURTURING AND HARVESTING

Gardening is another cornerstone of Muddy Hands' mission. The hands-on experience of planting, nurturing, and harvesting in the garden imparts valuable lessons about the origins of food. This connection encourages healthier eating habits, with studies suggesting that children are more likely to embrace a variety of foods when they've played a role in producing them. Mel Bartholomew's square foot gardening method serves as a practical and accessible tool for introducing children to the joys of gardening. The simplicity of the system empowers young minds to actively participate in growing their own food, contributing to a sense of accomplishment and a deeper understanding of the food-production process.

FOSTERING A CONNECTION WITH EARTH

The benefits of connecting with nature extend beyond physical health. Research has shown that exposure to outdoor environments, particularly those involving contact with mud and soil, can significantly impact the immune system. Mud, a seemingly unremarkable substance, is teeming with a rich diversity of microbes that can train the immune system and build resilience to a range of illnesses, including allergies, asthma and even depression and anxiety.

As society has shifted away from nature-centric lifestyles, there has been a notable rise in autoimmune diseases, including asthma and food allergies. Experts believe this surge is linked to reduced exposure to microbes present in natural environments. Muddy Hands

recognises the importance of allowing children to get their hands dirty, fostering a connection with the earth that goes beyond the superficial. In doing so, they are not only enhancing physical health but also promoting resilience in the face of environmental challenges.

The decline of unstructured outdoor play in recent decades has resulted in a generation of children whose lives are meticulously scheduled, leaving little room for spontaneous exploration and creativity. The contrast between Charles and Jeffrey's free-spirited after-school play of the 1970s and 80s, albeit on different sides of the Atlantic, and today's highly structured routines is stark. It has been suggested that the shift towards regimented schedules and organised activities has led to a decline in the organic development of essential life skills.



1. Jeffrey guiding a group through a carpentry session
2. A creation of loose parts



EMBRACING VALUABLE LIFE SKILLS

Beyond the physical benefits, Muddy Hands champions the ideals of free play—activities unstructured by adult intervention. In the nurturing environment of Muddy Hands, groups of children of different ages engage in unstructured play, interacting and learning from each other and developing a sense of community whilst embracing valuable life skills. Skills

such as negotiation, compromise, team building, communication and language development, creativity, imagination, perseverance and resilience. These skills along with calculated risk taking, once cultivated organically through outdoor play, are now in danger of being overshadowed by the structured routines that define modern childhoods.

The centre also provides structured activities such as using real tools to create simple woodworking projects, creating art using natural materials, observing the wildlife that they share their space with, helping out with tasks in the garden, as well as cooking and baking. These activities serve as a bridge between unstructured play and the demands of a more structured world allowing the children the chance to push wheel barrows, shear grass, dig holes, move soil, plant trees, tie knots and varnish wood.

The four elements—Earth, Air, Water, and Fire—have an inherent fascination for children. At Muddy Hands, the connection to all four elements is embraced, with a particular

focus on fire education. Children are taught the art of making and lighting fires, accompanied by a thorough understanding of the associated risks and how to mitigate them. This hands-on approach not only instils a respect for fire but also imparts more crucial life skills.

GOING BACK TO THE ROOTS

Muddy Hands Garden and Nature Play is more than just an activity centre; it is a refuge for childhood as it was meant to be—a time of exploration, discovery, and unbridled joy. In a world increasingly dominated by screens and structured routines, Muddy Hands stands as a beacon, calling children back to the outdoors, back to the mud, and back to the roots of their own existence. It is a testament to the enduring importance of nature in shaping healthy, resilient, and environmentally conscious individuals who will, in turn, become the guardians that Mother Earth so desperately needs.



.....
In 2007 Charles left his allotment in Brighton, moved to Taipei and was a teacher at TES for 15 years. He took a leap into the unknown to start Muddy Hands to be able to spend more time with his family, honour his promise of a garden to their cat and kids and bring his love of being outdoors to children who might otherwise be missing out!

Muddy Hands Garden and Nature Play provides after school sessions, bi-monthly Saturdays or Sundays, holiday camps and birthday events and can tailor programmes to school parties, youth groups or private parties.
FB: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100086806088901>
Website: <https://muddyhands.com.tw/>