

delight FOR THE senses

Sue Gascoyne looks at the benefits of supplementing treasure baskets with further stimulating resources...



If over Christmas you noticed children playing more with the boxes that presents came in than the presents themselves, then you'll have witnessed the limitless potential of open-ended resources. Many parents describe their children's interest in bright flashing toys on Christmas Day but report that by Boxing Day and beyond a treasure basket alone captivated them. Why so? Because like the proverbial cardboard box, a treasure basket of natural and household objects offers challenge, opportunities for problem-solving, creativity and imagination, and certainly far greater play potential than prescriptive toys with 'right' and 'wrong' ways of being used.

If you've already started offering a treasure basket to a baby to play with, you may have noticed them picking up objects one at a time and putting them to their mouth – the source of most nerve endings – to try to understand 'what the object is and what it is like'. In this first stage of play, described by Anita Hughes (2006) a baby might take one hour simply exploring one object or exploring all the objects in a systematic way. Older babies and children tend to play in a more complex way using multiple objects and exploring 'what can I do with it?' and 'what can it become?' – the exciting realm of problem-solving, symbolic play and imagination. You may even have seen a preference for metal objects (as the Sensory Play Research findings suggest).

Between the age of three and four years my own little boy frequently



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spent an hour engrossed in what appeared to be domestic role-play – be it tossing 'spaghetti' (a chain in a measuring cup), clearing up imaginary spillages, or stirring and mixing. Frequently using no more than three or four items from the basket, he sat deeply focused on fulfilling whatever challenge he had set himself. Contrast this with his bored response to plastic play food and we get an insight into some of the attraction of these unconventional resources.

Adding to the mix

After watching a baby or child freely exploring a treasure basket you may wish to offer the basket with another resource such as sand, water, magnets or mirrors, to further extend its play potential. This, the second stage of the Sensory Play Continuum (Gascoyne, S. 2008), was found to be the most highly creative stage of play from the extensive research observations.

Picture the aforementioned three-year-old playing outside with a shallow sledge filled with sand and a treasure basket nearby. After a few minutes play with the sand and a plastic digger and toy cement mixer (inadvertently left in the sand tray!), the child draws the treasure basket near and begins using just a few of the objects for

deeply focused play. In just one hour he explored (but not necessarily put a name to) cause and effect and gravity (the sand falling through the tea strainer holes); problem-solving (discovering that if he speeded up the action he could catch some sand); the pattern making potential of sand (pressing a bath plug into a mini-bucket of sand); and 'big' and 'small' and volume (transferring the sand to different sized containers). We also witnessed transporting and rotation schemas (repeated patterns of behaviour), as he mixed and then rotated and pulled the sledge itself; and imagination and creativity (as he seemingly created his own imaginary meals). Meanwhile, the digger and cement mixer were left conspicuously untouched until finally being discarded from the sand! This is not to decry the value of a range of toys, including plastic brightly coloured ones, but to recognise the apparent play appeal of resources with no agenda which children can freely mould, exploit and enjoy.

Expand their Play

TRY OFFERING THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES ALONGSIDE YOUR TREASURE BASKETS..



- Sand (dry or damp)
- Water (can be soapy)
- Dried rice, pasta, couscous
- Wood shavings
- Magnets
- Mirrors
- Play dough, pastry, modelling clay or Plasticine
- Any other play resource, e.g. trucks, dolls, etc.

Nb. Always check allergies first. You can choose whether to offer the whole basket of objects for a child to pick what to use or initially offer a selection of objects which will not be ruined.





findoutmore

Check out the next issue of *TN* for adult-initiated activity ideas for playing with children and their treasure baskets.

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Context: Three children aged four years, six months to four years, nine months playing in the garden. Child E (aged four years, nine months) has played with the treasure basket before.

C fills up a pot using the large metal spoon. He turns it over, saying "Look, I made a sandcastle", banging the bottom to ensure it comes out. "Ta-da" he announces proudly. "Very good, C".

D and E find the terracotta pot in the purse. "Look, ah it's a baby flower pot" says E. "It's small, look these ones are bigger" says D, comparing it to the flower pots in the garden. D fills up the terracotta pot and runs off around the grass area. She runs back to the sandpit and finds the sand is gone. "Hey. How that happen?" says D. "My sand all gone!" "It's got a hole in it, D, that's why" says E. (Each of the children fill up the pot and run around the garden, then check to see who has the most sand left.)

C picks up the metal egg cup and fills it up with sand. He lifts it up and the sand falls out. "Oh man, it's coming out!" So, D says "You need some water." C gets some water and mixes it into the sand, and then puts the sand into the egg cup and says "It's staying there."

Understanding play

This trio of children display excellent language for communication and numeracy skills (they make the links between big and little and are easily able to convey their ideas); they develop a game combining creativity with physical development and explore the properties of materials and science of cause and effect and change. This session succinctly shows children's amazing potential for problem-solving and peer mentoring. An adult could easily have stepped in and solved the issue of the hole and the need to add water. But if given the space, time and opportunity to freely explore issues like these, children can discover the answers and adults can learn just how much children understand about the world. If I'm ever in doubt whether and when to intervene in children's play, I cast my mind back to those three four-year-olds playing with a treasure basket: step back, watch and enjoy!

Seeing the benefits...

THE APPEAL OF THESE RESOURCES IS APPARENT, BUT WHAT DO THEY ACTUALLY OFFER? THE FOLLOWING THREE VIGNETTES PROVIDE SOME EXAMPLES...

Context: eight-month-old baby, shallow sand tray on floor and deeper tray, both filled with purple coloured sand.

A started at the shallow tray, spooning sand using the teaspoon, put the handle end in her mouth and then realised that the sand stuck to the wet part of the spoon so continued spooning sand and putting the handle end in her mouth. She transferred from one tray to another continuing to use the teaspoon.

I added brushes; she looked at these, discarded them and continued using the

teaspoon, holding the spoon end and spooning with the handle end. A ignored other children crawling through the sand tray and continued spooning.

Understanding play

This baby is discovering about cause and effect; thermic properties (metal things warm up if held), and that sand sticks to wet things. She's developing hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills (hand movements) and amazing concentration and focus. We can observe a potential preference for metal objects, and purposeful decision-making and use of tools.

Context: Two years, eight-month-old boy, rarely plays with sand or vocalises during play.

Child B spent 10 minutes filling the small metal bowl and half a tea infuser using the teaspoon. After filling he smoothed the sand, patted it, then used the brush to brush the sand. He did this very carefully with good fine motor control. His play then changed to pretend play and he started to comment on his own play. He filled the metal egg cup with sand, saying "Wait a minute, need egg" then, filling the pan with sand, "Making tea now". He went on to fill the tin with sand, and showed me, saying "Sand inside of it, see".

Child B got the pastry brush and started brushing the sand off the sides of the sand tray and off his hands repeating "Brush, brush, brush", then singing "Brush, brush, brush it off, it clean now, it not got any sand on it any more". He looked at several other objects, cleaned them with his brush, commenting on what he was doing and singing "Brush, brush, brush it off".

Child B started burying objects, saying "Where's it gone?" then finding it, saying "Here it is".

Understanding play

This child shows great fine motor and communication and language skills; he is deeply focused for over an hour playing with a resource he never normally plays with; he uses the objects for domestic role-play, and develops his own song and hiding game; he shows an understanding of cause and effect and good social skills.