

What comes naturally

Sue Gascoyne explains how to make irresistible treasure baskets that will spark endless hours of sensory play...

At a recent visit to a children's play area on a wet and cold day, I happily observed a group of toddlers excitedly jumping in muddy puddles. They delighted in the experience – the satisfyingly noisy splashes; the strikingly cold water gushing into their wellies; the swirling patterns of mud stirred by their feet; and the discovery of 'cause and effect'. It's impossible to pinpoint what each individual child gained from the experience, but for about 20 minutes that puddle sustained their interest while noticeably the play equipment remained

empty. The children were enjoying some fresh air with their enlightened childminders. Whether the parents collecting their children that day shared this same enthusiasm for mud, we'll never know. Perhaps they reminisced about similar experiences from their childhood or reflected upon the amazing learning potential of a puddle? Some may have simply sighed at the thought of all that washing!

Ask an adult about their typical childhood play memories and chances are their eyes may twinkle as they wistfully



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SUE GASCOYNE



reflect upon days spent exploring, climbing trees, building dens, lighting fires, making mud pies and rose petal perfume. If you can relate to this happily you are not alone, these were just some of the vivid childhood play memories that parents and practitioners retold as part of a national Sensory Play Research project carried out by Anglia Ruskin University in May 2009. If you're lucky enough to share these sorts of memories then you'll probably have a fair understanding of why children get so much from sensory-rich play and why it is so important. Watch children's concentration, focus, determination, problem solving and social skills as they play with mud, sand, shells, stones, leaves etc. Not only is this sort of play hugely satisfying for children – and largely free – it's also great developmentally as each sensory experience helps create and reinforce vital connections in the brain.

Natural alternatives

Worryingly though, 92% of parents and practitioners surveyed felt that play had changed, with today's children spending less time outdoors. Increasing on-

screen based play, branded toys and greater fear of stranger danger were all cited as possible causes. However, sensory play and access to freely available natural resources doesn't have to stop when children come inside. A treasure basket – quite literally a basket of natural objects – can happily engage children from young babies to those of primary age for long periods of time, in any location.

Treasure baskets contain around 50 objects that have been carefully selected for their sensory appeal. These should include:

- items made from metal, stone, cardboard, wood, rubber, fabric, etc;
- a mix of shapes and colours;
- objects that move in different ways, have different weights, textures and properties;
- similar objects, e.g. a short handled wooden spoon, teaspoon and scoop.

The idea of a treasure basket for babies came about in the 1940s when Elinor Goldschmied observed babies' fascination for household objects – the things commonly found in a utensil drawer or contents of a handbag. These days, having seen older children's complex and fulfilling engagement

with treasure baskets, there's also a growing recognition of the value and importance of this type of sensory-rich play for young people of all ages. It's great for developing literacy and numeracy; for encouraging sorting, and for learning about the properties of materials. Treasure baskets introduce sophisticated concepts that unlock the key to the world and how it works, giving babies and young children the sensory experience and meaning to which they will later attach words.

How does a collection of what some adults may see as ordinary objects become a source of awe and wonder with numerous possibilities? It's the very fact that the basket doesn't include any toys and, like that muddy puddle or a cardboard box, every treasure is packed with open-ended play potential. So a knitted purse becomes a bag, a dolly's hat, a submarine, or even a hot air balloon basket. There is no right or wrong way of playing with the resources, which encourages children to explore, problem solve, create and discover to their hearts' content. It also means that they are age and developmentally appropriate. Every child (indeed person's) response to a treasure basket is unique, with reports of babies playing for over an hour with a woven maize coaster; toddlers repeatedly transporting a metal



Favourite things

WHY NOT CONSIDER PUTTING THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR TREASURE BASKET...

- Small cardboard box, mini board book
- Teaspoon, wooden spoon
- Pastry brush, shaving brush, mini bottle brush, nail brush
- Wooden eggcup, napkin ring, pegs, juicer, coaster
- Metal tin, thick length of chain, measuring spoons/bowl, coaster, whisk
- Mini glass jam jar, mini-flower pot
- Pine cone, stone, shell, dried whole orange, wicker ball, Loofah, large cork
- Bean bag, knitted ball, crocheted mat,

Feeling the way

HOW CHILDREN HAVE ENGAGED WITH SENSORY PLAY...

OBSERVATION 1 – CHILD AGED 8 MONTHS

S started by (seemingly) randomly emptying objects one at a time until she found the metal teaspoon. She started mouthing this, then picked up the measuring spoon and started mouthing that. She showed the spoon to another staff member, offered it to her, then took it back laughing several times. S then returned to emptying objects one at a time and mouthing the metal objects. She picked up the metal bucket, started balancing it on her fingers, babbling and looking inside.

OBSERVATION 2 – CHILD AGED 2 YEARS, 1 MONTH

R picked up objects one at a time, looked at them, waved them and placed them next to him. He chatted animatedly to himself whilst doing this with a range of intonation, although his words were mainly unrecognisable. He then moved on to playing with objects together. He picked up the pan, put the metal whisk in the pan and then tried other metal objects together. He tried to put the wooden whisk into the pan, this didn't fit so he went back to emptying and investigating objects randomly one at a time. He then started reading the mini book to himself. When he finished reading the book he said "Bye bye book" and continued emptying objects one at a time from the basket.

OBSERVATION 3 – CHILD 2 (3 YEARS 2 MONTHS), CHILD 3 (4 YEARS 9 MONTHS) AND CHILD L (4 YEARS 9 MONTHS)

Child 2 has picked out spoons, bowls and egg cups. Child 2 uses these objects with ease, mixing, pretending to cook and make dinner. L picks up the plug and chain. She swings it gently and starts to sing "I'm a dingle-dangle scarecrow". Child 3 copies L they share the plug and chain using the swinging movement from the chain. They both sing "dingle dangle scarecrow" again. Child 2 continues to do their pretend cooking. Child 3 has collected up all the kitchen items from the basket, picking up the metal spoons. "This is small and this is big. Look. Look at these."



chain between a tin and bowl; or older children 'cooking up' fabulous meals. Interestingly, research found that children generally seem to have a preference for metal objects – maybe because of their coldness, shininess, or noise-making potential?

Making your own baskets

If you haven't yet seen children's responses to this amazingly flexible resource, then now could be the time to start your own treasure basket collection. Pick a sturdy basket, ideally round and measuring 10" – 14" diameter, but more importantly deep enough (4" – 5")

so that you can't see all the treasures in one go.

Fill with objects perfect for small hands (see 'Favourite things') so the basket is brimming full of enticing treasures. Ideally avoid actual toys and plastic as children encounter these enough elsewhere and their absence makes the basket all the more special. Safety is obviously key – items with handles should be no longer than 10" long; check for small or loose parts that may cause a choking hazard; and avoid painted wood – but ultimately we want to create a resource that stimulates the senses not something sterile or boring. Once you've gathered together the objects, clear away other toys and put the treasure basket on the floor, possibly on a cosy mat to 'zone' the space. The only 'rules' for free play with a treasure basket are:

- Babies and young children freely play with the treasure basket
- Adult supervision is needed
- There are no right or wrong ways of playing

It is important to make time for uninterrupted play and to sit and watch and learn from what children do, as this an ideal opportunity for observing children's developmental milestones, schemas (repeated patterns of behaviour), preferences and interests. This is one type of play where we don't ask questions, offer particular objects or commentate on play: "oh you've picked up the red tin". Instead, as with the muddy puddle, enjoy watching children show

you what they are interested in. Marvel at their concentration, focus, determination and the wonder of their creative minds. Offer the basket at different times and take it indoors and out to see if children respond differently, play with different items, or use the objects together for more sophisticated types of play. This child-led play doesn't mean the EYFS goes out the window. Far from it. As the typical observations in 'Feeling the way' (see above) reveal, meaningful curriculum outputs are commonplace.

Sue Gascoyne, Nursery World Trainer of the Year 2009 is also Managing Director of Play to Z Ltd, producers of multi-award winning playful learning resources and training.

findoutmore

Check out the next issue of Teach Nursery to find out how you can use Stage 2, the most creative stage, and Stage 3 – an adult-initiated phase of the Sensory Play Continuum – to further develop, support and extend children's play with treasure baskets.

