

## Messy play and sensory exploration

Hi, my name is Georgie and I am mum to my 11-month-old daughter Cara.

Cara was born in May 2020 at the height of the first lockdown! It was definitely tough having our first baby during lockdown – not being able to surround ourselves with family and friends, grandparents having to meet her for the first time on the driveway and missing out on so many things including baby classes. It definitely hasn't been the maternity leave I'd always imagined. But despite this, we have still had an amazing year. Becoming parents has changed our lives and we absolutely love it.

I studied Early Childhood Studies in university and now work as a community nursery nurse. I have always had a huge passion for working with children and a big love for all things play, especially sensory and messy play!

During lockdown, I began sharing my play ideas on my Instagram page and created a blog to share both play ideas and my journey of motherhood during lockdown. Because we were at home and unable to meet friends or go to classes, I found this outlet so helpful. My hope as I share a few of my play ideas is that they will also help and inspire you to try some new play with

your little ones. You might like to pass these ideas onto your families or use them within your toddler groups.

Messy play and sensory exploration helps babies to begin to understand the world around them:

- Great for exploration – learning through texture, smell and taste
- Promotes creativity and imagination – no right and wrong, no set 'end goal'
- Helps to develop fine motor skills
- Provides opportunities to aid language development by labelling what your child can see and do

### 1. Edible sand



This was so easy to make – just blend up cereal and *voila!* I used Weetabix, Cheerios and granola (which I also used in the sensory bag activity below), but this works

equally well with most cereals on their own. The texture really is just like sand!

I put the 'sand' onto our tuff tray and added some stacking cups, balls, and animals to create a 'beach' theme.

Some language examples for this play could include 'sand', 'dry', 'crumbly', 'pour', 'fill', 'tap tap', 'the sand feels rough' and 'you put the sand in the cup'.

This is great for a minimal clean up messy play, as it is dry so brushes off easily and can be quickly hoovered up or kept in a container to be used again another time.

## 2. Sensory umbrella

I made this 'sea' themed sensory umbrella for our at-home baby sensory class - it was so easy to put together. All you need is an umbrella and items you can tape to the edges such as foil, ribbon, string and bubble wrap.

You could make this into any theme by changing the colours and textures. For example - jungle theme by using more greens, space theme by using cut out stars/moon/planets and greys and dark blues, or safari theme with animal pictures and yellows.



This is a great way to allow babies to experience different textures and they will love seeing the different fabrics as you spin the umbrella around them. I also paired this activity with the Usborne book 'That's not my mermaid', which we read while we sat under the umbrella. Pairing activities with books is a great way to incorporate reading into your play.

## 3. Messy play – jelly and spaghetti

I made the jelly up the night before and then set it out on our tuff tray with an empty bowl, wooden spoon and a mini whisk and allowed Cara to explore it. She

began to explore quite tentatively at first but she soon got stuck in and loved the feel of it on her feet and very quickly was covered!

Another idea for jelly play is hiding items in the jelly such as animal figures, shells, little balls or anything you have around the house. This is great fun for all ages and allows for even more exploration.

For the spaghetti, I cooked it and split portions into zip lock bags, added a different food colouring to each bag and set them out to dry. For the play, I again put them on our tuff tray to allow Cara to explore in her own way.



#### 4. Treasure baskets

Treasure baskets are simple to put together and keep little ones engaged for ages! There are so many options, just think real

play. Select things your child is interested in or collect items from around the house and fill a basket or bag and just let your child explore it at their own pace. Children love to explore things that aren't typically 'toys'.

I created a treasure basket by filling a wicker basket with a loofah, exfoliating glove, nail brush, feather, hair curlers, pastry brush, some wooden rings and a short rope. These items all have different textures which children will love to explore and feel.

#### 5. Ball drop

For this activity I used an empty cardboard box and cut holes in the lid for Cara to explore pushing the balls through. I used ball pit balls for this activity and this is a large box – ensure you don't use small balls that little ones could put in their mouth.

This activity can also help with 'object permanence', which is the understanding that an object still exists even when it can't be seen or heard. This is good for when children begin to experience separation anxiety, as play is a great way to help children learn and process things.

I love to keep cardboard boxes from deliveries to assist with play – before I cut

the holes, Cara loved playing with the box as it was, using it as a 'drum', opening and closing the lid and trying to climb in and out of it! Cardboard boxes allow for some great open-ended play and allow little ones to explore and widen their imagination. Ever heard of the phrase 'kids prefer the box the toy comes in'?

## 6. Sensory bags

I love messy play but sometimes mess free is needed! Sensory bags are great for those times you want minimal mess and no tidy up. They also allow exploration of different textures, especially those not safe to put in children's mouths! Plus, these last for a lot longer.

I filled these zip lock bags with hair gel and colourful buttons, water and glitter/food colouring, cereal and pom poms. Cara enjoyed exploring the buttons in the hair gel with her fingers using a pincer grasp, which developed her fine motor skills.

I also set this up by taping the bags to the floor to allow Cara to crawl to each bag – this is great when little ones are beginning to crawl or walk. You could also tape them to the wall or doors to get some standing practice in too.

The possibilities of what you could fill bags with are endless – just make sure you secure them with some tape!

## Messy play – tips for managing the mess

- Use a tuff tray or large tray to contain as much of the mess as possible
- Place an old shower curtain or rag under the tray for extra protection – or even just use this instead of the tray
- Use clothes you don't mind getting dirty or strip them down to their nappy. I have a couple of clothes that I tend to use specifically for messy play that I don't mind if they get stained
- In warmer weather get outside and just hose down once you're done
- Get the bath/shower/kitchen sink ready to wash them down
- Enjoy and embrace it! There are so many benefits to messy play

I hope you have as much fun as we have had with these sensory ideas!

For more of my ideas on play you can visit my [blog](#) and my Instagram page [@littles\\_journeyandme](#).

Thank you for reading!