

THE Montessori METHOD



Activity tables are ideal for encouraging sensory explorations this winter, says **Barbara Isaacs...**

During last year's warm and gentle autumn, many settings had the opportunity to develop their outdoor activities, and also to enrich their activity tables inside. Montessori's own idea that the "outside must come inside, and the inside be taken outside" invites practitioners to make links between the indoor and outdoor classrooms and to help children make links between the two learning environments, thus

increasing their tactile awareness and supporting their need to learn through the senses.

Leaf collections and hunts for conkers, acorns and seeds give children opportunities to investigate the gardens or take part in expeditions to local parks and open spaces. The artefacts found can be brought back into the classroom and arranged on the activity table to facilitate the exploration of textures, colours, sizes, shapes, as well as sound and movement. Magnifying glasses and microscopes can be used further extend the children's learning. Observations of these explorations will give practitioners opportunities to note children's:

- use of language, particularly when describing their explorations;
- mathematical skills, when comparing sizes, colours, shapes and textures;
- powers of observation – their ability to notice similarities and differences;
- skills of representation as they begin to use the resources in a symbolic way, for example, making the conker into a slithering snail, or a sycamore seed into a helicopter;
- ability to share the resources on the table.

The observations will also serve as tools for further planning and extension of children's learning using books, blocks and arts and craft activities within the classroom.

In winter, the outdoor resources are not as plentiful, but there is still an opportunity to use the activity table for artefacts representing the various festive seasons, for example, Hanukkah, Christmas, and the Chinese New Year.

On the table

Transport themes offer further opportunities to extend children's learning. Sorting models of the many vehicles in use across the world, using mats representing land, water and air, can be a good start for such a project during the winter. Once again, opportunities for sensory learning are plentiful: children can sort for vehicles by size, type, and colour, or by sound in a type of a sound lotto whilst developing play scenarios.

Or how about the exploration of light? This is another useful winter theme, which can be facilitated by the activity table. Starting with a light box, children can explore shadows and shapes, leading to the mixing of colours, making of rainbows and investigation of transparent, translucent and opaque materials. Shadow puppets become useful tools for story telling and can also introduce new cultures to the children.

Another natural element which can be explored during winter is water – always a source of delight to children. Using their knowledge of floating and sinking, children can investigate the properties of ice, and even explore steam with the supervision of adults. The changing qualities of water from liquid to solid and gas are miraculous for young children, providing rich opportunities for discussion and introduction of scientific hypotheses, and would be a natural introduction to the water cycle and observation of weather for the older children.

Finally, don't forget magnets, as they offer yet another chance to extend the resources offered to children on the activity table, and to promote their growing sensory awareness and opportunities to construct shape and forms using a variety of games.

Remember, with some consideration, opportunities for sensory exploration lie at the heart of most early years activities. Offering children artefacts on activity tables draws their attention towards them and gives practitioners the opportunity to observe and evaluate their level of knowledge and understanding of their environment and plan for further activities.



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