

## Children and Young People's Occupational Therapy

### MESSY PLAY

#### What is messy play?

Children learn through play. Messy play is a fun and interesting way for children to explore and learn about the world around them and it provides children opportunities to explore a range of sensory experiences. Messy play can encourage social play, interaction and develop movement co-ordination.



Your child should be encouraged to explore different food textures with his/her hands during play. These activities should be completed as part of playtime and separate from meal time.

Different textures and food textures should be introduced gradually during play so your child feels comfortable exploring and touching them. When your child feels more comfortable these can be introduced to him during meal times.

#### Familiarisation with Foods

The first step is to develop some positive associations with food. Take the focus away from trying foods, and have fun with food instead!

Here are some ideas:-

- Painting with foods
- Food plates
- Grow vegetables/herbs
- Messy play – hide 'n' seek with motivators
- Songs about food
- Read food related books
- Involve in making dinners
- Baking – dress up!
- Supermarket shopping games
- Making our own placemat
- Give your child the opportunity to do role play- they can play being the parent and serving food or feeding others (this can be very empowering for resistant eaters)
- You can make a chart of 'foods I like' and 'foods I've tried'



#### Different Types of Messy Play

##### Play using dry textures:

Start by giving your child opportunities to explore materials that are dry. This stage is often comfortable for children as they many have experienced these textures around them already:

- Dry rice, cous cous, cereal, pasta, sand, chalk, crayons and paper.



## Play using soft textures:

Following dry texture start to introduce soft texture such as

- Cooked pasta/spaghetti/noodles, play dough, wet sand, bags of different materials (for example, gel, shaving foam or wet cornflakes) and squishy balls.



## Play using soft wet textures:

As your child begins to explore different texture start to introduce wet textures during play. Your child may need time and support at this stage, be aware he may resist or becoming sensitive towards certain textures therefore monitor and grade the input.

- Paint, water, shaving foam, baby lotion, bubbles, food and paper mache and glue.



## Gradual Introduction of New Foods

- Judge when it is best to introduce new foods, depending on your child's response, rigidities at meal times or stress levels.
- If you choose to introduce a new food at mealtimes, do so after they have eaten their preferred food. Put a very small portion of the new food on their plate. Or, if they are not coping with the new food on their plate, it can be placed on a separate 'taster plate'.
- Always offer at least one preferred food a mealtimes, along with the new food (you may choose to introduce the new food in a different context).
- If it is too disruptive to the mealtime routine, choose a separate time, such as at snack time.
- Avoid saying to your child "you don't like this food", instead say "you're still learning about this food".
- Use the 5 sensory stages to food acceptance and use a tick chart/reward chart.



5 stages of food acceptance:

- 1) *Accept a new food on a plate (your child does not need to try it).*
- 2) *Touch a new food*
- 3) *Smelling a new food*
- 4) *Tasting a food without having to swallow (Encourage child to spit it out).*
- 5) *Final stage is to eat new food*

- You may need to expose a new food 10-15 times before a resistant eater will either look, touch, smell or hold it to their mouth. If after this amount of time they continue to have an adverse reaction to the food, move onto the next food item.

## Get creative!



### Create a farm scene:

Use a range of cereal and other dry textures:

- Coconut, flour
- Broken up Weetabix
- Coco-pops
- Corn flakes/ bran flakes

Add tractors, cars and animal figurines

### Create a snow scene:

Dry play:

- Flour
- Coconut

Wet play

- Shaving foam with glitter
- Water



### Create a bug scene:

- Cooked spaghetti pasta and then mix with food colouring

Add some toy plastic bugs

### Other tips

- Join in - your child is likely to copy what you're doing
- Always gently encourage play, do not force it
- Watch your child, follow their lead and stop when they have lost interest or concentration