

MESSY PLAY AT HOME

Cornflakes and other cereals

Small or large quantities of dry cereals are good for creativity play. Ask parents or your local shop to donate 'past the sell-by date' packs or ends of packets to avoid the sensitivity of using food for play. The added benefits of this play are that if children do eat a bit of it they will come to no harm, and the birds can eat the left overs!

Young Babies (0-8months)

Put some cereal in a small bowl and let the baby dangle their finger and hands in it. Lift the cereal up and let it trickle between your fingers, scrunch it and listen to the sound it makes. Talk about what you are doing as you play.

Put a bit of cereal in a small container such as a film box or similar box to make a shaker – let the baby watch you as you make the shaker, so they can see what goes in.

Babies (8-18 months)

Put cereals on different surfaces such as tin trays, plastic sheeting, fabric and listen to different sounds. Pour a pack on a builder's tray and let the children stomp on it (with bare feet if possible). Let standing babies play with mixtures of cereal (adding rice or dry pasta shapes) in bowls or water trays. Give them containers so they can pour and scoop the dry cereal in and out of bowls and sups.

Young Children (18-24 months)

Put some cereals with spoons, scoops and bowls for pretend sand. Add wide mouthed funnels and jugs for poring to strengthen eye and hand actions. Let them squeeze and squash the cereals in their hands and fingers. Talk about the sound and feel of different cereals as they squeeze them. Get a box of cheerios and show how they stick on young skin – on fingers, arm and legs. Try balancing one on one finger of each hand!

Children (24-36 month)

Put some small paper or plastic bags and scoops out with the dry cereals and encourage fine motor skills in pouring and filling the bags.

Hide small world creatures such as bugs and insects in the cereals for the children to find. By this stage, children will not be so likely to eat play items, so you could add other foods to the mixture – dried beans, peas, rice, very small pasta shapes, and seeds.

Children (3 to 5)

Offer the different cereals (and rice, beans, pasts etc) in separate bowls or containers with scoops, spoons, plastic sups, ladles, bags and boxes. You could even add a pair of balance scales (no weights). Don't suggest what they should play, just see what happens. Inevitably the different materials will get mixed up during play, so another challenge is to talk about how you could sort them out!

Cooked Pasta

Cooked pasta of all sorts is ideal for developing hand and finger control – it's also great fun for children of all ages. Try to find different sorts (tubes, spaghetti, noodles, stars, sheets, animal shapes). Cook the pasta in boiling water till it is 'al dente' and let it cool before using. Add a bit of oil to stop the pasta from sticking together.

Young Babies (0-8 months)

Noodles are quick and easy to baby play material as they only need boiling water (cool them under a cold tap before using). Offer young babies a couple of strands of spaghetti or noodles to hold and feel in their fingers. Stay with them and talk as they play. Put a shallow bowl of cooked pasta near a laying baby and let them reach for the sensation. You could also put some cooked pasta on the tray of a high chair or a table top.

Babies (8-18 months)

Babies will enjoy having some small pasta shapes to pick up. They could put them in a bowl, or post them in a tube if they don't want to eat them! This helps with pincer grip and hand control. Cooked spaghetti, coloured with food colouring makes a new experience; offer small quantities to individuals, so there have their own bowl or dish.

Young Children (18-24 months)

Make large quantities of cooked spaghetti or other types of pasta, adding colouring to the cooking water if you wish. Try orange, red or black food colouring paste for a strong colour. Put the pasta in a deep bowl or water tray so several children can explore it together. You can also use cooked pasta to make pictures without glue – drizzle or arrange shapes and strands on paper and they will stick with their own starch.

Children (24-36 months)

Add small world creatures to cooked pasta for small world play. Try making blue spaghetti, putting it in a paddling pool and adding sea creatures. Offer some kitchen tools and saucepans for pretend play and developing hand control – try strainers, tongs, spoons, tweezers, pasta lifters. Add spaghetti to a water tray and watch what happens as the pasta dissolves in water.

Children (3 to 5)

Offer cooked pasta outside to make patterns, shapes and scenes on paving stones and paths. Leave the remains for the birds to eat. Offer the children different colours of food colouring to make their own coloured pasta – put some cooked pasta and chosen colouring in a zip lock plastic bag and children can squidge it about with their hands until it is coloured. Use for free play, pictures or role play.

Soap Flakes

Soap flakes are worth looking for – they are not easy to find, but demand is bringing them back! Don't use detergent instead. Mix some soap flakes with warm water in a bowl or other container. Leave the mixture to stand until it becomes thick, adding more water if it needs it. The mixture will be slimy and slidey. It's called slime!

Young babies (0-8 months)

Spoon or pour into small trays on the floor at a young baby's level so they can explore it with their hands and fingers, helped by an adult if needed. Put blobs on small mirrors for exploration. As the slime is moved on the surface by a young baby or adult, the baby will see patterns and reflections. Or put in a builder's tray or 'tuff spot' for lying in as a whole baby experience. Take care about eyes!

Babies (8-18 months)

Use in a large trays for sitting or standing in. place in a variety of shallow containers so babies can trail their finders through, lifting the slime in the air and letting it drip between their finders. Talk about the feel and movement of the stuff, watching for body movements and sounds of enjoyment. Put some on see-through surfaces such as windows, mirrors or Perspex sheets. Add some food colouring for a change.

Young children (18-24 months)

Continue to add things to slime – food colouring, paint, sequins, little beads or small pasta shapes so the children can begin to experience changes. Use slime on different surface, to make smeary patterns, for example with card combs, funnels, spoons and cups, to pour and mix and drizzle. Encourage young children to talk about what they are doing, feeling and finding out.

Children (24-36 months)

Let the children help you to mix the slime, then give them whisks, beaters or forks to beat it into foam. Add other kitchen gadgets to explore the slime with. You could make a really big quantity of slime and put it outside in a paddling pool so children can sit in it. Take care and stay close, it's slippy! Or you could put slime in a bowl on the floor and let children put their feet in it to see how it feels. Put the bowl on a towel.

Children (3 to 5)

Give the children the ingredients and a simple pictorial recipe and let them make their own slime, colouring it as they wish – black or green will probably be favourites! Talk with them as they make the slime and play with it, exploring the process of mixing, whisking, colouring, as well as how the slime feels as they work. Give them a really big bowl – can they make the slime fill the bowl? What makes the slime get bigger?

Compost

Older children will love compost as a new and different medium for their play. Be especially careful when using compost with babies – buy new compost and make sure you supervise the experience at all times, so the babies don't eat too much!

Young Babies (0-8 months)

Let babies feel the texture of dry compost as it is sprinkled on their hands, feet and bodies. Hold them upright and let them 'walk' on it or hold them so they can reach out to feel the texture with their hands and fingers. Take a soft toy, a teddy bear or other animal for a walk in the compost tray.

Babies (8-18 months)

Mix the compost with other safe gardening materials – sand, gravel etc and let babies explore the different textures. Lift babies so they can feel the compost on the soles of their bare feet. Let standers and explorers walk in shallow trays of compost and sand mixture. Hide objects in the compost for them to find. Alter the texture by adding water, making a path of smooth pebbles, dropping some glitter adding small shells or sequins.

Young Children (18-24 months)

Encourage young children to use a compost and water mixture for tipping, filling, pouring and even for 'painting' on paper, smearing with fingers, hands, feet, or making body prints out of doors in a large space. Remember that it is the process which is important, end products are an extra, and of less interest to most children at this stage. Walking or riding through piles of compost is another popular game.

Children (24-36 months)

Encourage children to mix compost with other substances in different size containers, and then explore it with tools – dig, build, spread, sieve, etc – dry and wet. Try sand, gravel, leaves, beads or perlite. Talk with children about what they are doing, seeing and discovering. Play 'hide and find' with small world people and animals or natural objects such as polished stones, shells, driftwood, glass beads, nuts and acorns.

Children (3 to 5)

Discuss with children what compost is used for, where it is found, how it is used at home. Offer seeds or plants so children can grow them in compost in containers of different sizes. Talk about different composts for different types of plants. Children may want to record what they are doing so remember to leave some materials handy (clipboards, cameras, felt pens, measuring equipment). Make your role play area into a garden centre.

Finger Paint

Check to be sure that the paint is suitable for young children and use one of the wide range of finger paints specially produced for children. Watch to see which they like best, try different colours, textures and thicknesses. You could make your own finger paint by mixing paint and moisturiser (this stops paint staining hands and other skin areas!).

Young Babies (0-8 months)

Encourage young babies to feel paint by touching and lying in it – protect their clothes or strip them down to a nappy. You can put the paint in shallow containers on the floor, on the tray of a high chair, or just in a puddle near where they are lying or sitting.

Clear or reflective surfaces such as plastic sheet, acrylic, a mirror or a window can attract young babies to this activity.

Babies (8-18 months)

Babies can be encouraged to investigate paint by smearing or on a range of equipment such as plates, boards, mirrors, paper, glass, fabric or tiles. Try sitting a baby in the middle of a big piece of paper or card so they can paint all round themselves. If they are interested in tools, start offering brushers, dabbers, sponges or other mark makers. Try using finger paint to cover plastic animals, dinosaurs or dolls from the home corner!

Young Children (18-24 months)

To help young children begin to develop their mental and physical skills let them use hands, fingers and feet to make marks on paper or on outdoor surfaces. Encourage them to talk about what is happening with the marks or how they are making them. Offer access to a wide variety of brushes and rollers and encourage young children to use water and paint on a range of surfaces and at different heights. This could include fences, paving slabs, easels and tables.

Children (24 – 36 months)

Encourage children to investigate painting with hands, fingers and feet, developing more controlled movements. This could include making footprints and handprints. Enhance paint by adding glitter, washing up liquid (bubbles), sand, sawdust or paste, for different experiences. Use paint to redecorate a toy or climbing frame. Make a huge finger painting on a wall, a path or a sheet in the garden and hose it off again.

Children (3 to 5)

Encourage paint mixing and offer children a choice of materials to make their own textured paint. Discuss with the children the advantages and disadvantages of thick and thin paint and different textures. Try hand sprayers on a shower curtain outside. Offer children other tools to use paint and print - kitchen tools are great.

Keep on encouraging the use of fingers, hands (and feet) for both painting and printing.

Dough (See the separate sheet on making dough for dough recipes)

There are many types of dough which can be safely used with babies and children. Dough is a great learning experience for babies and young children, meeting both emotional and physical needs. Dough needs to be experienced for its own properties before adding tools for modelling.

Young Babies (0 – 8 months)

Use soft, very pliable dough with young babies. This will allow them to touch it, squeeze it, poke it and make it move through their fingers. Sensory experience will be increased if you add colourings, perfumes and safe textures.

Try: orange, lemon or vanilla flavouring; aromatherapy oils; food colourings; porridge oats, rice grains, pasta stars.

Babies (8 – 18 months)

Make big quantities of dough so babies can explore it by sitting and standing in it. Colour and perfume the dough sometimes. Children will be able to experiment by squeezing the dough with different parts of their body and making imprints in it with fingers, hands, toes, etc. Encourage them to start using individual fingers, palms and sides of their hands, by playing alongside with your own hands. Don't force them if they just want to squeeze.

Young Children (18 – 24 months)

Encourage young children to model the dough by using their hands, fingers, thumbs, wrists, palms, outsides of their palms. Let them further explore by patting and rolling it into shapes with their hands.

Once children begin to develop their modelling skill they can start to use simple tools to explore the dough: sticks, smooth rolling pins, stones, nail brushers etc. Encourage and praise the experience and not the product.

Children (24 – 36 months)

With adult help, children can begin to mix their own dough. Add glitter, pasta or colourings to dough recipes. Begin to offer a variety of tools such as plastic scissors, sieves, combs, sticks. Introduce cutters. Children can now use the dough to add to their role play – 'baking' cakes or pizzas in the home corner, or making salt dough decorations for the garden. As the children talk about what they are doing, dough play will help extend their vocabulary.

Children (3 to 5)

Using a variety of simple recipes, children can make a variety of doughs completely independently. They will be able to talk about the differences between dough's, some are stretchy, some stiff, some watery, some last longer, some go hard. Adding colouring with the liquid or kneading it in later, or adding texture and perfume can enhance the experience. Try some dough's that bake hard and make role play props or models for small world play.

Cornflour 'Gloop'

Make gloop by mixing cornflour and water together. This creates a substance unlike any other! Gloop almost appears to have magical qualities. It can be picked up like a solid but tips and pours like a liquid. This is messy, so remove any clothing that could suffer, or protect the children!

Young babies (0 – 8 months)

Place gloop in small trays at floor level. Encourage the young baby to watch an adult playing with the gloop and then help the young baby to explore the gloop using hands and fingers.

You could tip the tray so that the gloop is a bit deeper and easier to pick up. Some babies may need a bit of encouragement to get their fingers in this mixture. Take your time, be patient and encouraging.

Babies (8 – 18 months)

Put the gloop in large accessible trays and encourage the babies to play with it. They will enjoy just touching it, picking it up and moving it around and letting it drizzle through their fingers. Babies could also sit or stand in the gloop and feel the texture with feet, legs and other parts of their bodies. You could remove clothes and let them experience the gloop in just a nappy. Talk with them about the mixture and what they are doing.

Young Children (18 – 24 months)

Young children can make gloop themselves, investigating the ingredients and properties of dry cornflour before adding water. Encourage the young children to mix the two ingredients together and see what happens – be prepared for both watery and very stiff gloop! Young children may particularly enjoy making patterns in the gloop and just watching them disappear. Add some food colouring for a different experience.

Children (24 – 36 months)

Put the gloop at an accessible height and begin to use tools in it – spoons, scrapers, forks. Sand rakes, funnels. Etc.

The children could make gloop by themselves and experiment with adding colours and scents to it, using food colouring, paint or perfumed oils. Talk with them as they work, modelling and encouraging descriptive languages as they pick the gloop up, pour it and watch how it changes.

Children (3 to 5)

Talk with the children as they explore the gloop, using words like solid and liquid and how gloop appears to be both. Compare gloop with custard powder, cocoa powder and drinking chocolate when they are mixed with water. Try mixing these with other liquids to see what happens. Removing drips and drops from surfaces has its own fascination – offer the children scrapers or old credit or loyalty cards for clearing up time, and they will love it!

Instant or Whipped Cream or Shaving Foam

These substances all give good sensory experiences, and allow babies and young children to explore using a range of senses. Cream also offers opportunities to taste as well as touch and smell. Cream and aerosol shaving foam have similar but not identical textures. Choose non-allergenic shaving foams.

Young babies (0-8 months)

Spoon or pour your chosen foam into small trays on the floor at a young baby's level so they can explore it with their hands and fingers, helped by an adult if needed.

Put blobs on small mirrors for exploration. As cream/foam is moved on the surface by a young baby or adult, they will see patterns and reflections. Try putting foams in a builder's tray or 'Tuff spot' for lying in as a sensory experience for the whole body.

Babies (8-18 months)

Put foam in a variety of shallow containers so babies can trail their fingers through it repeating and practising making patterns. Use large trays for sitting or standing in, to explore in more ways. Begin to share the language of texture, rewarding sounds and body movements. Spread foam all over see-through surfaces – windows or Perspex sheets. By making patterns on these surfaces, children can reveal what is on the other side – people or objects.

Young children (18-24 months)

Add things to cream or foam. Start with food colouring or paint, so children can begin to experience changes. Put some colouring next to the foam so children can incorporate it themselves. Use foams on different surfaces for young children to experiment how it feels. Make 'pictures' on different papers, plastic, wood, paving, glass, mirror, bubble wrap, card. Encourage the children to talk about what they are doing, feeling, finding out.

Children (24-36 months)

Place foams in deeper trays and create a treasure hunt for children by hiding buttons, pebbles, coins, big beads, small world figures etc. Develop texture by adding glitter, pasta, lentils, sand, beads etc. Children can begin to make their own patterns in the foam or cream, developing wrist, finger and hand control, mark-making skills and hand-eye co-ordination. Try foams on flat sheets of card, plastic or a cheap shower curtain.

Children (3 to 5)

Use coloured foams to develop story telling skills. Add small world, cars, play people, animals, dinosaurs etc. Try using both sides of a Perspex sheet to copy patterns or make backgrounds.

Add colours (paint or food colouring) to explore colour mixing or changing. Make repeating patterns, letter shapes, zigzags, loops, circles. Take prints of coloured foam (not cream!) by pressing paper very gently on the pattern and peeling off.