

EXPLORING CLAY IN THE EARLY YEARS



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Clay is an exciting, and engaging material for young children to explore. However, it is often overlooked, with other malleable materials such as playdough, being favoured. Clay often comes out for something specific, such as making a pot, but we often don't give children time to really explore it as a material. I sometimes think clay is a 'forgotten' resource. Like many resources in early years, such as wooden blocks and sand, clay has historical significance. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the founder of the Kindergarten included materials like clay in his educational approach. It is Froebel we have to thank for wooden blocks, which are still a staple of the early years settings, but clay does not have such high visibility.

Providing children with access to play and explore with clay gives them a rich and exciting learning opportunity and I would really recommend it becomes part of your regular provision. As an open ended, natural material, it can be anything the child wants it to be. Clay provides children with opportunities to engage in imaginative play and the ability to transform the clay, through rolling and squeezing means ideas can be explored rapidly. As an open-ended natural material, it allows more complex, imaginative ideas to be represented. Adding other natural objects to clay, can support children's creativity, such as stones, shells, sticks and buttons.



A CHILD IS EXPLORING A LARGE LUMP OF CLAY.

SHE DECIDES TO MAKE LOLLIPOPS AND THE ADULT MODELS HOW TO ROLL THE CLAY INTO A BALL SO SHE CAN ADD THEM TO STICKS.



A CHILD MAKES A BIRTHDAY CAKE OUT OF CLAY AND USES LOLLIPOP STICKS FOR CANDLES.

Due to its engaging nature, children often become immersed in clay exploration and play. This provides adults with opportunities to observe carefully and also the chance to support and extend children's learning. Clay exploration provides opportunities for 'guided play' as described in the Early Years Pedagogical Continuum in the EEF toolkit. Adults can comment on children's play, offer suggestions and model new vocabulary.

Clay is a unique material, as it is malleable but when fired becomes a hard permanent object. Therefore, making a lasting object (like pot) can be engaging and exciting. However, before children make something tangible they need to have explored clay and found out what it can do. The exploratory stage can be exciting – try putting a whole bag of clay out to explore or adding lots of water.

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Practitioners can begin to model skills as the children become more familiar with clay. The photo on the left below shows a child who has independently made a series of pots, after having the method of making a pinch pot modelled to her. Manipulating clay in this way, really supports children's physical skills, especially their finger dexterity.

Clay can also be used to develop and support children's interests. Adding dinosaurs to the clay area, with natural objects provided these children with opportunity to make dinosaur habitats, following on from an interest in dinosaurs and from enjoying the book 'Dinosaur Roar'.

Play experiences such as this provide opportunities for adults to develop high quality interactions with children. As highlighted in the Preparing for Literacy Guidance for Early talking with children when they are immersed in their immediate experiences and interests is an effective way of supporting their communication and language development. Using the model of 'sustained shared thinking' (see Preparing for Literacy Guidance), can support practitioners with developing high quality interactions and work well when children are engaged in everyday play experiences.



A CHILD HAS INDEPENDENTLY MADE A SERIES OF POTS AFTER HAVING THE METHOD OF MAKING A PINCH POT MODELLED TO HER.



ADDING DINOSAURS TO THE CLAY AREA, WITH NATURAL OBJECTS PROVIDED THESE CHILDREN WITH OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE DINOSAUR HABITATS,

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CLAY, DOWNLOAD THE EXPLORING CLAY PAMPHLET AT:

<https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Exploring-Clay-Pamphlet.pdf>

Box 1: High quality interactions—it's harder than it looks

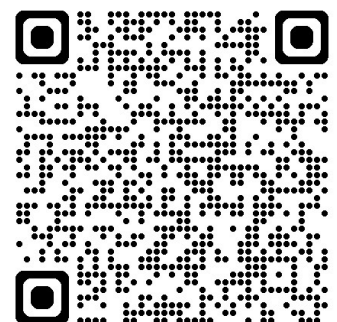
Multiple frameworks exist to help structure high quality interactions.

Guided interaction occurs when an adult and child collaborate on a task and the adult's strategies are highly tuned to the child's capabilities and motivations.¹³ The adult is responsive to the child's intentions, focuses on spontaneous learning, and provides opportunities for the child's feedback. Discussion is a key feature of this approach and the use of a variety of questions helps to develop and extend children's thinking.

Sustained shared thinking involves two or more people working together to solve a problem, clarify an issue, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative.¹² Key features include all parties contributing to the interaction—one aimed at extending and developing children's thinking.^{12,14} Techniques that adults might use include:¹⁵

- **tuning in:** listening carefully to what is being said and observing what the child is doing;
- **showing genuine interest:** giving whole attention, eye contact, and smiling and nodding;
- **asking children to elaborate:** 'I really want to know more about this';
- **re-capping:** 'so you think that...';
- **giving their own experience:** 'I like to listen to music when cooking at home';
- **clarifying ideas:** 'so you think we should wear coats in case it rains?';
- **using encouragement to extend thinking:** 'you have thought really hard about your tower, but what can you do next?';
- **suggesting:** 'you might want to try doing it like this';
- **reminding:** 'don't forget that you said we should wear coats in case it rains'; and
- **asking open questions:** 'how did you?', 'Why does this...?', 'What happens next?'

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