

# DIG & splash!

Is your sand and water play in urgent need of rejuvenation? If so, try these imaginative ideas from **Anna Ranson**...

**S**and and water play are two staple sensory activities that should be found in every early years environment due to the huge myriad of learning opportunities they offer. However, they can sometimes be left as sad looking tables with little or no added resources, thus reducing their interest and failing to maximise their great potential. Sand tables, for example, are all too often left filled with only dry sand, with children therefore missing out on the many opportunities for malleable play that would be possible if water were freely available.

As sensory bases, sand and water provide wonderful possibilities for storytelling, small world imaginative play, science investigations and role play games. All that's needed are some new materials and a little imagination. So, here are some ideas for enlivening both your sand and water table areas with new sensory additions, themes and storytelling activities, as well as some play recipes to stir into the mix!

## Sand play

### Coloured sand

Coloured sand is hugely exciting for children and fantastic for sensory play. Try asking children to crush up pieces of broken chalk to make coloured powder. This can be stirred into sand to add colour to it. Alternatively, adding a few tablespoons of brightly coloured powder paints will make an instant change, and look wonderful. The children can be left to experiment with this themselves, and to investigate the best methods for making the sand change colour – can they find a way to combine two colours to create a new one? You could also



try adding glitter, small beads or sequins to change the look and feel of ordinary sand and make it a little more magical, for some fantasy imaginative play and storytelling.



### Concoctions kitchen

Making a semi-permanent play area for an outdoor concoctions lab or cooking space is a great way to extend sand play away from the usual pit or tabletop area. Children should be encouraged to add out-of-date kitchen products such as lentils, dry pasta and beans, as well as fresh herbs and grass that they have snipped from the garden. Real pots, pans, wooden spoons and bowls can be collected from parents and stored on little shelving units with an old table and a pretend play oven. Old recipe books could be brought out to use on dry days to provide some contextual literacy learning opportunities at the same time. Large jugs of water should be kept to hand for making the mixing and 'cooking' possible. Providing baskets of open-ended play materials, such as those listed above, will also further extend the play in these areas.







## Play-scapes

Sand is such a malleable material and this makes it wonderful to use as an exciting play base for many otherwise ordinary play activities. For example, using the back of a spade, a roadway can be smoothed through a large sand tray for cars or trains to be raced along. A tunnel or cave can be hollowed out of damp sand for trucks to drive through or animals to live in, and a volcano can be formed to make a great backdrop for a dinosaur habitat. Fabric petals and acrylic gems make a gorgeous fairy world setting, and by adding some white or black aquarium gravel with moon buggies the sandy scene can quickly be transformed into a moonscape.

The sand table is also a perfect place to bring familiar stories to life, and makes a great base for sticking story props into for sequential storytelling through play. Print and laminate the characters from *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, or find suitable small toys to match each one instead, then add them into the tray along with an image from the book and other sensory elements to match each section, and watch the story come to life!

The children could experiment with this themselves and think about what feels dry, sticky and 'just right'. Or set it out with cutters, real shells, glass pebbles and cocktail umbrellas to make little beach scenes, sand castles and natural art pieces.



## Sand playdough

Try using sand to make some unusual and exciting playdough that's perfect for beach and shell themes or seaside small world play set-ups!

### Recipe:

Mix together 2 cups of plain flour, 1/2 cup of salt, 1 1/2-2 cups of boiling water, 2 tbsp oil and 2 tbsp cream of tartar. Stir until it forms a ball, then turn it onto a surface to knead it until it stops being sticky. Finally, roll it into a thin layer of sand, repeating this until as much sand is incorporated into the dough as possible, without it becoming too dry.



## about the author

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## Homemade mouldable sand

Another activity to try is making your own mouldable sand - you only need two everyday ingredients. Simply add one cup of vegetable oil to five cups of plain flour and stir through until it has a 'damp sand' consistency. It can be coloured in the same way as normal sand, and scent can be added to enrich the sensory experience. It can be used to make sandcastles that hold their shape well, tunnels and imprints from found objects and shells.

## LOOSE MATERIALS - SAND

Sand play can easily be revived by allowing the children some ownership of the materials they can add to it, for truly child-directed, open-ended play. Make these loose parts easily accessible by storing them in open baskets or buckets near the sand area, and change what they contain often enough to sustain interest, but not so often as to disrupt possible ongoing

play. Here are some suggestions for adding to the loose materials baskets, but there are obviously many more possibilities to add to the list...

*Pine cones, pebbles, shells, flags, sticks, fabric flowers and leaves, building blocks, straws, pipe cleaners, funnels, toy mini beasts, safari animals, cars and trains, figures.*





## Herbal infusions

Another way to add scent to the water is to make herbal infusions. This is a great activity for settings that have a herb garden or are growing plants indoors on the window sill, as the children can be involved in the whole process. Hand them some scissors and ask them to snip pieces from rosemary, basil, lavender or mint plants, then add the herbs to the water and leave them to soak for a few hours. You can also use herbal tea bags or loose leaf tea for new and exciting smells.

Afterwards, try introducing tongs, sieves and strainers into the water so that the children can play with the plant materials that remain and smell the delicious scent as they do so. The mix can be turned into sensory soups and concoctions, and used to go along with popular stories about cooking, too.

## Songs and stories

Water is an easy medium to add story and singing props too, and lends itself really well to certain specific ones. Simply adding five plastic ducks to the water, as well as some numbers, instantly provides an invitation to come and sing and count with the *Five little ducks went swimming one day* song, in a wholly interactive and fun way. This could easily be adapted for any counting or addition activity to mix in some further learning possibilities, while keeping it open-ended and very hands on.

In a similar way it is easy to set up a scenario from a book to create a small world storytelling scene in the water, such as *Sharing a Shell*. For this tray you simply need to add some rocks and shells to create the rock pool environment from the story, then find some similar characters or make some by cutting their basic outlines from coloured craft foam. Place laminated, photocopies of pages from the book, or the book itself, nearby and encourage story-retelling using the available props. This would be great for *The Rainbow Fish*, *The Snail and the Whale*, *Tiddler* and countless other favourite books.



## Water play

### Coloured and scented water

Try adding some food colouring to the water table to bring a new sensory dimension into play. Just a large squeeze of liquid colouring should be enough to colour the whole tray while remaining diluted enough not to stain hands or clothing. Focus on one colour theme at a time to practise sorting and classification skills. Ask the children to go on a colour hunt for red (waterproof) objects around the room that can be added to the red water in the activity tray. You could even have a few different trays of coloured water at once, and ask them to sort and match to each one.

Most supermarkets sell strawberry, vanilla and peppermint flavouring in the cake decoration aisle and this can also make a wonderful addition, filling the air with a different scent each time the children play at the table! They can fill and empty bottles to make perfumes, lotions and fizzy drinks, and sell them in a pretend shop to customers. Adding in some glitter would present further wonderful opportunities!

## Themed water play

Other ways to bring excitement to water play include introducing themed sessions at the table, of either a morning or afternoon, a day or even a whole week, depending on the children's level of interest. The simplest way to make the water play relevant is to tie it into any current topics or themes that are being focused on at that given time. For example, if you are learning all about springtime then the water table might become a frog pond with little toys to represent all the stages of the frog life cycle, with some added rocks and laminated information words to match the theme.

You can turn the water table into a sensory small world play scene with fairies, plastic jewels and sparkly coloured water to make a magical setting. Create some simple role-play themes, for example, by adding baby dolls with soap, flannels and towels for a baby clinic; some doll clothes with a scrubbing board for an outdoor washing station; or a vehicle car wash. The water table is obviously a great location for setting up some simple science investigations such as floating and sinking and absorption activities, too. Follow the children's lead and be inspired by their imagination and curiosity!

## LOOSE MATERIALS - WATER

When it comes to water play for young children, it's important to remember to add the extra materials that will allow them to interact with it. These are cheap and freely available – look for funnels, sieves, bowls and pots in various sizes, plastic bottles, tubs with holes punctured in the bottom, pieces of plastic tubing and rain guttering, all of which are fantastic added extras to keep in a storage box near to the table, ready for experimenting with pouring and transferring. Some settings may be able to obtain a small hand water pump to extend the play possibilities even further, and they are a great way to work on those gross motor and cooperative skills too. Other valuable objects to have ready for free play are sea creatures, boats, cut pieces of coloured craft foam, driftwood and shells, smooth rocks, glass gem pebbles, Duplo and plastic play figures. The children can then make up their own imaginative play scenarios and stories, and incorporate their own choices into their play sessions.