All About. -Messy Play

A Fine Mess

Despite appearances, messy play can make an enormous contribution to babies' and young children's cognitive and creative development. What do we think about when we hear the word 'messy? Untidy, muddled, disorganised, confused, cluttered, shambolic, disordered, disarray or perhaps the instruction, don’t make a mess'. The word messy is often given negative meanings and calling an important aspect of play 'messy' can lead to it being undervalued. This guide aims to reclaim messy play as an important part of early years provision and demonstrate its importance for young children's learning and development.

Importance

To mess about is to play with something and it is through play - which is part of the creative process (Duffy 1998) - that children learn and develop. Children are being creative when they use materials in new ways, combine previously unconnected materials and make discoveries that are new to them, and messy play enables children to do all these things. It is this aspect of messy play that we want to emphasise, and our definition of messy play at Hedgehogs is play that emphasises the active exploration of materials and their properties.

Messy play involves:

children using all their senses in the process of exploration, especially the sense of touch  offering children plenty of opportunity to mould and manipulate materials not having a focus on making or producing something.

This sort of play is important because its lack of a focus on making or producing something leaves the child free to explore all sorts of possibilities. It taps into children's innate curiosity about the world around them and their strong desire to explore and find out more.

By giving children messy play opportunities, we give them the opportunity to explore materials fully. Messy play is also enjoyable; we have only to look at children freely exploring water and paint to see their enjoyment and, as the Primary Strategy document Excellence and Enjoyment

(DfES 2003) stresses, enjoyment is a good thing and something to aspire to and encourage in all early year’s settings.

Cognitive Development

One word associated with 'messy' is 'confused', and it seems to me that confusion can be a very good thing. The creative process is characterised by risk taking, trying things out and experimenting, and an insight often occurs at the very moment when we are confused and have to look deeper. For me, there is a strong link between the process involved in messy play and Piaget's concept of cognitive disequilibrium. Cognitive disequilibrium is when thinking has to change to incorporate new information. Children's interpretation of the world is challenged when they take on new information and find that they now have two contradictory views of the same event. Here are two examples:

Bubbles intrigue the babies at Thomas Coram and watching their first encounter is fascinating.

Their previous experience has led them to believe that spherical shapes such as bubbles are solid and can be held, so as the adult blows the bubbles, they reach out to catch them. But as soon as their hand closes on the bubble it vanishes. The look of surprise on their face as they puzzle on this new insight is a moment of cognitive disequilibrium.

Three-year-olds experiencing cornflower for the first time can experience a similar reaction. They see what appears to be a solid surface and reach in to take a handful. At first the cornflower stays solid but then it turns into a powder and falls through their fingers, causing them to rethink their understanding of materials.

In stages

Some people assume that by three years old children should have left messy play behind and be doing something constructive such as making things.