

Advent activities



In the lead up to the Christmas period, this selection of seasonal multisensory learning opportunities will capture your children's imagination, says **Kirstine Beeley...**

I have to admit to being one of those practitioners who absolutely loves Christmas. I'm worse than the children when it comes to getting excited. However, I do believe that just because it's the festive season that doesn't mean you have to forget all your child-led principles. It does astound me that we work so hard all year to provide exciting, inviting invitations to play, and then for a few weeks seem to forget all that we know is right as we plan adult-led activity after adult-led activity...

So, I hope here to renew your enthusiasm for Christmas and give you some ideas of how to provide a good mix of both child- and adult-led activities right up to the big day...

Get the senses working

Christmas is a time that's associated with lots of different scents and these can be integrated into many aspects of your provision. Try adding Christmas spices such as cinnamon, pine, nutmeg, cloves and cranberry to paint as a multisensory creative experience. You can even try painting with ground spices mixed with a small amount of water; you get a lovely array of autumnal colours.

Try making Christmas scented play-dough. Cinnamon play-dough smells great and is good for making pretend gingerbread men; red cranberry-scented play-dough and peppermint- or pine-scented green give lots more festive play options. You can even colour rice red, gold and green and add Christmas scents for lots of scooping and pouring activities. Add bows, tinsel, jingle bells and decorations for added sensory interest.

Outside, don't forget to add Christmas spices to your mud kitchen for lots of multisensory outdoor play – you can even add cranberries and pine needles.

For children who aren't so keen on wet messy play, try filling a tray with lamenta strips (the long tinselly strips that you hang from your tree) and tinsel. Add bells, bows, Christmas decorations or numbers and letters for children to find within the tinsel (remember to chop up tinsel so it's not long enough to cause a hazard). Sparkly letters and numbers are great for this. Build coordination and fine motor skills further by weaving with ribbon and tinsel.

Frozen fun and games

No British Christmas would be complete without talk of snow and there are lots of open-ended activities that involve snow-based play. Try exploring real snow in a tray if it happens to be around, or invest in some instant snow powder (available online): it expands to 100 times its volume when water



is added and feels cold to the touch. It's great for sensory play or as a base for snowy small world play. Try freezing a couple of water-filled balloons and put them together to make a snowman to go in your snow. The children love seeing how the snowman slowly melts away during the day (especially if you call him Olaf!).

Another oldie but a goody for small fingers is paper snowflakes. As children snip their designs, they give their hand muscles a great workout and build fine motor skills. Remember snipping is a precursor to being able to cut properly with scissors.

Try freezing red water beads for a real holly berry ice exploration. Put them in a tray and let the children investigate as they start to melt. Add green paper holly leaves if you want to make it more festive and watch what happens when the paper gets wet as the berries melt, use tissue paper or crepe paper and the colour will bleed out as the beads start to melt.



Socks, stockings and sacks

Try adding a variety of socks (Christmas stockings) of different colours and sizes to your sand, rice or mud play. Children love filling them and talking about what happens when they get heavier, longer and soggy! Can you make a really heavy one or an extra long one? With all the soggy, socks and sand, don't miss an opportunity for some 's'-based phonics talk as well!

Use a selection of Christmas stockings filled with a variety of different materials (shells, pasta, rice, cotton wool, Lego, etc.). Place an elastic band around their tops or tie knots to stop the contents coming out. See if children can guess the contents by their sense of touch. Make up picture cards of the possible contents to allow children to match their guesses to the stockings.

Try pegging stockings to a washing line. Add numbers and encourage children to fill the stockings with the right number of objects. Use Christmas bows, jingle bells, pine cones and cotton wool snowballs if you want to stick to the Christmassy theme.

Invest in a large Santa sack and fill it with puppets and other objects relating to Christmas songs and use it as a festive song sack. Pull out an object and see if children can guess which song it relates to, then sing it together. Once children are familiar with the sack's contents, they will love exploring

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it independently or with friends. Alternatively, fill a Santa sack with objects and puppets and encourage children to make up stories with the objects that they find. Change the objects regularly to keep the interest going.

All wrapped up

Home corner role-play is, according to the Characteristics of Effective Learning, supposed to reflect what children see in their everyday lives. So add a tree and a box of decorations and let the children play at decorating and un-decorating the tree. Adding battery-powered fairy lights makes it even more exciting (and safe). Remember, this is a play tree, so don't get precious about how it looks.

Introduce boxes wrapped in Christmas paper. Use different sizes and shapes, and fill with building blocks and other objects to create different weights and sounds. Encourage children to explore, talk about and sort the parcels. Try wrapping strange-shaped objects such as teddy bears, cars and toys to see if children can guess what they are. Provide children with supplies of wrapping paper, scissors and Sellotape to encourage their own wrapping – again, great for physical development.

One great activity for getting children talking involves wrapping a big cardboard box (the bigger the better), then decorating it to make it look really inviting. Don't allow children to touch it but encourage them to come up with ideas about what could be in the box, which Santa has left in your setting. Keep it going all day – you'll be surprised at how creative children can be with their suggestions and their reasoning. At the end of the day, open the box and show children that there is nothing in it but their imagination. Ask them to think what they would put in a box if they could. A great talking point!



Jingle bells and bows

Jingle bells can be purchased in an array of colours and sizes. A bowl of bells is an exciting invitation to play in itself, but add sugar/ice tongs and some small buckets or bowls, and the possibilities for sorting and counting, plus fine motor development, are endless.

Try adding large jingle bells to a paper-covered tea tray. Drizzle paint on the paper and roll the bells around to make a pattern whilst building coordination and listening to the sound!

Or how about trying some large-scale physical painting? Place an old sock in the bottom of a stocking and tie a knot to keep it there. Soak the sock end in red paint. Now bounce the stocking at a large, floor-based piece of paper (like bouncing a yo-yo) to make huge red splats. Try using pens, crayons and googly eyes to see if you can make red-nosed reindeers around your prints – you can even find twigs to place on the paper to look like antlers! – or try dipping cotton wool snowballs in paint and throwing them at paper (again, a great gross motor activity).

Add Christmas bows or cotton ball snowballs to the centre of a small parachute for some cooperative physical play as you bounce them around trying to keep them on the parachute.

about the author

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