

HOLISTIC PLAY IN THE EARLY YEARS: "AM I DOING ENOUGH?"



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Often, I am asked by other childminders, "Am I doing enough?", there is still an understandable concern that a parent or Ofsted Inspector might see, child led, unstructured play and assume that the childminder is not doing anything or is "just letting the children play".

I would really like to dispel this concern and to give you all the confidence to be able to explain the value in child led play. Recently I held a webinar where we used the example of children playing at a mud kitchen to show how all learning areas were being covered and I would like to share that with you.

Firstly, what do we mean by holistic? Birth to Five Matters, tells us that it, "Encompasses all aspects of development (Early Years Coalition, 2021)." Imagine a group of children, playing in and around the mud kitchen. Let's observe and listen to their play and see what's going on and how each area is covered.

COMMUNICATION:

Maybe the children are preparing for a birthday party or working in a café or shop. We can hear some rich communication as they discuss their plans and negotiate their roles. "I'm making the cake, you make the ice cream", "It's your birthday". Are they enacting stories? "I've got a very good idea, let's go to the café"

PSED:

The theorist Vygotsky tells us that children, especially in a mixed age or mixed ability group, learn from each other. We have all seen this haven't we? The toddler joins in a game which would normally be above their development level, they may not know or understand the "rules" of the play, but they learn and absorb how play works, that we take turns, listen to others' ideas and work together.

In this scenario we can also see the children selecting and using their own resources without adult interference. This gives children confidence in their ideas and a sense of agency over their play and exploration.

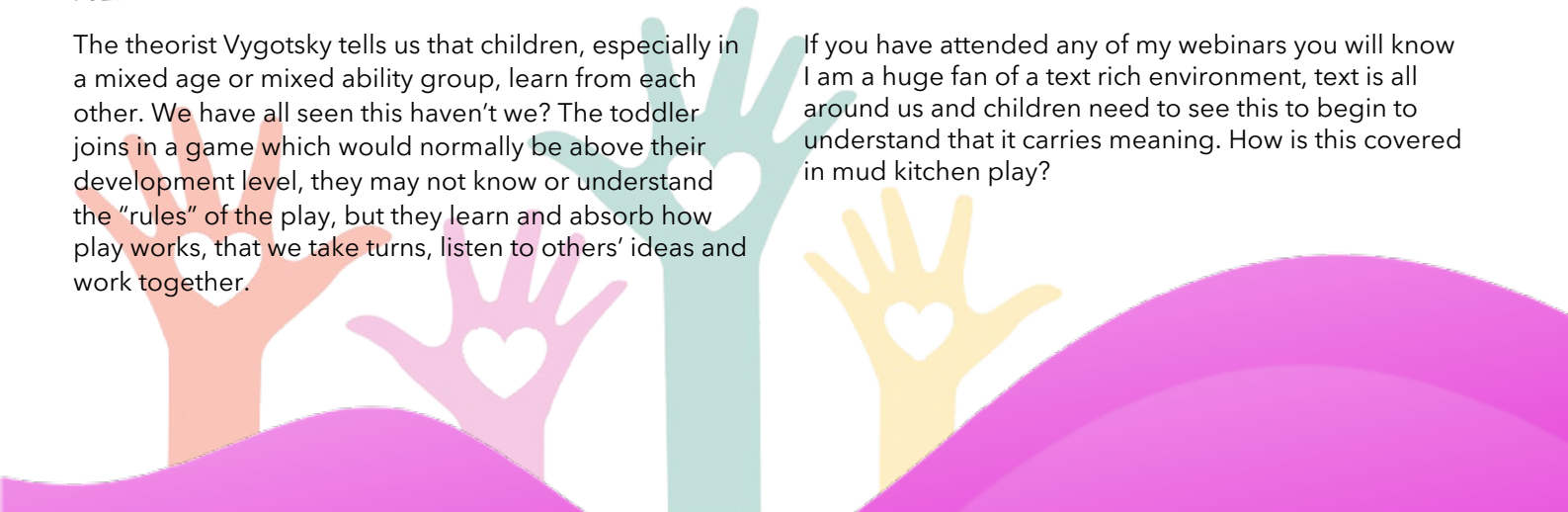
PHYSICAL:

We are all familiar with the idea that children need to develop gross/large motor skills to support the later development of fine motor skills needed for writing and using tools such as scissors but how can we see this in the mud kitchen? Simple, in this case the children are digging mud to use as an ingredient, squatting down, using their core and leg muscles to steady themselves and of course using their shoulders and arm muscles to dig. Children can use tools such as whisks, tongs and scissors in the mud kitchen, just as adults do when cooking. If you don't have a mud pit or digging area, consider how you could introduce something similar, or maybe you have a large sand area which can serve the same purpose.



LITERACY:

If you have attended any of my webinars you will know I am a huge fan of a text rich environment, text is all around us and children need to see this to begin to understand that it carries meaning. How is this covered in mud kitchen play?



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Signs, posters, books and of course mark making opportunities. Include notepads or clipboards so that children can take orders or write lists and invitations. Think about including cookbooks or recipe cards. Yes, it's true that anything outside will inevitably get wet and muddy so my advice is to ask your families and friends for donations.

MATHS:

As Grenier and Vollans (2023) remind us in the Revised EYFS, "Our daily lives are filled with maths". The mud kitchen is no exception, imagine how many resources in our own kitchen use maths, timers, scales, jugs, measuring spoons, the list goes on and if you introduce these types of authentic resources into your mud kitchen area you are enriching mathematical play.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD:

As anyone who has read the fabulous "Lessons in Chemistry" will know, cooking is science. There are so many opportunities for children to test, experiment and discover when playing in the mud kitchen. "What happens when I mix sand and mud together", "What if I roll pinecones in playdough?", "Why do the herbs have a stronger smell when I squash them in the pestle and mortar?"

Of course, another aspect of "Understanding the world" is that settings need to reflect the wider diverse community. It's very easy to do this in the mud kitchen too; check out your local charity shops for interesting pots, pans, plates and utensils that may have been bought back from holidays as souvenirs or add take out menus and cookbooks that depict foods from a range of cultures. A ball of string and some scissors makes fab noodles or spaghetti, boxes from delicacies like Turkish delight add an invitation to create something new.

EXPRESSIVE ART AND DESIGN:

The mud kitchen offers so many creative possibilities, we have probably all made perfume from flowers as children, and it is still a wonderful experience today. You can add resources with scents and colours that can be mixed or explored. Grating coloured chalk is a very satisfying task and creates a new colourful ingredient.

So, there we are, we have observed the children playing and they have already covered all the areas of development, but wait, what about the Characteristics of Effective Learning, let's not leave those out, they give us insight into how the children learn and we can see their confidence and resilience blossom as they lead their own play. A group of children aged between 18 months and five years are playing together at the mud kitchen, each has a part to play, they are active creative learners, exploring resources and thinking critically.

TO RETURN TO MY ORIGINAL QUESTION "AM I DOING ENOUGH?" LETS CONSIDER THE PRACTITIONERS ROLE IN ALL OF THIS.

We need to use our expert knowledge of these children to know when to stand back and when to step in. If we stand back and observe, we allow the deep engagement to continue uninterrupted, we may see or hear things that we didn't know about the child. Or we may use our judgement and step in to support or extend learning, perhaps by working alongside the child, narrating play or to seize upon a learning moment and introduce a new resource or concept.

So, what do we think now about holistic play? I have used this example of a mud kitchen because I think most of us have one or something similar, but we see holistic play every day, in all sorts of child led play. You have enabled this; you have provided the opportunities and resources. You know these children so well and have curated this experience for them to optimise their learning potential. Now you are considering how best to further support their development as you observe their play.

In my opinion that makes you an excellent practitioner, and yes....

You are doing enough!

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