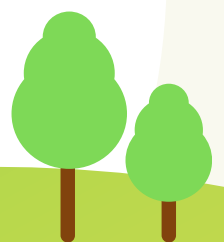




# Playful Learning with Fine Motor Activities

*theempowerededucatoronline.com*



BY JODIE CLARKE



Hi there, I'm Jodie!

## A Little About Me

I enjoy supporting early **childhood educators & parents** around the world through my training sessions, blog posts, digital resources, play ideas and **Member Hub** to feel more confident in their role **no matter their level of experience** or the early learning environment they are currently involved in!

I have worked in the early childhood and community services profession **for over 35 years** **AND I'm a parent of 3** so I know what it's like to be always busy without the support, time and step by step guidance you need. *As often overwhelmed parents, carers and educators* we don't have time for any difficult to understand jargon, lengthy theoretical debates or complicated learning activities - we just want to **meet education requirements and engage with children (without stress overload)** while still having the time to do what we do best...support and extend the unique **learning journey of every child** as they grow and discover in these very important early years - whether that's with you at home or in an early learning service.

And that is exactly why I like to do things a little bit differently to **support educators, carer and parents** just like you - I don't believe that home learning plans, online training and the tools we access to help us plan fun learning experiences need to be complicated, out of the budget or rigid. I believe every adult **learns differently** and at a **different pace** and that's OK. There is nothing wrong with going back to basics & embracing simple... so welcome to our **Empowered Ed Community for Educators, Teachers, Parents & Carers...** let's do this together!

Welcome to your  
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# How to Make Chalk Paint

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

# Make your own chalk paint!

As a parent and an early childhood educator I love to find different ways of making my own budget friendly resources and this chalk paint is one of my favourites!

It is a simple hands on activity that encourages children to take part both in making the paint with you and then using it to get creative.

You only need a few simple materials for this activity and it can be easily modified to suit both toddlers and older children. My 6 year old twins enjoyed making their paint outside one afternoon after school finished for the day.

We then used it many times throughout the week. Follow the easy steps below to make your own chalk paint!



## WHAT YOU NEED TO MAKE CHALK PAINT

- A collection of old or broken chalk ends (you can also use new chalk if you prefer, thick sidewalk sticks work well for this activity and if you have a large group of children).
- Tack hammers and/or wooden mallets and hammers for younger children (or you can use rolling pins as another option)
- Ziplock bags
- A strong stable surface for hammering (you can use the ground, a table or a wooden cookie stump like we did – factor in the age of your children and what would work best for them.)
- Bucket or tub of water and a few jugs for pouring
- Spoons for mixing
- Paper and/or wood offcuts for painting



MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!





## WHAT YOU DO NOW TO MAKE THE CHALK PAINT

*I advise getting all of your materials ready before you start this activity – especially if playing with toddlers!*

Hand out a bag to each child and encourage them to choose the chalk pieces they want to crush – obviously the darker colours will create a more vivid paint.



This is a fun way to explore light and dark as well as basic colour mixing if using quite a few different chalk colours. When the pieces are chosen, help to make sure the bags are sealed securely and then place them flat on a hard surface.



MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!

Now it's time to challenge those fine motor muscles and hand eye coordination skills with some hammering. The aim is to crush the chalk pieces into a powder.

This can take a bit of work but I'm yet to meet a child who doesn't love hammering! If you would prefer not to use hammers why not try some wooden rolling pins – they can use them to bang and to roll across the bag and you will still end up with the same result – just takes a little more time!

You can also try the meat tenderizer mallet (see picture below) as another alternative to hammers.



**MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!**

There are always ways to modify an activity depending on what you have available. If you don't have ziplock bags or would prefer not to use plastic why not hand out some metal plates or bowls like these ones (I got mine for only a few dollars at Kmart) and use them for the hammering instead. This is better suited to the older children though as they need to be able to hold onto the bowl while they hammer to stop it from bouncing off the table!



When they have finished their hammering and crushing (you might need to help the toddlers crush theirs up a little more) pour into some bowls for mixing into paint.

**MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!**



Don't worry too much about getting the powder extra fine – there will be lumpier paints and thinner paints at the end but the point is they have fun creating their own version and it all adds to the sensory experience anyway!



Now it's time to add some water and get mixing! We talked about adding just a few drops or little bit of water at a time so we didn't end up with just runny coloured water – this will happen though, especially with the younger children, so again....don't get stressed, just let them experiment!



**MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!**

As you can see from the pictures below we went through a bit of trial and error to get the paint to the thickness we wanted and some of the chalk was not so crushed... but it was fun working through the possibilities!



**MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!**

Now it's time to have fun painting! We painted on some recycled brown packaging paper but you could of course use whatever you have available.

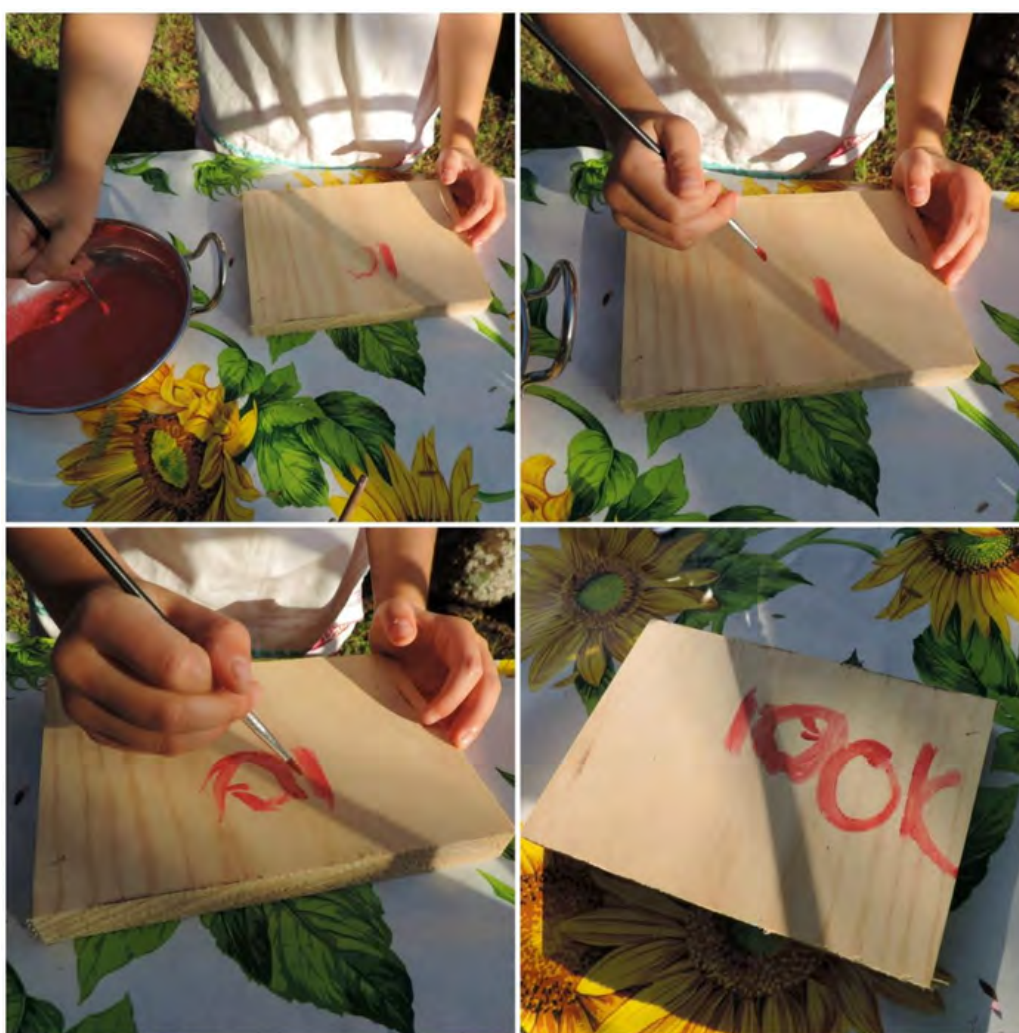
They certainly were proud of making their own paint and wanted to go back and keep making more and more colour combinations. I encourage you to take this activity outside so you don't need to worry about the mess from hammering and the children can come and go and take their paint around the yard to decorate treasures that they find!



MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!

We also used some wood offcuts out of our craft recycle bin and the twins practised writing and naming their sight words (Beat sitting indoors doing a homework worksheet that's for sure!)

Making your own chalk paint with the children's involvement really is so easy and it's also a fun way to model to children how we can use the resources and materials we already have and turn them into something new to play with and use in a different way.



MAKE YOUR OWN CHALK PAINT!



# Inviting Imagination into Outdoor Play with Facepainting

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**



## INTRODUCTION

# Doll Face Painting Fun!

I think it is really important to ensure your outdoor play environment provides opportunities for a child to use their imagination.

I love being an observer and listening to their play – children truly are masters of imaginary play and if you listen carefully you will hear them working through problems, trying to understand the world around them, exploring the roles of people and community. They are also having a whole lot of fun!

Children often use play to further explore their current interests. Although children are very adept at using the materials and environment around them to create their own play it is sometimes nice to offer an additional invitation to play with the goal of extending a current interest and acknowledging that they want to explore and create and 'act out' what they are learning.



My twins are currently very interested in facepainting and the role of a facepainter. It seems they are always having their faces painted lately – at Bunnings, parties, markets and even when out to dinner at family friendly places. And trust me when I say they are growing quite particular with their requests! They have become little facepainting connoisseurs!

I've let them paint my face, I've painted theirs and they have even tried to makeover the dog who ran far and fast when they headed toward him with the brush! But I wanted to set up an activity that would allow them to really get creative and explore this role and their emerging interest on their own. And that's when I decided to get the dolls out!

This activity was very simple to set up and even though my girls are 5 in these photos it would be suitable as a toddler activity too. It's one of those activities that is perfect for multi age groups as children will modify it to suit – older children will enjoy being more detailed with their painting and toddlers will just love covering as much of the doll as they can with paint! I also incorporated a water tub for washing baby and this is easily modified for all ages.

## WHAT YOU NEED FOR FACEPAINTING

**Washable paint** – I used acrylic paints we had on hand (You could do this with proper face painting materials to of course but I like to keep activities budget friendly and easy to clean!)

**Brushes** – I supplied an assortment of brush 'tools' as you can see in the photo below but whatever you have will work. Thinner brushes allow more chance for getting those important details 'just right'!

**Water** – A container of water to clean brushes as they work. I also set up a tub with water and bubbles for washing creations off ready to start again!

**Dolls** – A doll that you can prop or sit up with a larger facial area is perfect. Of course face painting will quickly become body painting for many so don't worry to much about finding the perfect doll. Just make sure you are happy for it to get messy!



**Extras** – I cut up some kitchen sponges to use for cleaning and blending paint and then a few little mirrors so they could show their ‘customers’ the finished design.

I used glitter paint in place of loose glitter but you could certainly provide something sparkly for children to stick to the face paint design! If you want to keep it simple though just stick with the paint, dolls and paint brushes!

Then it’s time to step back and let the creativity and conversations begin



Ruby decided her first character was going to be 'Spiderwoman' and she put great emphasis on the 'woman' part – Love it! There was a lot of concentration and attention to detail. Fantastic opportunity to strengthen fine motor muscles and grip which she often struggles with.



OUTDOOR PLAY WITH FACEPAINTING



I noticed lots of experimentation with thick and thin brushes as different designs were created – there was even a little blending with sponges – just like the real facepainters!

If you could have heard the conversation and explanation behind this red face you would know that there was actually a great deal of thought that went into this design even though to our adult eyes it just looks like red paint everywhere!

Incorporating mirrors into play provides opportunities to explore self, faces, materials and the environment from different angles and perspectives. And they really sounded like facepainters too as they asked their customers to look at their finished designs!



OUTDOOR PLAY WITH FACEPAINTING



When it was time for a new design they headed over to the water tub and washed off the paint with sponges which became just as much fun and another opportunity for conversation and role play as they looked after their babies.

And then it was time to start all over again! The simplest of play experiences can often invite so many opportunities for learning and creative self expression!



OUTDOOR PLAY WITH FACEPAINTING



# Wooden Stump Geoboards – Math Play Outdoors!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

# How to Make a Wooden Stump Geoboard for Outdoor Play

Outdoor play provides many opportunities for children to investigate, problem solve, learn new skills and challenge themselves. I love thinking of different ways we can get outside and continue to try new experiences.

Just because an activity may usually be done indoors doesn't mean educators and parents can't consider new ways to take the play outdoors!

My twins often show a keen interest in using real tools.

They do a lot of little projects with their Dad and even have their own toolboxes filled with real tools just like Daddy does.

Working with tools is definitely not a gender specific activity and shouldn't be treated as such!





They had been practising their hammer and nail skills and I thought it might be fun to incorporate their love of making patterns and shapes while strengthening those eye hand coordination skills!

His Patient Self used the chainsaw on an old eucalyptus tree that had fallen to make us some stumps and large tree cookies. I knew immediately that I could use a few to make some stump geoboards. They are so easy to make but children really enjoy being involved in the process from start to finish. Want to make some too? Here's how we did it!

First find yourself some wooden stumps or even just scrap wood offcuts (landscapers and tree loppers are good to approach). We are lucky enough to have a lot of fallen branches and logs on our property and His Patient Self is trying to get used to using the chainsaw so of course I had to give him a project to help him.

I requested some stumps of varying thicknesses as I want to use some for an obstacle course in the backyard (as you do!) I chose the smaller ones for our geoboard project.





The girls also insisted on setting them up around their mat to use as stages for their dolls as we played outside!

Grab some large nails and a few real hammers. I have some smaller ones for my girls and have used them with toddlers in my Family Day Care service – yes toddlers! With guidance and supervision hammering with real tools can be such a valuable experience for older children as well as younger toddlers.

Start them off by hammering some nails into the wood until they just grab and become fixed into the stump. Then hand out the hammers and let the children keep hammering until they are firmly wedged. In reality they probably won't move the nails much depending on the type of wood but they will think they are and will enjoy lots of practice using those fine motor, spatial awareness and hand eye coordination skills and that's what counts!



This was serious business and Ruby even tried to remove a few nails to move their position. I love that she has learnt how to use the claw part of the hammer to remove nails...and that she insists on wearing her 'favourite pretty dress' to do her hammering in!

## WOODEN STUMP GEOBOARDS

They really took great pride in hammering the nails and getting them just right. Toddlers also love this sort of activity and I encourage you to let them be involved because they will probably surprise you with how focused they become and their isn't actually a 'wrong' way to do the hammering.

Well unless it's on another child's head but that is rare with positive guidance as they are so focused on the task you have shared with them I promise!!

I let them tell me when they were happy with their work and felt like they were ready to move onto the next step. It's important not to rush children as they work.

As an educator or parent (or both) you might have a plan in mind to reach the end product but it's essential to let them work through the process at their own pace and feel that sense of satisfaction of getting their project 'just right'.



When they are happy with their nails and you have made sure they are all firmly wedged into the wood – while still allowing some room for the heads of the nails to be above the wood (don't let them hammer them all the way in!) you can pass out the rubber bands.

I like to get the balls of rubber bands from my local Woolworths as it provides another little challenge for those fine motor skills as they work to peel each one off the ball. Also allows each child to have their own little stash of bands to use as they want to. Mine like to be able to choose the colours they will use and how they use them.



Then it really is time to leave them to it to get creative and experiment with colour, patterns and shapes as they hook the bands from one nail to another.



You might sit back and watch or join in a discussion about the colours, shapes and patterns being created. The twins really enjoyed telling me about the shapes they were making on this day. We talked about big and small triangles and how to make some that were the 'same' and then 'different'.

It was fascinating to watch how engrossed they became in creating their patterns and how they chose to use the bands. They work in very different ways as Ruby prefers to just mix everything up, change the pattern and colours every few minutes while Tara is very deliberate with the colours she chooses and patterns she makes. Fascinating to watch how children choose to work in different ways with the same materials.



To keep a record of the wonderful creations each child makes I suggest taking lots of photos and then displaying for the children to discuss with friends, family and carers. I realised how old my girls are getting when they both told me I should 'put the picture of their stump on my blog to show other kids how to make one too!' When did they get so wise?

It really is a very simple activity but one that embraces and supports outdoor play, natural materials, independence, self expression and creativity. Why not give it a try this week?





# Learning with Magic Tape Names!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**



## INTRODUCTION

# Paint Names Using Tape!

Who would have thought painting and tracing a name could be so much fun?

Such an easy little activity but children really enjoy the thrill of seeing their names at the end and I think the masterpieces

turned out quite well!

We found some shiny cardboard packaging in the recycle bin and I decided it would make the perfect canvas for the girls to 'paint' their names.

They are really interested in name and letter recognition at the moment so this was just a fun little activity to foster that interest.



You'll note I haven't used correct handwriting font or anything like that... this is a toddler activity just for fun and to help keep their emerging interest in letters and pre-writing skills.

Using masking tape I roughly marked out their names in the middle of the card and then laid out some paint with brushes of varying thicknesses. I also taped around the edge to form a little border to give it that added 'masterpiece' feel!



My girls approached this activity in very different ways. Tara loved painting all the gaps first before trying to trace over the letters, a difficult skill for this age! If you decide to give it a try just keep your expectations realistic... they are not meant to be 'writing' as yet!

LEARNING WITH MAGIC TAPE NAMES!



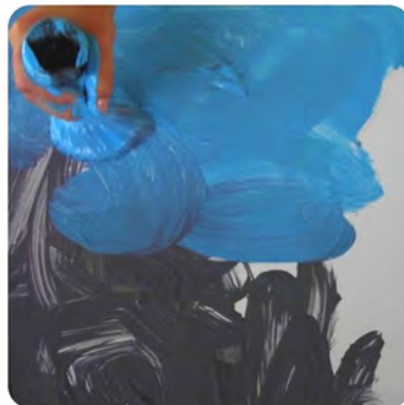
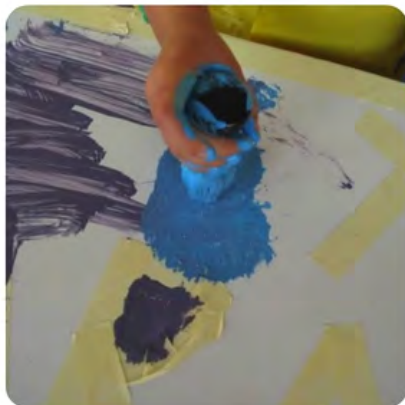
Ruby also tried to trace but soon turned her focus to just covering each piece of masking tape first. We talked about the letters they were painting and what colours they were using.



LEARNING WITH MAGIC TAPE NAMES!

Tara focused on getting each letter covered well before moving onto the next one. Then they both discovered the shaving brushes.

I love using these brushes with toddlers, so easy for them to grasp and they can be moved around in different ways to a paintbrush. They soon realised that they could cover their letters a lot quicker with a bigger, thicker brush!



LEARNING WITH MAGIC TAPE NAMES!

Shaving brushes are also great for making big colourful splodges!

In the picture below you can see how each girl chose to create their masterpieces in a different way. Tara was very precise at first, she painted over all the letters and then proceeded to cover all of the white areas... and I do mean all...she was very specific!!

Ruby was more interested in mixing different colours and painting circles and lines as well as making splodges. She has been practising circle and line movements recently and I can see her reviewing this skill when she participates in activities like this.

I didn't encourage her to cover the entire piece of card to form a border. This is how she wanted to create and I think it's important for parents/carers/educators to respect that when children are creating. It's their art... not ours, so if it doesn't look like we envisioned... it's really not important!



LEARNING WITH MAGIC TAPE NAMES!



A little in awe of all that glorious paint and not quite sure whether to touch it or not at that stage. She still takes a little while before jumping in to messy, sensory type play as many children do to begin with.



After making sure they had covered all of the tape (not a problem with Tara!!) I left it to dry in the sun for a day and it did take a full day to dry completely as they put enough paint on to cover a house I think!

I then peeled off the tape carefully (the shiny surface of the card was very helpful with this!) and we stood back to watch the great reveal!

LEARNING WITH MAGIC TAPE NAMES!

The toddler twosome were so excited and quickly began to start tracing their names with their fingers. A great opportunity to again talk about the letters, count the letters in their name and also use some fine motor skills!

I think they turned out rather special and they are still tracing over them as they play in their rooms where they are hanging with pride!



LEARNING WITH MAGIC TAPE NAMES!



# Recycling Deodorant Bottles for Fun!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**



## INTRODUCTION

I've been collecting empty roller deodorant bottles for a little while now because I wanted to share a favourite activity from my early days of child care. It's a fantastic frugal activity for practising fine motor skills and also for those children that don't really like getting their hands too messy with paint!



I just love recycling items from around the house and turning them into creative learning opportunities full of fun. There really is no need to buy expensive products to have a little fun with your toddler at home!

After using the last drops of roll on deodorant simply slide a butter knife in between the side of the roller and container as shown below. It's quite easy really, you just have to wiggle it in place and then it is a simple matter of popping out the ball!

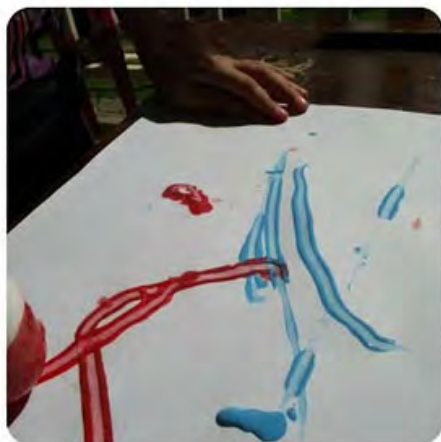




All ready for a little roller painting fun! It's a good idea to do a few test runs first to get the paint flowing before offering otherwise it can prove difficult to use the first time for toddlers.

So many opportunities for fine motor fun and exploration as they push down and try to roll, play with the roller ball to see how it works and putting the lids on and off is lots of fun too!

Ruby took quite a while to decide which one she wanted to use mainly based on the packaging I think! She was happy to begin painting without touching the paint for quite a while as she got a little braver she began to explore the roller and get a little more paint on her fingers each time.



ROLLER BOTTLE PAINTING

This toddler twosome enjoyed creating lines, dots and splatters with their roller bottles. They made lovely colourful prints.



Ruby was overjoyed when she realised she could make splatters with the bottle by using it in a different way. Once she started we went through an awful lot of paper I can tell you!



ROLLER BOTTLE PAINTING

Tara preferred to make lines and splodges...



Dabbing was lots of fun and took lots of control to do...

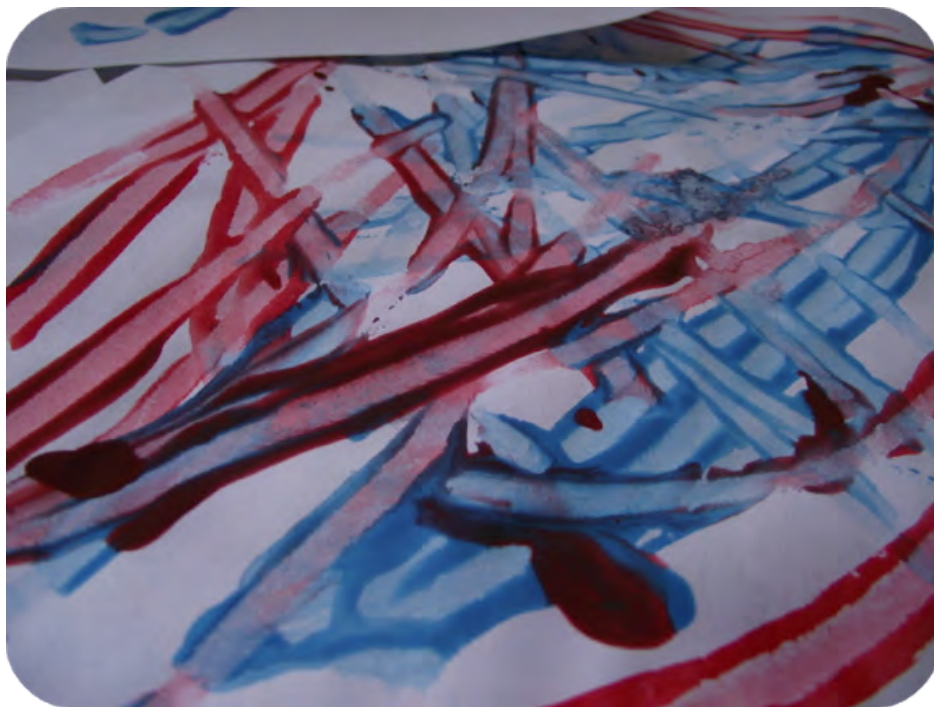


ROLLER BOTTLE PAINTING

This is Ruby's 'face'... I can see it... can you? She was very proud of it!



A fun, easy and frugal activity which left us with lots of masterpieces to share with family and adorn our walls.... I hope you give it a try!



ROLLER BOTTLE PAINTING



# Sensory Seeking Fun with Rollers

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

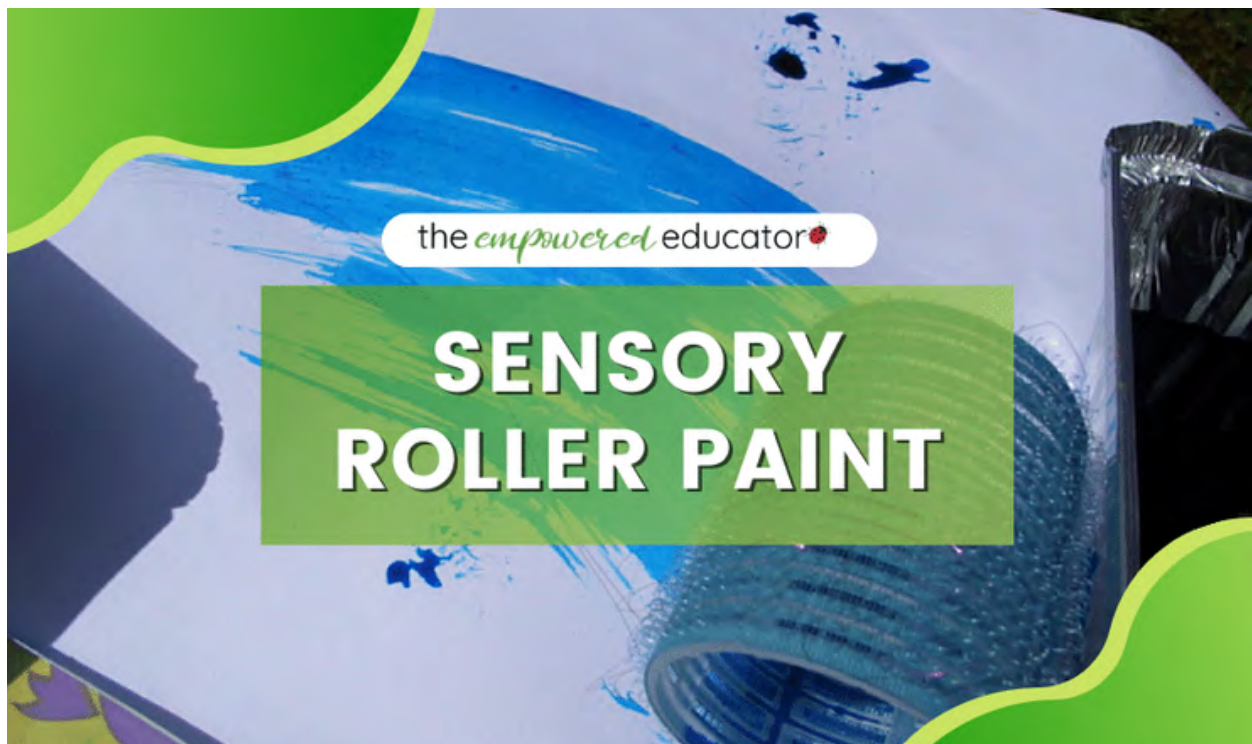
# Velcro Roller Painting

We always have lots of fun with our hairdressing prop box .

I introduced it as a way of helping the toddler twosome become more comfortable with hair brushing and all things hairdressing as this is a huge area of stress for both the girls and me!

As they were thoughtfully decorating my head with velcro rollers the other day (and I do recommend you keep track of what's in your hair before opening the front door to the delivery man by the way. Currently trying to block a little incident out!)

I decided that the rollers would make a fantastic sensory painting experience! (yes I know my mind works in mysterious ways...)



## WE TRIED OUT A LITTLE VELCRO ROLLER PAINTING

Very easy to set up, I just used a few of the recycled trays I am always collecting, filled them with some water, sprinkled on a little edicol powder dye (you could use food colouring if no dye) and plonked a few different sized rollers into the trays.

We had red and blue rollers so I decided to match with the paint colour although I didn't stress that they had to stay that way. This activity was all about exploration and challenging the senses!

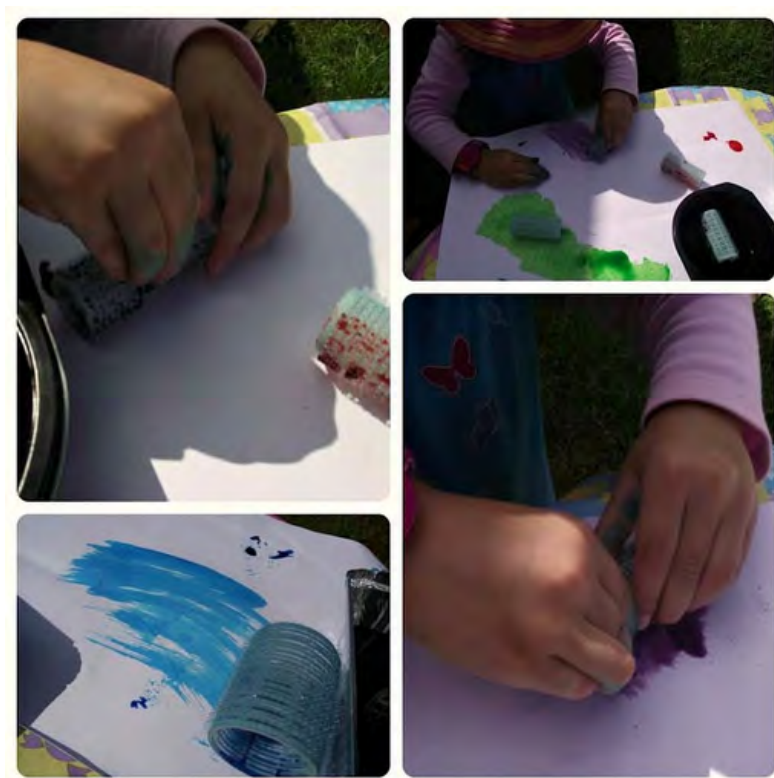


After rolling in a little water paint the girls then used them in various ways on the paper. They scrubbed which caused the paper to shred a little and form balls which caused much excitement!





They rolled back and forth, they swiped using long strokes, they dabbed gently and they pressed down hard. So much fine motor fun and discovery!



SENSORY ROLLER PAINT

It took Ruby a while before she would paint with them. Some children will not be keen on the prickly texture and having to hold them for long periods of time so be patient.

Encourage children who don't like the prickly texture to begin painting by holding near the ends of the rollers instead and mainly just stamping. The rollers would make a fantastic activity for those children who are sensory seekers though as there is constant stimulation.

Ruby did a lot of touching the rollers to her face which is what she tends to do when unsure about a texture and if it is 'safe' for her to interact with. I found it interesting that by placing the rollers into a different activity (other than the hairdressing box) she became cautious of them again.

In all honesty she preferred to go and collect rocks but she did stick with it for a while and it was a nice little sensory challenge for her. Best to offer these challenges in short sessions so they don't get too stressed. Tara absolutely loved it though and enjoyed finding different ways to paint with them. Always follow a child's lead.



Because I used water paint the rollers just rinsed clean easily and dried quickly ready for use in our prop box again another day.

You could also use a thicker acrylic type craft paint but it would be harder to wash out of the rollers. You can pick bags of these sort of velcro rollers up from the discount shops for a few dollars.

I like to have a mix of sizes and colours so we can use them for colour recognition and sorting activities too!

I really encourage you to give this a go if you have kids with sensory difficulties whether sensory sensitive or sensory seeking there are many ways to incorporate rollers into some play activities and challenge those senses!



**SENSORY ROLLER PAINT**



# Play-based Learning with Playdough

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Playdough is a truly wonderful play based learning tool for children. It can be used as a medium for strengthening fine motor skills and supporting colour, letter and number recognition as well as encouraging sensory exploration and investigation.

You can add colour or leave it plain, add different tools for children to find new ways of using and introduce other sensory materials including those from nature to take the play in a different direction.



I use playdough with my own twins and also with my family day care children and love to encourage others to think outside the box and offer more than just a lump of playdough with the same cookie cutters each time. You will find the children remain engaged with the activity for a lot longer and it will provide many opportunities for you to do a little intentional teaching while they are having fun.

Today I am sharing just a few of the ways we like to use our playdough. I always make my own. You can find my [microwave recipe here](#).

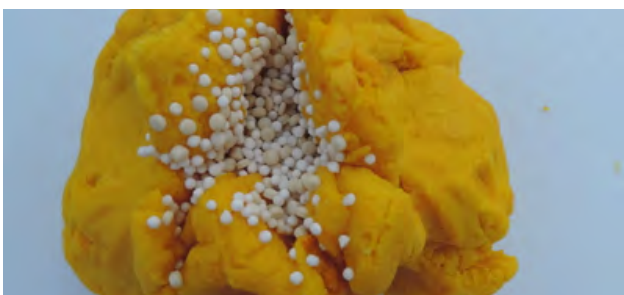
It's quick and easy to make and don't have that awful smell that the commercial playdough has. But if that is what you like to use than these ideas will still work for you too!

## SENSORY FUN WITH PLAYDOUGH

Adding sensory materials to dough allows children to explore and use their senses in different ways.

- Is it hard or soft?
- How does it feel when you squish and roll the dough?
- What else can we add that is hard/soft?
- What does it smell like?
- Can your fingers find something bumpy and smooth?

Sago (uncooked) added to the playdough was very popular here recently. I have also used dry tapioca which are slightly bigger balls so it provided opportunities for discussion about big and small.

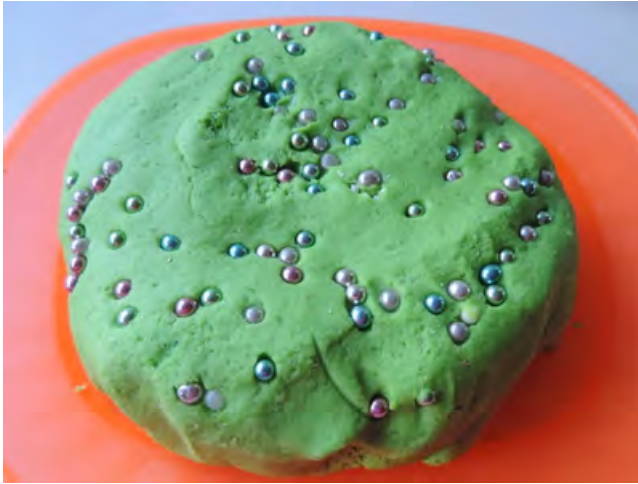




Coloured cake decorating balls are quite hard and challenged little fingers to push and poke until they had them where they wanted them. A good workout for those hand and wrist muscles.

After hiding the balls I joined in the play and asked the older children if they could find me “5 blue balls”, “2 red”, “1 blue, 1 yellow and one red” etc. They really enjoyed this extra challenge and the toddlers were happy to just keep exploring with their hands, rolling and squishing and trying to find the colourful balls.





At Christmas time we coloured the dough with festive colours, some shiny 'baubles' and then cut out Christmas tree shapes to decorate with more balls.

And then there is the power of smell. Ruby is a sensory seeker and loves to smell and feel the playdough on her face at times. This batch had a little lemon and eucalyptus essential oils kneaded through it as we were all suffering from colds and blocked noses that week.

When adding scents be very sparing though, you only need a drop or two or you can easily overwhelm sensitive noses and it's not great for those who still like to taste their playdough either!

We have also picked lavender from the garden, crushed it with a mortar and pestle in our outdoor kitchen and then kneaded it through our playdough. A lovely experience but I gave up trying to find the photos sorry. I really need to sort and store my digital photos a little better obviously... one day.





## INTENTIONAL TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES



Use playdough as your base to extend upon. There are many ways you can introduce some simple learning concepts while the children are just having fun.

I used some coloured counting teddies and corresponding coloured dough in the activity below. We matched bears to colours, made different patterns and sequences, mixed colours to make other colours , counted out how many bears were stuck in each 'mudhole' and talked about big and small.



Using some letter stamps in the dough was fun for all ages but provided different challenges for each developmental stage. Toddlers practiced their pincer grip and picking things up from a pile before trying to push hard enough to imprint on the dough. The older children tried to find the first letter of their name to press into the dough. We looked for the upper case and lower case.

Challenge those problem solving, hand/eye coordination and fine motor skills by using some sticks pushed into playdough and then letting children attempt to thread different sized pieces of pasta onto the sticks. The playdough will hold the stick so the child can use both hands to coordinate if need be.



Don't you love the concentration? If you don't have any suitable sticks or want to make it a little easier then why not use some dry spaghetti sticks!



## INVESTIGATING WITH PLAYDOUGH

Making marble playdough is a fun way to introduce mixing colours and cause and effect. Simply make a batch of white playdough, add a little edicol powder dye to a dip in the middle and then fold over once.



Ask the children to start squishing and rolling the dough, the harder they work the more colour they will see!

You end up with a lovely marbling effect, by the end of a weeks play it will be a solid colour. Edicol colour dye is quite strong so I like to do this activity on some wooden boards or make sure your surface is covered in vinyl.



Have you tried using cotton buds (Qtips) in your playdough? They make some amazing creations with these!



You can make different types of dough just by using a few different but common materials and then encourage the children to experiment and investigate.





**Explore shapes using different objects to imprint with....**



Playdough also makes an easy medium to practice those cutting, slicing and snipping skills. Our crinkle cutters are a favourite as are the scissors. Can you cut some small pieces? What about some big pieces? Can we roll a sausage and use our scissors to snip some pieces?



## LOOSE PARTS AND PLAYDOUGH



Loose parts go together so well with playdough and provide so many opportunities for children to explore role play and use their imaginations.

It also gives them the chance to express themselves creatively and make patterns, stories and just plain magical creations that we could never come up with ourselves!



## USING NATURE WITH PLAYDOUGH

Don't forget to include the wonder of the natural environment sometimes when using playdough.

We have used pickings from:

- the vegetable patch, sticks and twigs
- leaves
- gumnuts
- flowers and so much more!

It really does make an interesting base material for children to work with.



I bet you want to go and make a fresh batch of playdough right now don't you? Hopefully you are feeling inspired to step outside the playdough rut a little and go have some fun.



# DIY Fine Motor Board Fun

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**



## INTRODUCTION

This little fine motor board stems from an idea I had a few months back when I observed how much the toddler group attending my family day care service were enjoying playing and creating with washers and bolts whenever I brought them out.

As most toddlers do they also have a love of trying to figure out how things work and putting things on and off. So I thought I would extend upon those interests and make up a simple board that would also challenge their fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination



I'm simply calling it a fine motor board....pretty clever huh? Yes I know it's not that exciting but hey at least you know what I'm talking about!

Now I'm pretty sure you don't need my instructions to make one for yourself but let's take a wander through the process just in case you have a question or two and frankly I took some photos so I have to show them somewhere!



I started off cutting a few boards from some pallets we had stored downstairs, if you want to be fancy you could measure and cut specific sizes but I personally don't think your toddler is going to care either way, just sayin!

We then went on a bit of a scavenger hunt in the shed to find some cup hooks because I just knew I had seen a stash of them somewhere.

Tara thought it was great fun to help me find them and then pick out the ones she thought were the perfect match. And doesn't she have just the perfect outfit for the job? Love that kid's individual sense of style!



The wood we used is pretty rough as it was just recycled pallet timber so it needed a little sanding and then some clear lacquer over the top. We did try some old stain we had on one of the boards but it was too dark so the others just got some lacquer over the top to give them a nicer finish and protect them from the weather as I will be using them outdoors as well as indoors.

You could of course add a stain of your choice but this project was all about using what we already had and the only leftover stain we had was too dark for this project!



Older children will enjoy trying to help you make the boards, they can select different hooks, choose where to put them and even try to screw them in if your timber is soft like the pallet wood pieces we used.

It really doesn't matter where you place the hooks, I used a few different sizes and tried to leave enough room for small fingers to maneuver .



Once you have the hooks where you want them all you need to do is add a little bowl of washers that can be placed on the hooks. I also added some bolt nuts to provide an extra challenge.

Try to include different textures and sizes to encourage and support problem solving and sensory exploration.



At the moment I am just leaning the boards against the wall or some rocks outside so they stand upright and slightly back but I intend to add a few screws to the back so I can add a rope for hanging. Either way works!



Some toddlers will find it more difficult to choose the pieces that fit easily over the hooks, others will just enjoy making patterns and taking the washers on and off and rearranging.

However they choose to play with the board you know they will be strengthening their fine motor and problem solving skills as well as challenging their hand/eye coordination and understanding of the concepts big and small and spatial awareness.

An easy little DIY project that incorporates sustainability and is of course budget friendly. What else could you use the hooks for?





# Toddler Tongs and Water Play!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I love water play activities for keeping toddlers busy outside. Lets me get into the vegetable patch after we have had some fun together. They always find a way to extend the activity and have no further need for my input!

It is always beneficial to find fun ways to help children strengthen their fine motor skills. If you have a child who struggles to maintain interest with fine motor activities then this activity will help you make it interesting!



Some children with Sensory processing challenges often prefer to always be on the move and can crave a lot of gross motor play and action. They will often choose not to focus on a task or activity for a lengthy period of time which unfortunately can cut down on the time they spend participating in fine motor play. All the more reason to make sure it's playful!

From the research I have done and conversations with occupational therapists I really feel that SPD is misunderstood and not often considered to be the cause of this 'always active' behaviour. But as a parent or educator you can help!



We can get a little clever about how to encourage all children to participate in fine motor activities. Starting outside with an activity is a good tactic as they usually tend to feel more comfortable when they know they are able to move around freely.

That may sound indulgent to some parents and teachers perhaps but it is a stepping stone to working within a child's current limits and extending skills to the next stage.

**TODDLER TONGS AND WATER PLAY!**



This particular activity was very basic but lots of fun for both girls. I always ensure that the activities I setup appeal to children at different stages in their development.

I filled 2 large bowls with water, easier for me to have a bowl for each of the girls but you could just as easily do this in the bath, a water table or play pool if you have more children. I added a little edicol dye to colour and then some tongs and our foam building block shapes.



I gave the girls a selection of different sized tongs to use. The idea being that they would use them to pick up the foam blocks floating in the water.

This does take a little practice for a toddler, they need to first understand how the tongs work, then how much pressure to apply to squeeze them together, then how to pick up items from the water. It still provides a challenge for the 3 year olds too.

I did join in and model how to use them a few times but they were happy just to work on their own problem solving!

**TODDLER TONGS AND WATER PLAY!**

Some of the tongs were small, some big, some harder to squeeze, some easier. I pick them up from the op shops whenever I see them as they are such wonderful tools for fine motor activities!



I also added a few items from the kitchen drawer that were heavy enough to sink to the bottom. The girls enjoyed finding them and trying to pick them up with the tongs. It was a little more difficult but sure kept them busy. They just picked them up with their hands if they got too frustrated.



TODDLER TONGS AND WATER PLAY!

Ruby kept watching what Tara was doing and tried to copy even though she found it much harder than her sister. She did wander off quite a few times but kept coming back to give it another try, each time practising her fine motor skills and patience just a little bit more.

She also liked putting the blocks in and out of the water and enjoyed naming the shapes and their colour so another learning opportunity just through play! Tara seemed to be relishing the joy of wielding tongs left, right and centre!!

So much concentration... and a lot of problem solving... she kept going until she got it just right!



As the girls interest in the activity began to wane I decided to extend the fun and brought out our teacups and silver pouring jugs.

**TODDLER TONGS AND WATER PLAY!**

This is one of Ruby's favourite activities and also good for eye hand coordination and of course fine motor skills! They also became fascinated when they realised they could see their reflections in the water.

Don't you wish you could see the wonder of life through toddler's eyes some days?



TODDLER TONGS AND WATER PLAY!

Tara then decided she would pour some of her red water into the paddling pool which had clear water. This turned into a wonderful activity for talking about colour and mixing. A little bit of red...



Some more pouring and a little mixing...and the pool turns red!



TODDLER TONGS AND WATER PLAY!

Amazing how the simple things can keep them so busy for so long...

We stayed outside under our shady tree all morning. And they had a fantastic day time nap! The simple joy of sharing some water play fun with your sister....  
No adult intervention required!



**TODDLER TONGS AND WATER PLAY!**



# Edible Sensory Fine Motor Tray

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I really loved this activity (mainly because it kept the girls busy for ages). Many learning experiences and outcomes were gained from this one easy activity.

The activity kept evolving as I went along (my mind works in mysterious ways when it comes to play) but I originally started with a packet of cornflour (cornstarch) and added some coloured balls.



They are in the baking section with 100's and 1000's and we use them to sprinkle on cookies. Very edible which is always a fun addition to sensory play. I put the flour into a large baking tray and let the girls sprinkle the balls on top.





We talked about the size and colour of the balls and how they might feel in the flour.



EDIBLE SENSORY FINE MOTOR TRAY

And then they dived in! I added a few scoops and then some larger cedar balls, a great prompt to discuss big and small.



I then added some coloured acorns and we discussed how they were bigger still. Tara enjoyed lining them up by size while Ruby revelled in the texture of the cornflour rubbing it back and forth repeatedly.



Cornflour makes such a lovely sensory experience, powdery but slightly squeaky and holding shape better than plain flour.

- There was squishing, rubbing, sifting through fingers and much squeezing.
- There were patterns to make with fingertips and tiny balls to bubble along underneath palms.



I suggested we play a game and asked the girls to find the coloured acorns. It was like a mini treasure hunt as they searched for the colours I called out and then deposited them into their trays. I then made it a little harder by asking them to find the colours of the tiny balls.



I added a few small scoops I found at the op shop and together with some muffin trays a whole new game began, making cakes.

There was lots of fine motor practice happening as they transferred flour from the tray to the cake tins.



The scoops were also the perfect size for picking up the cedar balls out of the flour and placing into trays.

As they tired of the scoops I decided to extend the activity and challenge their fine motor skills further by introducing some small tongs to the tray...



Ruby has been working hard on mastering the use of tongs and I could see her concentration and determination as she began to experiment.



The girls used to tongs to find the balls and acorns in the flour and transfer them to their trays.



And also to make squiggly lines and patterns in the tray.



Of course, with any sensory play there had to be a little taste test. After all, those balls are usually a treat when we are baking! Apparently not quite as tasty when coated in cornflour, there were some funny faces pulled!



I just love this picture as it shows just how much fun they were having that day... which always makes me so glad I made the effort!



EDIBLE SENSORY FINE MOTOR TRAY

They were having so much fun I just didn't want it to end so I handed out the squirt bottles which we often use.



A little water always reinvigorates an activity immediately I think. By adding water to the cornflour the girls began to make a gloopy sensory material that had a whole new feel!





Squirting water into the flour allowed hidden balls and acorns to reappear and colours of the little balls to run and make pretty patterns!



They ended up with a lovely gloopy mess that prompted discussion on how the flour was no longer soft and what had happened when the water was added. There were more cakes to be made, patterns to arrange and balls to squirt and colour.



And when the sensory feel of the wet flour began to get to much for Ruby's sensory system she turned to the bucket of water I always have close by to wash those sticky, gooey hands (which allowed her to start all over again).



I think this activity lasted for about an hour by the time I kept adding new prompts. For very little effort and only a few basic materials I had an activity that presented many learning and sensory opportunities and was a whole lot of fun! I hope you give it a try with whatever materials you have available!



EDIBLE SENSORY FINE MOTOR TRAY



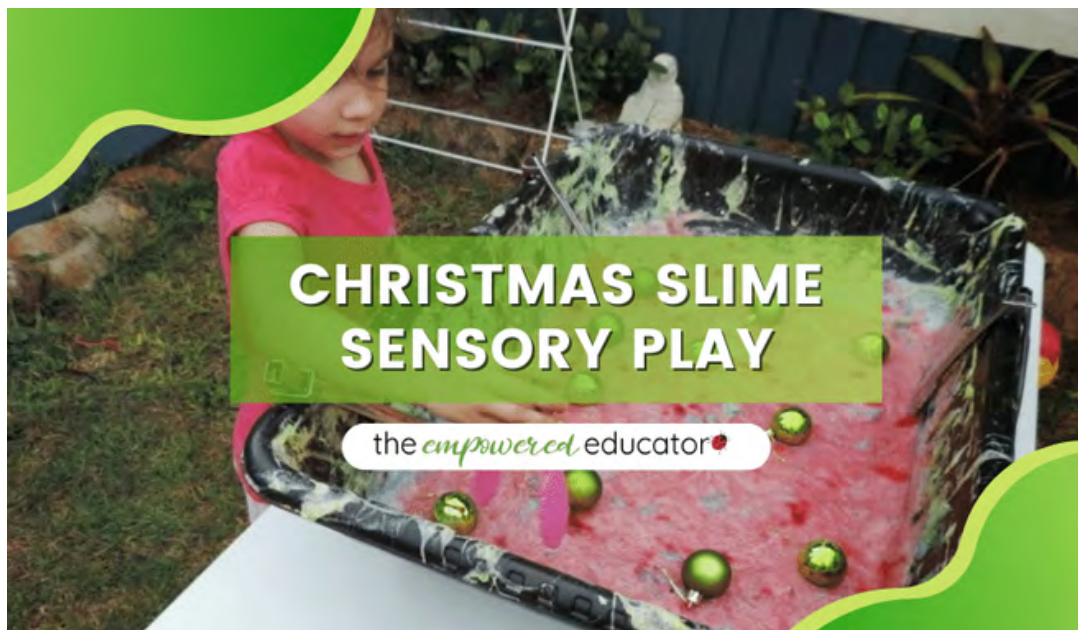
# Christmas Slime Fine Motor Play

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Soapy Slime is one of my favourite activities for all ages – babies, toddlers and preschoolers and if you don't get it too dirty it will last for ages! If you have never made soapy slime for sensory play make sure to check out the recipe further below.

This activity best suits Christmas coming up and the playful preschoolers all excited about hanging baubles and other ornaments on the tree. Turn your slime tub into a little Christmas themed fine motor fun.



Preschoolers would absolutely love this activity as well as day care kids. It's simple to set up... just make up a little 2 ingredient slime with my simple budget friendly recipe, add a little red or green food colouring or edicol dye and a packet of baubles from the \$2 shop or from your outdated Chrissy stash that were due to be replaced anyway.

## HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN SOAPY SLIME

What you need:

- 3 Cups Lux Flakes (or you can grate some pure soap bars – I use Sunlight yellow)
- Around 2.5 litres of warm to hot water (you may need more or less )
- 1/2 teaspoon of Edicol paint powder or a few drops of food colouring – whatever colour you choose to create!

## WHAT TO DO NOW

- Mix together well and then I like to leave overnight or at least for a few hours as the mix will go thick and this way you can tell if you need to add more water or more flakes to get the consistency you desire.
- You can add colour if you want at this stage or keep it white (adding glitter creates a lovely effect in the white mix). Washes off easily when it's time to clean up, smells lovely and will keep in a covered container for quite a while!
- Older children will like to use whisks and egg beaters to froth it up while younger toddlers are usually happy to fingerpaint and squelch with it!



CHRISTMAS SLIME FINE MOTOR PLAY

Place the baubles on top of the slime. I suggest using a wide shallow tub similar to this one (found in the \$2 shop) and then hand out some small tongs. Watch the concentration and excitement as they rise to the challenge.



I added a few egg cartons we had painted with watercolours a few days ago and they raced to see who could fill their tray with Christmas baubles the quickest.

To alter your quantity of slime simply keep adding more soap flakes and hot water. If you want a thinner slime add more water, for thicker add less... easy.

If you just want a white slime to perhaps replicate snow then don't bother with the colour dye and your activity set up just got even easier! If you want the perfect slime then be patient, mix and put it aside overnight before use like I suggested above – it really does give a better slimy result!



If you don't have egg cartons why not try muffin trays or just bowls to drop those balls into?

The children really enjoyed the challenge of getting the slippery balls to the egg cartons and placing them to their satisfaction. Wonderful for problem solving, spatial awareness and hand-eye coordination.



When the trays were filled it was a greater challenge to pick the now slippery balls up and drop them back into the slime!



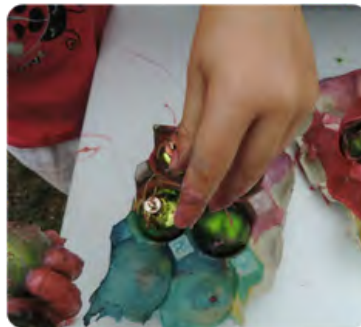
I just love to think up games that we can use these little tongs with. They really are a fantastic, budget friendly tool for challenging and improving fine motor skills and wrist muscles.

This slime sat overnight so it became lovely and thick which made it a little harder each time to get the balls back out as they got a little more slippery at each turn.





When they grew tired of the tongs and the temptation was too much they dived in with their hands to really enjoy the slippery, soft experience of the slime between their fingers. And it proved easier to pick up the balls and then hide them for friends to try and find again!



They finally decided it was even easier to just put the egg cartons into the slime and fill them with balls from there.

Amazing the progression of play and the thought process of children isn't it?

Yes it was messy, but a bucket of water and a towel close by soon washed small hands easily and by doing this activity outside, all the mess just ended up on the grass and the table was easily hosed down. The slime has been put into a covered container to keep for another day.

The balls were washed in a tub of soapy water by the children who played with them, I think it is important for children to be involved in an activity from the start to the end. The children helped me make the slime the previous day, they played with it and then they helped to clean it up.

And did I mention I love slime? Go on, try it! I promise it is the most glorious stress reliever to squish and run it through your hands! Why let the kids have all the fun?





# Painting with Plungers

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

When I saw these small plungers while out shopping, I knew I had to have them. Now I realise not everyone would look at sink plungers and immediately think "Yes, I need 5 of them!" but it's the way my mind works!

The look the cashier gave me as I plonked them all down at the checkout was indeed quite priceless. Is it just me or do you find yourself often saying "I run a family day care service, they aren't just for me".



I've actually got a few ideas in mind for these little beauties but I decided to do the obvious first. Well I thought it was obvious when I saw them! I grabbed some plastic bowls, added some paint and we were ready to go...

**A little word of warning: this activity is best done outside as they can get rather 'exuberant' with the plunging and paint.**



The activity appealed to the mixed age group with the preschoolers enjoying it as much as the toddlers. It encouraged lots of communication about colours and big circles. The older girls also worked out they could make patterns and representations like caterpillars.



**PAINTING WITH PLUNGERS**

The toddlers just loved being able to use their muscles and push down hard on the paper to make circles and splatters.



Having to grasp the longer handles and push down hard was a very different movement from using a brush to paint with. The old children soon worked out that they had more control if they grasped the handle lower down toward the plunger.

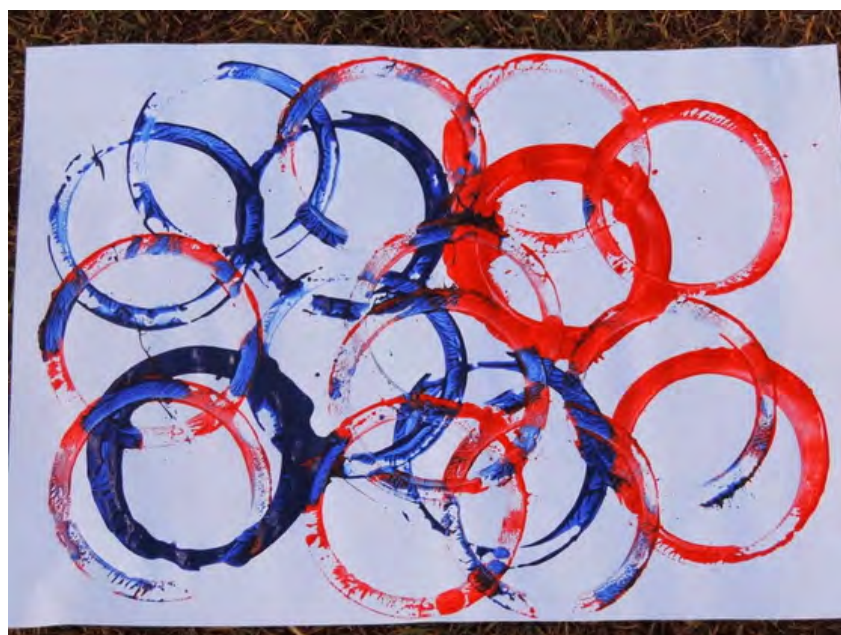


**PAINTING WITH PLUNGERS**

This activity is not only lots of fun but it's really easy to clean up. Just a quick rinse of the plungers in a bucket of water and some plastic over the trays to keep the paint for another day.



They make lovely prints and the children were very excited to show their parents their 'circles' that afternoon.



**PAINTING WITH PLUNGERS**



# Fine Motor Whisk and Sieve!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**



## INTRODUCTION

I love to offer simple activities to toddlers that are fun but also support their emerging interests and strengths. Fine motor muscle strengthening and hand/eye coordination are skills that are important to focus on, especially for toddlers.

This doesn't mean that as educators and parents we need to provide detailed and expensive activities to target these skills. You can always do it through the magic of simple play based learning!



Here's one of the activities that is always very popular with the toddlers and is easily modified to make it a little harder for the preschoolers. Even my school age friends have been known to enjoy having a play with this one!

## HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED

- A few medium wash bowls/tubs or a large water play trough/tub
- Different shaped and sized whisks
- Dishwashing detergent or hand soap
- Warm or cold water
- Paint powder dyes or food colouring (optional)

## HERE'S WHAT YOU DO

1. Half fill your tubs or trough with water, we used warm as it was a cool day and it added to the sensory experience.
2. Squirt in a little soap or dishwashing liquid.
3. Hand the whisks out and first watch to see what they do. I like to ask a simple question like "How could we make bubbles in the water?" or "What can we do with the whisk?"



FINE MOTOR WHISK AND SIEVE

There is usually a little experimenting but then bubbles start to appear as they stir faster and then begin whisking and they know what they need to do. It's great watching their eyes light up when they realise what they are achieving!



If you have a very young toddler, you can model using the whisk or encourage them to splash and stir with their hands to begin making their bubbles. A little help from you to whisk a few first will keep their focus and interest in the activity.



When they have made some bubbles you can make it a little more interesting by sprinkling on some powder paint dye (I use edicol vegetable dye as it goes a long way and washes out easily!).

I ask the children to mix the colour in with their whisk or hands and watch as the water changes to a bright colour.

FINE MOTOR WHISK AND SIEVE



Some of the toddlers enjoyed making patterns in their friends tub using the different colours. They were fascinated with the effects they made!

You shouldn't need to keep intervening in this activity, there is no wrong or right way, it's about the process and letting them experiment and problem solve to get the outcome they want.

While they are having fun doing this they are of course working those hand and wrist muscles as well as practising their hand eye coordination. You can talk about the colours they are making and how they could make other colours too.



FINE MOTOR WHISK AND SIEVE

I find a few separate tubs for a small group works well and really allows them to explore their own creativity and purpose. It is a good exercise in turn taking though if using a larger trough.



When there is a bit of foam and bubble from the whisking I like to introduce a few small sieves to the play as well.



FINE MOTOR WHISK AND SIEVE

The sieve is good for trying to catch the bubbles and for transferring one foam colour to another colourful tub. They encourage scooping, twisting, spatial awareness and hand control and balance.



Some will also just prefer to use their hands...and this is perfectly fine, it is a wonderful sensory activity especially when you have warm or cold water!



FINE MOTOR WHISK AND SIEVE

Older children will enjoy trying to take prints of their bubble foam colours. They will need to first whisk up a good froth and then you can support them to lay a piece of white paper over the tub without immersing it. Give it a wiggle and this will take a “print” of their creativity to keep.



I always like to involve toddlers in the packing up/cleaning process as this is also an important skill to learn and one that they usually enjoy as they love to feel useful!



FINE MOTOR WHISK AND SIEVE

When we were nearly finished I gave them all some pieces of sponge I had cut into shapes from some packaging we received in a box. We talked about the shapes and how to clean the paint colours from the table. They loved it and were so busy wiping down the tables and then finding the sponges in the bottom of their tubs after dropping them in there!



In reality they did of course make more mess than was originally there but look at that concentration and focus on getting the job done! When they went down for their rest I just came back and hosed the table and sponges and left everything in the sun to dry, easy!



And although the prints look just like water colours they were awfully proud of them and they acted as a conversation prompt when parents picked them up and asked them questions about their day.



## WHAT DOES A CHILD EXPERIENCE WITH THIS SIMPLE ACTIVITY?

- A sense of pride and self worth as they explore a new skill.
- They are practising their pre writing skills.
- They are expressing themselves creatively.
- They are strengthening their fine motor muscles, control and coordination.
- They are learning about cause and effect
- They are using their thinking and reasoning skills to problem solve.
- They are communicating and using descriptive language.
- They are recognising and naming colours.
- They are exploring with their senses.
- They are happy and HAVING FUN in their own way...but they are learning!



# Easy DIY Toddler Shakers

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

This easy toddler activity evolved from an emerging interest in musical instruments and sound by my family day care toddlers.

They are particularly excited by the homemade shakers and glitter bottles I have around on the shelves. I decided to extend upon their interest by helping them to make their own mini music shaker bottles!



Now I'm pretty sure you don't need me to tell you how to make the shakers in great detail. Put some beans or rice into a bottle, seal and then shake of course! However, I wanted to share this activity to show how you can turn something simple into a wonderful learning experience offering so many possibilities. Share the same concept at home with your child or with a group of children if you are working in the early childhood field. It works for all toddlers and is easy enough for anyone to pull together quickly!

## HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED

- Beans, rice or anything else you have going out of date in the cupboard that makes a noise!
- Some small bottles with lids (make sure the opening is wide enough for little fingers to poke through though)
- Tweezers/spoons/tongs/scoops (formula scoops are great by the way!)
- A tray to hold the bottles steady while they fill is a good idea.



I also added a few old medicine cups and baby food storers with attached lids. This gave those toddlers getting frustrated with the bottles an easier option and allowed for some fine motor practice and task achievement while still participating. The baby food containers (I use to freeze the twins vegies in them) made great shakers too.

Always important with toddlers to work with their skill and comfort level. Work from one level and support them to reach the next level by offering more difficult options with any activity you offer. By adding just a few different options to this tray I could include everyone immediately and then work with everyone at their own particular level.

When a toddler gets frustrated they will just give up and walk away, your job as parent and/or educator is to ensure you can support them to problem solve, communicate and participate in a way that keeps them interested and experiencing a sense of self worth.



The skill I was focusing on with this activity was for the toddlers to try picking up a bean with the tweezers and then transfer the bean into the bottle. Tricky. But immediately they all had a try and used them in different ways.

Squeezing and releasing to pick up the beans was the first goal, the next was squeezing and holding using their fine motor muscles to transfer.

Another important thing to remember when playing with toddlers is to allow them to explore and experiment. It might not be the 'right' way to achieve the goal in your mind but it is their way of problem solving and completing a task.

If we jump in too early we run the risk of missing a valuable learning opportunity. I found it fascinating to watch how they each approached the task in different ways. Some spread the beans out on the table for easier access before trying the tweezers again....



They watched each other and tried to copy actions...



Some abandoned the tweezers and just used fingers to achieve their goal faster...



But the common theme was that they all began to fill their bottles in various ways and with much concentration. The tray really helped when some were getting frustrated with them falling over as they added beans.

It was a good learning opportunity to show them how they needed to support the bottle with one hand as they filled.



Another little tip... you'll notice we are doing this outside. Why? Because it was glorious in the warm winter sun so why wouldn't we?

Also, because they are toddlers and they spill, tip, run off and drop. And beans go everywhere on a wooden floor. And I do mean everywhere, I was finding those suckers for weeks after I last did an activity inside with them and that was with the older kids!!

You'll often hear me say I prefer to do messy and craft activities outside. It's not just so I don't mess up inside it's because it allows them to come back and forth to an activity, explore the materials, make a mess, problem solve and usually add things from the environment around them as they find them!



As they filled we talked about the beans and what we might be able to grow with them. One of the boys wandered off to 'plant' his in the garden and sandpit so we shall see what happens there!



When they were happy with the sound the shakers made I helped them try to screw on the lids and then they were off around the yard to make some music....



And the parents looked so pleased at pick up time when they were handed a child making lots of noise. Even more pleased when I said they could take them home!

Just joking, I have lovely parents and so enjoy the opportunity to share moments like this with their precious children! They might have hidden the shakers though now for a while



## WHAT DOES A CHILD EXPERIENCE WITH THIS SIMPLE ACTIVITY?

- A sense of pride and self worth as they explore a new skill.
- They are practising their pre writing skills.
- They are expressing themselves creatively.
- They are extending upon an interest and actually finding a way to achieve an end goal.
- They are strengthening their fine motor muscles, control and coordination.
- They are learning about using sustainable materials and recycling.
- They are using their thinking and reasoning skills to problem solve.
- They are communicating and using descriptive language.
- They are making music and different sounds.
- They are counting and naming colours (beans).
- They are happy and HAVING FUN in their own way...but they are learning!



# Easy Fine Motor Spider Game

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I couldn't resist sharing this easy fine motor activity with you as my family day care toddlers absolutely loved it. To be honest the preschoolers had just as much fun too!

I love thinking up simple games and activities to support the strengthening of those little fine motor muscles and coordination and this one couldn't be easier!



**When trying to engage toddlers in an activity it is always a good idea to do the following 3 things...**

- Make it simple so they can experience a sense of achievement and want to keep going
- Use materials/resources they have shown an interest in – think of ways to incorporate and extend those interests (in this case wet sand and spiders).
- Join in with them at first and make it a game, get them excited about what they can do

My spider scooping game ticked all of the above and the toddlers kept finding new ways to play even after the initial concept had been followed and achieved numerous times. They made it their own and I love watching that happen right in front of me! It really couldn't be simpler to get started...

First I filled our water trough/ship with some coarse sand. We have a huge sandpit but lately I have found the toddlers prefer to play with sand in a smaller space so this has been perfect.

I used brickie's sand as it holds together well and makes fantastic roads, hills and castles. It also hides things well!



I pushed lots of little rubber spiders (a large packet I picked up cheaply from the dollar store) into the sand, some I made harder to find, some easier. Don't be tempted to make it too difficult at first as toddlers are easily frustrated and distracted and will just wander off.



I then added a few little buckets and some teaspoons. Would also work well with tongs but we have been doing lots of squeeze and release activities lately, this time I wanted to challenge their coordination, control and wrist movement by using a scoop, balance and twist to tip out motion.



As they found the spiders they had to balance them on their spoons until they found the bucket closest to them and then turn and tip them inside. This often challenged their spatial awareness too.



There was lots of opportunity for turn taking and communication and when the buckets were full we counted them together and then the toddlers loved being given the important task of hiding them again.



There was lots of chatter about where spiders live and who had seen one at their house, we even went on a search around the backyard and luckily found a few that I 'accidentally' dropped when they weren't looking.

They played with the spiders in lots of different ways and I let them continue to explore and communicate among themselves. It's good to take advantage of opportunities like this for intentional teaching but also important to let them learn in their own way as they play and process too.



Got some budding little excavators at your place? Why not give this one a try, I promise they will love it and there is very little for you to clean up afterwards.

You could use any little toy the children are interested in at moment rocks, fairies, cars, animals etc. and if you don't have sand why not try rice, hay, beans or flour? What would your child love to find hidden?





# Fine Motor Magnet Fun with Recycled Materials

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I'm always looking for new ways to incorporate old materials into the activities I provide for my family day care kids and also for my own children. I think it is important for children to realise we don't always need new materials to have fun.

I like to include them in my scavenging and then see what we can come up with. Sometimes they have much better ideas than me (but we'll keep that quiet).



I wanted to share this activity with you because the children absolutely loved it and it also evolved in so many different ways. They were so proud of their end result and that means a lot.

I provided this activity for my 3 year-olds but it could quite easily be adapted for younger children by using larger metal pieces so as not to provide a choking hazard. Let me take you through the set up!

## HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED

- You'll need a tub of rice (or other fine sensory material: will work with sand, beans, pasta etc.)
- Some magnets (I used some large horseshoe ones but smaller will work fine too)
- You could also use small tongs
- A tray for sorting (I just used a cutlery tray)
- Some metal O rings and bolts from the garage (the older and more rustic the better!)
- Wood off cuts
- Watered down PVA glue and brushes



## HERE'S WHAT YOU DO

I used my current sensory tub which already had some coloured pasta in it from a previous activity. You don't need to add pasta but if you have other things already in there no need to take them out. I'll tell you how to incorporate them into the learning later.

Ask the children to help you place the rings and bolts into the tub, don't let them bury them as the magnet will need to be awfully strong to find and lift them out! My girls really loved this part and took their role very seriously!



Then ask them to see if they can pick up the objects with the magnets. It can be a bit tricky and really works their coordination and fine motor skills.

You can also use some small tongs if you don't have magnets, we used them as well. If you have other items in the tub like I already had pasta you can engage the children in discussion about why some things are magnetic and some aren't? Can they find just the ones they think the magnet will pick up?



They had so much fun finding their 'treasures' in the rice and showing me how they stuck to the ends of the magnet.



Once they had them on the magnet they had to carefully transfer them to the sorting tray on a table nearby (I wanted them to have to walk a little way to extend on their hand eye coordination and balance skills).

We sorted the bolts as 'long' and 'short' and the rings into different slots for 'small', 'medium' and 'large'.



They spent a lot of time getting their sorting just right and worked together to make sure the tray was 'right' according to them.

I let them decide what pieces were which size and stood back as they corrected each other or changed their mind. There was lots of communication, problem solving and teamwork.

When every piece had been removed from the rice tub they took the pieces out of the tray, placed them back into the rice tub and then started all over again. It really did hold their interest for quite some time!



Using these sort of recycled and older materials also opens avenues for discussion about their original purpose, how they might have been used before by people and the discovery of different shapes, sizes, textures and colour.



When interest finally began to wane in the collecting and sorting I brought out a box of wood scraps we had collected earlier in the week for our woodworking, a little watered down PVA glue and the sorting tray of rings.

The old bolts and screws were a little too bulky and heavy to use for this part of the activity so I left them out. They were so excited to be creating their own little recycled masterpieces and I thought they did such a lovely job.

We talked about small, large and medium as they worked and they told me which ones they were choosing and all about the patterns they were creating. Such self expression!!!





There was a LOT of glue used but that was part of the fun and it dries clear so it didn't matter how much they used. And of course we were outside so I didn't need to worry about mess!



Ruby and Tara (my twins) took great pride in decorating a piece of woodwork that their big sister made when she was in school.

They presented it to her that afternoon and were so excited to share their creativity and gift with big sis!!



It was a wonderful morning of creative self expression and didn't cost me a thing! The possibilities are endless when you incorporate recycled or repurposed materials and resources into learning activities for children. Why not have a look around the home and garage for something you could recycle into fun too!



## WHAT LEARNING DOES THIS ACTIVITY ENCOURAGE FOR YOUR CHILD?

- Strengthening of fine motor muscles and control
- Investigating size and length
- Sorting and classifying
- Encouraging communication and language development
- Problem solving
- Opportunities to incorporate counting skills
- Basic science concepts of magnetic fields, magnetic, not magnetic.
- Using teamwork to reach a shared goal
- Discussion and research around the recycled materials and how they were originally used.
- An awareness of items in our environment.
- Opportunity for self expression and an appreciation of the process over product.



# Kangaroo Fine Motor Tong Treasure Hunt

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I love to introduce new ideas and games into our outside spaces to encourage children to explore their environment, use their fine and gross motor skills and generally just enjoy all that outside play has to offer!

I recently introduced a game using only a few resources but even I was surprised at how much fun this group had and how they extended and evolved the activity into their own games without any prompting from me.



I used some lovely little kangaroo counters given to me by one of my fantastic Family Day Care parents but you could also use little bears, dinosaurs, farm animals, zoo animals. Whatever you have on hand and that your children are currently interested in. We have been talking about the wallabies that come to visit us here lately so the kangaroos were a perfect fit to our current journey of learning and play.

## SETTING UP

This is what I used but please modify according to what resources you have!

- A large bowl
- Pair of small tongs for each child
- Kangaroo counters (see suggestions for other inclusions above)
- Coloured stones (kangaroo food)
- Wooden discs (any loose parts to use for 'food' will do just get creative)
- Some hay (or garden plants, pot plants etc. anywhere that provides a hiding spot for the toys used)

Depending on your outdoor space you might spread the game across the yard or keep confined to a smaller area.



I asked the children to go and play while I 'hid' the kangas all around the circle, some I made more difficult to find, others were easy to find to allow for the different personalities and developmental stages.



Then it was time for the fun part! I asked the girls to chose a pair of tongs and see how many kangaroos they could find and put back into the bowl. They also had to find lots of food for them to eat!

They had to use the tongs which helped to strengthen their fine motor muscles and control as they picked up, squeezed to hold and then carried over to the bowl.



FINE MOTOR TONG TREASURE

They worked independently to find as many as they could and when it become more challenging they began to communicate and work together as a group.



They climbed over rocks, walked planks, investigated pot plants and moved hay around always thinking, always intent on their task.

FINE MOTOR TONG TREASURE





Feeling the smooth rocks, the crunchy, tickly hay, the hard pebbles and wood - a wonderful activity to explore with the senses!



FINE MOTOR TONG TREASURE

Let the kids get their shoes off and really explore



The game soon evolved as they began to hide the kangaroos themselves and then tell their friends to go look for them.

A little word of warning, keep an eye on where they are hiding them as I am still searching for a few of the brown ones!



FINE MOTOR TONG TREASURE

When they grew tired of hiding and finding they began to use the resources within the environment around them to create new games. They set them up on the planks and rocks and a small play world with lots of imaginary play began to occur.



I began to work with them and we explored some sequencing, counting, sorting and colour activities as a group. A simple activity that can be easily modified to suit the resources and spaces you have in your home or care area.

It can of course also be set up indoors but I think it's so much more fun to explore outside and incorporate the natural materials and environment. Why wouldn't you take it outside?



# Exploring & Learning with Sunflowers

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

There is nothing better than seeing the joy on a child's face when they pick something from the garden that they have helped to plant and nurture. Lately there has been a lot of interest in the beautiful sunflowers that have been brightening the vegie patch.

I decided we couldn't let this little gem from nature just be admired, I wanted the children to really experience the wonder of nature and engage in some hands on activities to extend their interest and learning.



As my twins picked purple beans from the vegie patch one afternoon we talked about the colours and sizes of the sunflowers and picked a few to arrange and display inside their bedrooms. They couldn't stop talking about them and because we had talked about how much the king parrots love to munch on them they were a little worried at first that the parrots would fly into their rooms to find them... precious!



When the flowers began to die off we collected the heads with some of the day care children and left them to dry in the sun. We talked about where the bright yellow colour had gone and what was inside the flower head. They were amazed to learn that all those black things were seeds and that is what the parrots love to eat.

When they had dried out a little I showed the children how to pick the seeds carefully out of the flower head. It was quite a challenge and really worked those little hands and fine motor muscles. There was lots of communication, problem solving and pride in their achievements.

As we worked together I began to talk about how we could grow new sunflowers from these seeds because we were collecting them instead of just throwing away and having to buy a new seed packet. It was a fantastic opportunity to talk about sustainability and how we can grow things from seed over and over just by putting in a little extra time and hard work.



Check out the concentration... Tara stayed with this for nearly an hour!



Ruby got frustrated at times but we worked together to problem solve. She found that by ripping the flower open into smaller parts it was easier to get the seeds out herself.





I handed everyone a little cup to collect their hard earned treasure in and help give them a sense of ownership.



I labelled the cups and they went home with the children to plant in their own gardens with their siblings and parents. I have encouraged them to bring me back a flower or photo when they grow.



I hadn't finished with those beautiful sunflowers yet, I knew they would make the perfect sensory painting activity. A few shallow dishes of paint and some of the flower heads (with built in handles!) and we were ready to get creative.



It was such an interesting activity as they all explored the process in different ways. There was splattering, stamping and smoothing back and forth. The little sunflower stems provided the perfect handles for small hands to grasp tightly.



The stems helped them have more control over how they wanted to paint with the sunflowers. They also made some lovely patterns.



And the dry sunflower heads provided a wonderful sensory experience that really got the 3 year-olds talking and investigating!



They also began to notice that sometimes seeds would fall out as they painted so they were excited to make them part of their masterpieces or pick them up and carefully rearrange. Lots of lovely pincer grip practice!



The seeds stayed on the paper even when dry so we came back to explore how rough the pictures felt and Tara told us that the parrots would love our paintings!

Their creations were all unique and reflected their different styles and it was lovely to hear them talking so excitedly about sunflowers and all the fun things they could do with them rather than just look at the flowers as they walked by in the garden.



There are always little treasures in nature that we can incorporate into children's play and learning and it really needn't take much effort or planning. It just takes a little thinking outside the box!

## HOW DOES THIS ACTIVITY PROMOTE LEARNING FOR YOUR CHILD?

- It introduces a respect and awareness for nature, sustainability practices, and a love of gardening.
- It provides an opportunity for children to engage in dialogue about the process and problem solve as they work.
- Depending on the size of the sunflowers you use it can provide an opportunity to talk about the basic concepts of big and small with toddlers and for older children a sequencing activity.
- Painting with the sunflowers encourages self expression, creativity and sensory development.
- Collecting the seeds provides practice and strengthening for fine motor muscle control and hand eye coordination skills.
- You can encourage children to use their senses as they smell the flowers, touch the softness of the leaves and then the smoothness of the seeds and the rough flower head when it dries.
- Talk about why adding paint makes that sort of pattern on the paper. Get them talking and investigating.
- It encourages a sense of self worth and pride in their efforts as they collect the seeds and then grow again after nurturing their plants.
- They can see the lifecycle of plants in action and participate in the process.





# Goopy Bear Hunt Fine Motor Fun!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

My girls were absolutely obsessed with the story and song “We’re going on a bear hunt” at one stage. At the same time they were also interested in the concepts of big and small, counting to 10 and grouping colours.

On this day, when my new barrel of coloured teddy bear counters arrived in the mail I knew they would be the perfect resource to practice all of these!



I wanted to see where the children’s interests led them without too much provocation so all I got out was some teddies (making sure to include numerous sizes and all 4 primary colours), added some plastic containers and tools such as big and small spoons and a few small tongs and of course some goop.



This goop was a little runnier than I usually make it so we turned it into a mud pit the bears were stuck in. There was a layer of watery goop on the top and a slimy sludge underneath that could hold the teddies upright so they looked stuck. Don't know how to make goop? Try using my easy recipe below.

## HOW DO I MAKE CORNFLOUR GOOP?

- Cornflour/Cornstarch
- Water
- Large tub or deep sided tray for mixing

1. To make goop you simply add just 1 part cornflour and 1 part water and mix together well in a large tub, bucket or tray. You can add more or less water to alter the thickness of the goop – it's fun to experiment, you really can't go wrong which is why I haven't given you any exact measurements!
2. Add some edicol dye or food colouring or just leave white is fine. A higher ratio of cornflour to water gives it a mouldable feel and allows little fingers to make balls and pull up large strings before adding more water and making runny again! I also find the that the versions that aren't "gluten free" work a lot better for consistency.



The children began putting in the colour teddies they wanted. Interesting to see that most of them actually picked a colour and stuck with it, after a little spirited bargaining with each other of course.

They enjoyed moving them around and making stories about the big and 'baby' bears and then began squelching them in the 'mud' just like the book we read.



They then started to pick up spoons and try to catch and scoop the bears from the goop and collect them in their containers. A real workout for those fine motor and problem solving skills.



GOOPY BEAR HUNT FUN

After they collected their chosen bear colour, they had just as much fun tipping or spooning them back into the mud!



They all played with the bears in different ways at different stages. Ruby preferred to stick with her chosen colour of red while Tara enjoyed mixing them up to create more of a challenge.



GOOPY BEAR HUNT FUN

The tongs were a popular tool as well and it was quite tricky to pluck those stuck bears out. It took a lot of concentration and perseverance! The large tongs were even harder for little hands to master but they kept trying.



I'm still working on Ruby's grip. This is how she is still holding a spoon (photo on the right) until prompted to turn her hand over. By gripping this way she doesn't have as much control over the spoon, the things she needs to pick up and her coordination. We are slowly getting there with the use of lots of fine motor activities such as this one!





Goop is a fun sensory experience just on its own but the addition of the coloured bears, spoons and tongs increased the longevity and learning outcomes of the medium.

Simple to set up and the bears are washed easily at the end of play in some soapy water. Pink tutus outside while you get messy are of course an optional extra :)

## EXTEND THE LEARNING AND PLAY POSSIBILITIES WITH THIS ACTIVITY

- Ask the children to follow directions and find the bear that matched my description e.g “Find me the small yellow bear please”
- Ask if they could pick up a certain number of bears and count as they put them into their bowls.
- Ask them to find “All the yellow bears”
- Ask them if they could make their bears swim through the mud.
- Ask them to pick up only with the small spoons (or large)
- Ask them to pick up and put back using only the tongs.
- Ask them to line up a simple pattern of bears (blue, yellow, red, blue, yellow, red).
- Ask them to help me wash the bears, tongs and spoons when we had finished play.



# Sensory Fine Motor Florist Fun

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

This easy activity takes its inspiration from when we had planned a little sensory walk around the garden to collect some flowers, leaves and herbs for touching and smelling.

But when our baskets were full my twins decided they wanted to use their treasures with the playdough that we had abandoned on the table outside. And so our sensory florist activity was borne!



We had collected lavender, rose geranium leaves, sage, basil, rosemary and lots of different sized and coloured leaves and flowers. There was a lot of sniffing and squishing and tearing of leaves as senses went into overdrive and textures were explored.

On the playdough table we already had some blue playdough, plates and trays as we had been 'cooking' before our nature walk. All I added was a basket of green and the children took over.



There was some sorting, some choosing, some problem solving, some conversation and some sniffing... again!



FINE MOTOR FLORIST FUN



Each of the children became engrossed in their own creations as stems were pushed into dough and leaves squashed on top until it looked just right. The beauty of the playdough plate bases is that it was easy for them to change their mind and rearrange by pulling out pieces and pushing them back in.



They also made use of the trays to press small blobs of playdough into as another base and then added single flowers or leaves.



As the activity progressed Tara began to get frustrated that some stems were too long to hold the flowers upright in the dough due to the weight. She decided she needed to cut them 'to fit better' so I passed out the scissors.



This added a whole new level of concentration and creativity to the activity. Leaves were trimmed, stalks were snipped to make them smaller and basil was chopped up into pieces for dinner.

It was a fantastic workout for fine motor muscles and hand eye coordination as well as their problem solving skills!



I didn't give scissors to the toddlers but their fine motor muscles had a real workout too just by pushing leaves and small flowers into their dough.

They were so proud of their finished creations and we later looked up some information on the computer about florists and the work that they do creating arrangements just like we had done that morning.



A very simple activity that took hardly any effort on my part but was beautifully child-led and kept them busy for a long time. It is also a different way of bringing a little bit of nature inside with us as we displayed the arrangements around the house for all to see.

For the Australian educators reading about this activity, check out the next page for the following EYLF outcomes I would link to.



## OUTCOME 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

- Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency
- Children feel safe, secure, and supported

## OUTCOME 2: CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

- Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment

## OUTCOME 4: CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS

- Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity
- Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating
- Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials

## OUTCOME 5: CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

- Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes
- Children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking



# Fine Motor Colour Mixing

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Colour mixing is such an easy activity for toddlers to enjoy and experiment with. I love finding ways to modify activities so toddlers can enjoy some creative fine motor play too and this is one of our favourites!



When I saw these basters on special for 99 cents at our local Coles I was a tad excited! I knew they would provide a fine motor challenge for the girls while being fun at the same time!

There was very little set up required. I filled some empty containers from the recycle box with water and then added a little edicol dye to make some lovely bright colours. A little absorbent paper towel and a few other trays and containers from the recycle bin and the colour mixing invitation to play was ready....

The girls both began to investigate in very different ways. Ruby began by squirting colours into the trays and Tara used a spoon to explore each colour tentatively first.



The large squeeze heads of the basters provide a real challenge to developing fine motor skills and Ruby had to practice being able to pull up paint into the baster and hold it until she was ready to release.

As they grew more confident with the large droppers the colour mixing and creating on paper towel began.



This is definitely an outdoor activity as the basters hold a lot of liquid, some is absorbed on the paper towel but a lot does run to the ground as they pour, squeeze and experiment with placing colours on top of each other.



Ruby really enjoyed filling the egg carton cups....



FINE MOTOR COLOUR MIXING

While Tara had lots of fun dropping paint and mixing colours in the trays.



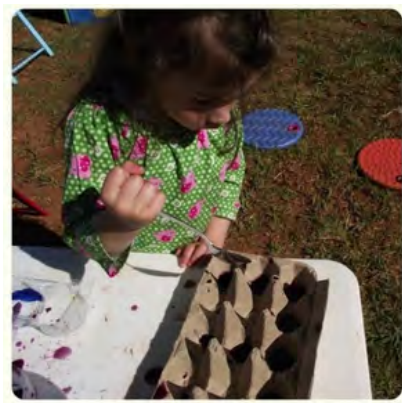
The photo below shows the grip Ruby continues to use when grasping. At this age (3yrs), I would prefer her to be using her hand on top of the spoon to give her more control but it is something we are working on.



Activities like this that require the use of her fingers and wrist help to strengthen those muscles.

I gently rotate her hand to the preferable grip and show her how to use tools (including spoons when eating) in this way.

She did a lot of scooping with the spoon and then turning over to drop paint onto the towel, lots of wrist rotation in this activity.



Tara has more control over her wrist and finger movements and really seemed to enjoy using both hands to squeeze in different ways to achieve different results on her paper towel.



They created some lovely patterns and enjoyed talking about the colours they were using.



FINE MOTOR COLOUR MIXING

A simple activity (as always!) but one that really gave their problem solving, fine motor and eye hand coordination skills a workout!

To extend on this activity you might like to use some smaller droppers. This water paint can be reused until it runs out so we have had quite a few days of this activity keeping the girls busy, I just left it set up on the table outdoors.

You don't need to keep using paper towel, the colours running and mixing on the table are lots of fun too! Simple, fun and a workout for those fine motor muscles!



FINE MOTOR COLOUR MIXING



# Fine Motor Recycling Fun with Foil

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

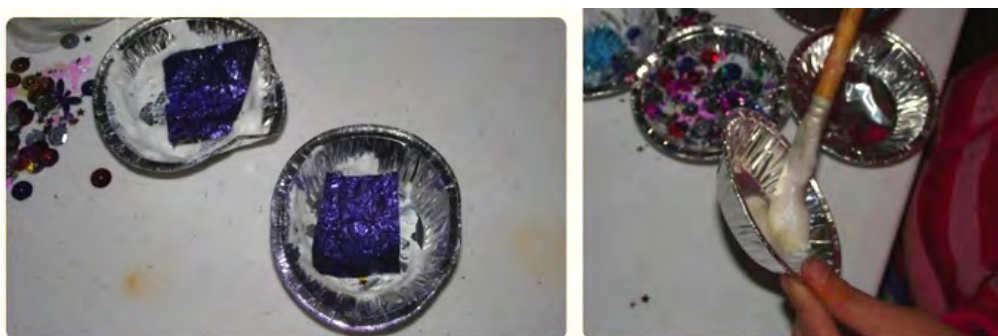
When we were given a whole stack of tinfoil goodies that were being thrown out by a shop you can only imagine how excited I was (Yes I know, bit sad...but there are always so many possibilities with recycled finds!)

Threading and sewing as well as pasting with loose parts and collage materials always support fine motor skills ...adding our recycled 'shiny' materials as a canvas made it a creative and fun activity.



We started with a few tart trays, some sparkly bits and pieces and some cornflour paste with a little wood glue mixed in to make it stronger. And then I just watched the creativity flow... There were no rules, they just added what they wanted to.

And I must say this kept them busy for ages! We did have to talk about needing more glue if they were going to add so many sequins and other goodies or they would just fall off but they soon understood what they needed to do!



Of course 'baby' presided over the activities as usual.... Why won't they let me put some clothes on those dolls??



When they had finished with the huge pile of circle trays we moved onto the rectangle trays and they got lots of glue and sparkly decorations too! When they got up from their nap they were just about dry so I set out some leftover twine from our outdoor music spool, used the hole punch to put a few holes around the edges of the trays and the girls began sewing!



RECYCLING FUN WITH FOIL

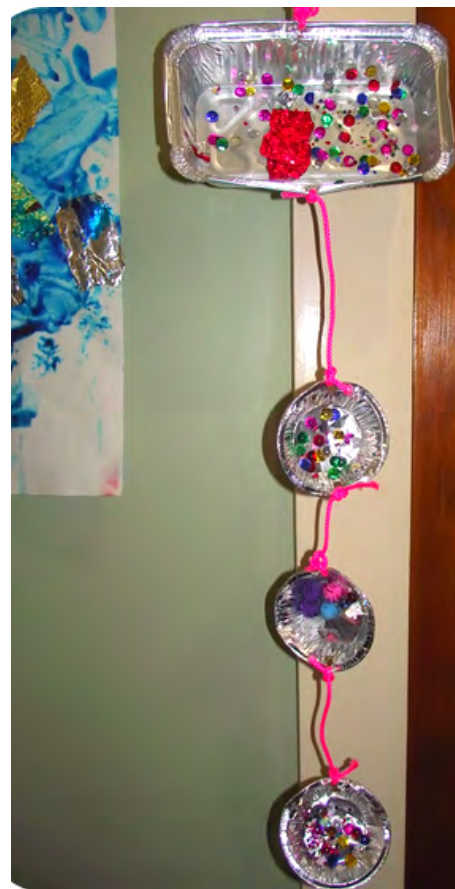




They had so much fun experimenting with these and then began requesting holes in some paper so they could keep going. This activity really had some longevity! When there were only a few left, I got them to help me thread and tie a few of the trays together to make some hanging mobiles.

They are now hanging all around the house and are very pretty swaying outside in the wind! Simple fun but they love pointing them out to anyone that walks into the house. Love those proud little faces when they see their artwork on display!

Do you have anything around the house you could make some sparkly mobiles with? Why not let that imagination run free and have a rummage in the recycle bin!





# Balloon Fine Motor Fishing Fun!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Another fun way to challenge and extend fine motor skills is to turn a preschooler's love of water into a fun learning opportunity!

Set up a tub of water on a low table or floor space, add a few slightly inflated balloons and a couple of wire strainers (check the op shops!)



Encourage the children to use their 'nets' to catch the balloon 'fish'! My girls truly had so much fun with this simple activity and it stayed on the verandah for a week!



It was a fantastic exercise to strengthen and challenge their fine motor skills as well as their coordination. Ruby also found the slimy surface of the wet balloons a challenging experience that she needed to work through slowly before she became comfortable handling the balloons without the strainer.



Catching the fish also provided an opportunity to discuss the concept of full and empty as well as how many balloons could fit in their 'net'. We also practiced our colour recognition skills. I called out the colour 'fish' I wanted them to find and then the girls had to catch the right colour and name it!

The girls had to practice using their wrist to dip and catch.



As well as how to turn over and tip the fish balloons back into the water.



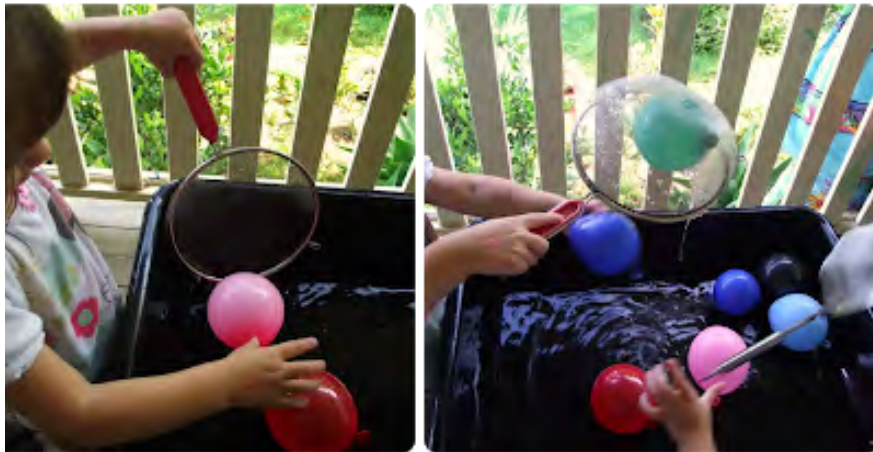
At times this proved quite difficult and they experimented with using two hands to achieve the outcome. Reaching across, scooping and dropping proved useful for practising crossing the midline too. I loved how Tara extended the activity and her skill level by finding a plastic spoon to scoop and balance with. She showed great pride in this achievement!



I really was so pleased with this activity, it covered so many areas of development we are focusing on even though it seems so basic (which it is of course!).

It provided a challenge for the senses with the slippery, slimy balloons and wet water, fine motor skills with the handling of the strainer - scooping, balancing and tipping over, colour recognition, hand eye coordination and crossing the midline practice!

Best of all it kept them busy and they had lots of fun after a particularly 'fraught' day inside cooped up! Perhaps you might have some fun with it to!



**BALLOON FINE MOTOR FISHING**



# Fine Motor Fun for Challenging Days!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Afternoons spent cooped up with tired toddlers are often... shall we say...'challenging'. On these days I usually try to incorporate a few quiet fine motor activities to keep them busy and therefore less prone to displaying the 'challenging' behaviour that is such a feature of the 2.5 year old! thought

I would share 3 of our favourites. They are easy to set up and pack away and only require items that can usually be found around the house!



The toddler twosome have enjoyed poking straws through colander holes before but when they grow bored with that try something a little different. I was very impressed by how busy it kept them both - even with those short toddler attention spans.



First I turned the washing basket over after folding a pile of nappies and gave each of the girls a tray with some thick and thin, long and short type sticks, straws and pipe cleaners and they immediately began poking them through the basket holes.



It was a great activity for two as they had their own space to explore and problem solve. The sticks proved easier than the straws and pipe cleaners which bent a little when they tried to push them through so they had to move their hands and fingers a little differently.

Getting the objects through the hole was a good exercise in hand-eye coordination as well as spatial awareness and an understanding of 'how things fit'. There was also lots of fun as they picked up the basket to collect the objects after they emptied their trays.

**FINE MOTOR FUN FOR  
CHALLENGING DAYS!**



Tara decided to extend the activity by turning her tray over and using the sticks to do a little drumming!



**FINE MOTOR FUN FOR  
CHALLENGING DAYS!**

We used another object from around the house to have some quiet fun - the humble tong! A toddler's best fine motor friend!

I actually picked up a few smaller ones from our local supermarket recently but I know you can buy fancy smaller ones that are easier for toddlers to start with.

Personally, I like the challenge that these little ones offer, I just had to put in a little more time to show the girls how to use them. They do exercise the hand muscles a little more and this is what I wanted especially for Ruby as I really need to work on her fine motor skills.

All we used were some old egg cartons, a bag of pom poms which I use for many things (very cheap at any budget shop), the tongs and also our wooden cubes.



FINE MOTOR FUN FOR  
CHALLENGING DAYS!



Ruby did get frustrated at first but I persevered by holding her hands and as I pushed the tongs together in the bowl of pom poms and saying 'squeeze' then 'let go'.

We started saying it as a sort of mantra and each time I helped her to perform the action. It really only took about 5 mins before she got the hang of it and goodness she was so excited with her new skill!

The girls practised picking up either a pom pom ball or a wooden cube. Also works on the skill of holding the tongs together to transfer to the egg cartons. Finally, opening their hands again to release their tongs and the treasure inside! Once they have this skill mastered I will begin adding colours to the egg carton cups so they can match the corresponding cubes or pom poms.

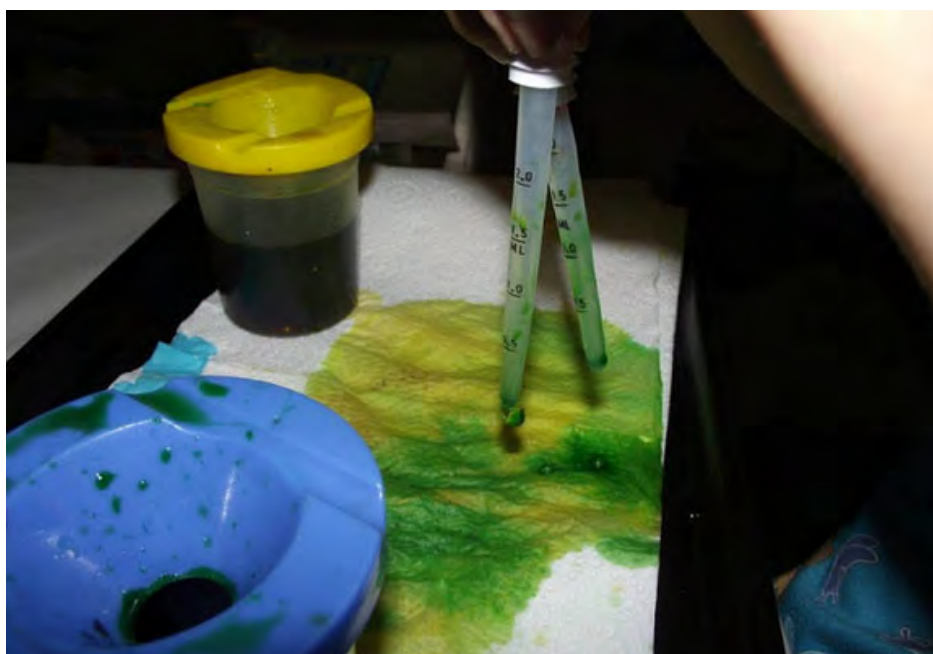


**FINE MOTOR FUN FOR  
CHALLENGING DAYS!**

The third activity I want to share is some dropper painting onto paper towels. Very easy to set up, I just used some water colour (edicol powder + water). You could also use a few drops of food colouring in some water.

Materials also include a few old medicine droppers and a tray for each lined with a few layers of absorbent paper towel. The droppers provided a fine motor challenge as they had to learn how to squeeze the top to suck up some paint and then squeeze to let the paint go.

Again it was a matter of holding their hands and showing them the muscle action to use. After a few minutes, they understood what they needed to do and I could see the pride in their faces.



By dripping the paint onto the paper towel it soaks in and makes some lovely patterns without making a whole lot of mess. What small amount of paint run off there is caught by the tray. We did go through quite a bit of paper towel as the girls really enjoyed this activity once they had mastered the skill of the droppers. It was worth it not to have paint running everywhere!

**FINE MOTOR FUN FOR  
CHALLENGING DAYS!**

I very rarely do painting inside with toddlers as they tend to need to constantly move (and therefore spread it from one end of the house to the other!). However, this really isn't a messy activity due to the absorbency of the paper towel.

To my surprise, the challenge of mastering this activity really held their interest and they sat there busy for quite a while. They also extended the activity again with no prompting from me when they decided to get some of our laminated felt board farm animals and use the droppers to colour them.

They sure loved exploring the bubbles that formed on the plastic surface. These three fine motor activities were perfect for inside play and kept the toddler twosome surprisingly busy for such simple activities using simple resources!



**FINE MOTOR FUN FOR  
CHALLENGING DAYS!**



# Recycled Bottle Painting!

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I really enjoy using items from around the home and recycling them into playthings for children and I know many others do too! We have had some fun turning used and washed plastic bottles into Paint Squirters!



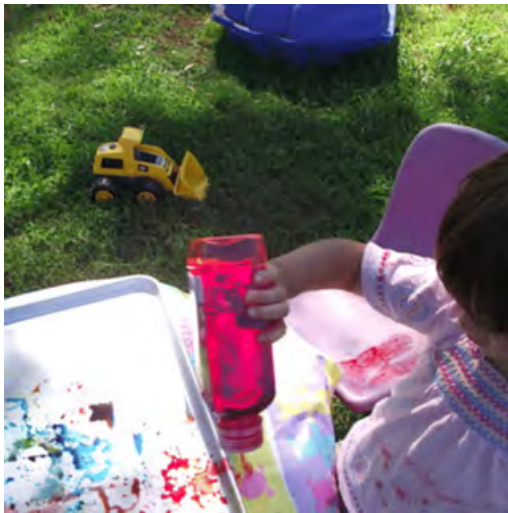
We collect, wash and dry empty juice and water bottles to use in different ways. We have so far used them for discovery bottles and shakers filled with rice to add to our toddler band instruments.

This time I wanted something that would challenge the toddlers fine motor skills, so we created... **Homemade Paint Bottle Squirters.**



I also had a few empty tomato paste bottles that I had been saving for inspiration to strike and this was perfect!

The tomato paste bottles already have a hole although the name brand bottles have a stopper in them so harder for the girls to squeeze. The juice bottles I simply drilled a hole into the lids. We have started using them in the bath now too and we drilled a few holes in each lid to make more of a shower effect.



Easily filled with water and my trusty edicol vegetable dye and the activity was ready for the outside! Lots of investigating of lids first:

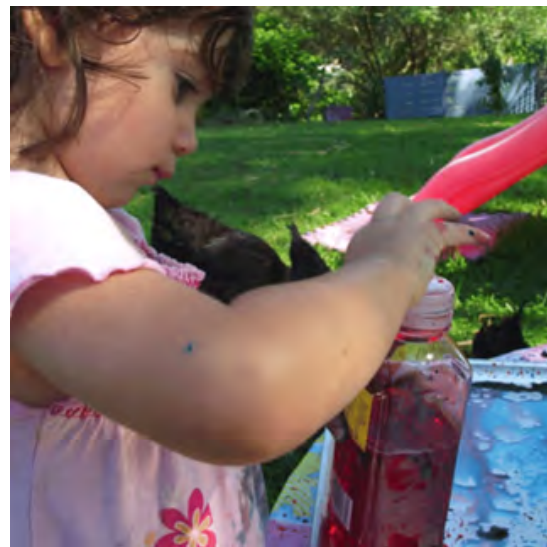
- How do they open?
- What will happen?
- How do I get the water out?



Once they began squeezing the patterns they began to form on the tray were bright and mixed easily. The juice bottles were the favourite as a little easier to squeeze I think. They had to work out first that they needed to tip them before the paint would come out.... great for problem solving skills and reasoning!

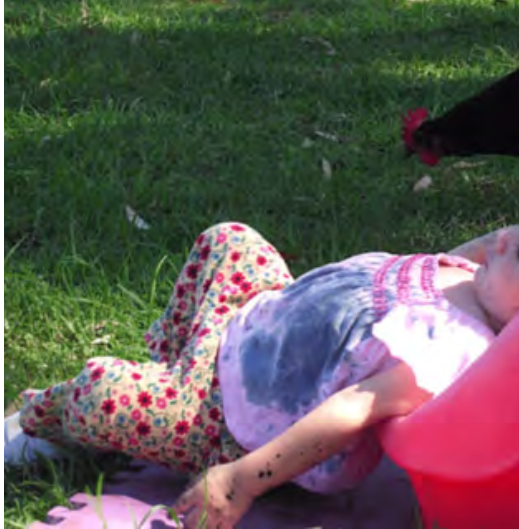


Tara soon figured out that the paint was running to the corner of the tray and squirting into the puddle caused lots of splashing and splattering! Ruby was really fascinated with the lid and I could see her thinking about how it worked.



RECYCLED BOTTLE PAINTING

At one stage Tara decided she needed to line all the bottles up before proceeding! Ruby needed a lie down with the chicken after all that paint action and thinking while Tara continued to make a mess.



Ruby suddenly discovered she could shake the bottles and water squirted out the top!

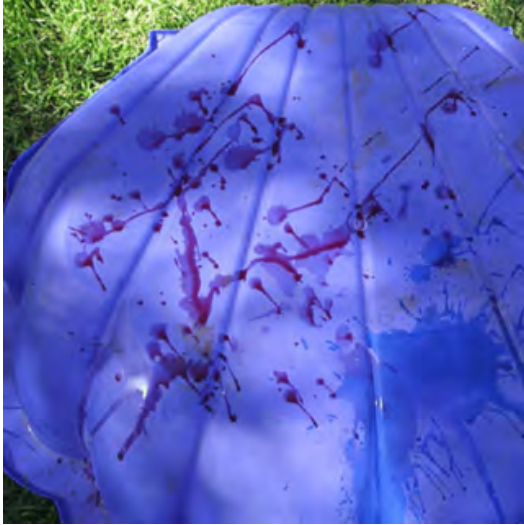


Toddler on a mission...out of the way... I have bottles!

We moved the activity over to the fence where I had stuck some paper up. Great fun squirting to make patterns although took some practice to master the different angles.



RECYCLED BOTTLE PAINTING



I turned around to find Ruby had created a masterpiece on the sandshell lid! Back to tray just to splash in the paint! You can never be too messy!

The patterns they created were quite unique and they seemed to enjoy changing them every time they squirted! Tara decided she would paint her planks and then requested a towel to clean up her 'mess'. She loves to clean, watches her Mum too much I think!

Thought I would show this shirt to illustrate why I love edicol dye, I washed this with my homemade basic laundry detergent and it came out with not a drop of paint left! Tara however needed a couple of soaks in the bath before she became a little less smurflike!



RECYCLED BOTTLE PAINTING

This activity kept them busy for over an hour outside and we have extended it to bath play as well now. They found all sorts of things to 'paint' outside with their homemade squirt bottles plus it was an easy activity to make and clean up!

Do you enjoy making fun for your kids with items you have recycled from around the house? I hope this thrifty activity will inspire some readers to realise that you don't need to spend a lot of money buying fancy craft items and tools to have fun with children.

Just look around the house and see what you can find! I hope you give the squirt bottles a go (you can use food colouring instead of edicol if you don't have it!)



RECYCLED BOTTLE PAINTING



# Magic Marble Playdough

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

The playdough stash was getting a little old so I decided over the weekend to make a favourite of mine from childcare days... I call it **Magic Marble Playdough!**

It is a great way to involve children in colouring their own playdough and provides opportunities to discuss light and dark and all things colour.



It is an activity better suited to 3 year-olds and up but young children such as my toddler twosome can still join in and see the results of their efforts with a little help from Mum or course!

Today I am sharing just a few of the ways we like to use our playdough. I always make my own. You can find my [microwave recipe here](#).

It's quick and easy to make and don't have that awful smell that the commercial playdough has. But if that is what you like to use than these ideas will still work for you too!

## FIRST STEPS - MAGIC MARBLE PLAYDOUGH

You start with a batch of plain playdough (I use my microwave dough recipe found below) and shape into rough balls (older children love to help with this part too!).

## HOW TO MAKE MICROWAVE PLAYDOUGH

What you need:

This makes quite a large batch but it will keep for weeks in the fridge. If you would prefer a smaller batch to start with just halve the recipe amounts.

- 2 cups plain flour
- 2 tbsp oil
- 2 cups water
- 1 cup salt
- 1 tbsp cream of tartar (to help it keep longer)
- Food colouring or edicol dye

1. Mix all dry ingredients in a microwave bowl or casserole dish, I usually use a clear pyrex dish as it allows me to see how the mixture is progressing while cooking.
2. Add water and oil and if you are wanting to add some colour sprinkle in a few drops of food colouring or a sprinkle of edicol paint colour dye at this stage and stir or whisk well. You don't need to remove all the lumps as you will be stirring a few more times throughout the cooking process anyway.

MAGIC MARBLE PLAYDOUGH



3. Cook in microwave for around 3 minutes – at the 3 minute mark carefully pull your dish out and give a good stir bringing down off the sides as well.

4. Put back in the microwave and cook in bursts of 40 secs – stir each time until the mix thickens, then forms a ball. When it has come together well but is still moist in places in the middle remove from the microwave , turn out onto a floured board.

5. Rest for 5 minutes to finish the cooking process and to cool a little then knead well. If you cook for too long you will get tough and crumbly playdough – it can be a bit of trial and error as all microwaves are different but once you have made a few batches you will be a pro and know exactly when to take it out for perfect soft, squishy dough!

## READY FOR PLAYDOUGH FUN

Make a small well in the centre of each ball and sprinkle a little paint powder in the colours you like.



Fold in the hole so the playdough, still looks white and place on the table ready for the children to begin to knead. I started the process off for the toddler twosome. You will begin to see a marbling effect of colour, the surprise for the children is what colour the white dough will become!

The longer they play with and knead it the brighter the colour will become!



Or perhaps they will just like to have fun creating their own marble effects!



MAGIC MARBLE PLAYDOUGH

For younger hands there is just the fun of different colours and the joy of playdough! Tara was particularly fascinated with the colours becoming darker as she played



Simple toddler fun lining up the colours and more pressing. Of course the marble effect only lasts a short time but that's the magic of it!





# Pebble & Ball Basket Play

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Endless rainy days stuck inside with toddlers can challenge even the most patient educator or parent. We love playing in the rain but even I have my limits as to how many times a day I can change wet, muddy twins even if they are having fun.

However the positive spin on this is that you tend to get a little more creative with fun ideas that don't entail paint and glue all over the walls inside! I enjoy finding items we already have around the house and turning them into an open ended play activity.



An activity the toddler twosome really seemed to enjoy (and I judge that by the fact that they sat and played with it for over 20 minutes with very little input from me!) was Pebble & Ball Basket Play. We went out to the back verandah, listened to the birds, watched the rain come down and played!

Very easy to set up - I went around the house collecting different baskets they enjoy playing with (all from the op/thrift shop and very, very cheap!). Pulled out a bag of large, flat, smooth decorator pebbles that I had picked up from the discount shop a while back for \$2.

I put them into a wooden tray, added some ping pong balls and watched to see what the twins would do! The pebbles are colourful, flat and smooth to touch and I added the ping pong balls because they are round and plain and offered a contrast in touch and visual stimulation.



Straight away the toddler twosome started arranging their baskets and adding pebbles and balls.



PEBBLE & BALL BASKET PLAY

Suddenly they both looked up and began comparing what the other had in their basket... too funny!



Ruby discovered they made a great noise when you tapped them together.

Tara really enjoyed taking the pebbles out methodically and doing her version of counting....



2,2,2,2... very cute and I was surprised that she immediately went to counting when she picked them up...



Ruby began to experiment with dropping balls and pebbles into the basket. The ping pong balls bounced, the pebbles didn't, but made a great noise!



PEBBLE & BALL BASKET PLAY



Then of course she had to touch to her mouth and crunch, hard!



Tara was very busy filling all the baskets and arranging them 'just so' as only a toddler can!



PEBBLE & BALL BASKET PLAY

I really was pleased with this activity, the girls played along side each other happily and were so intent, busy and obviously enjoying their different ways of playing with the pebbles and baskets. The balls were mainly bounced or thrown but it was interesting to see them investigate the differences!

These baskets were the best find in a thrift shop I have had for a long time. The girls have had such enjoyment from them over the past year and I am always filling them with different items that they like to discover.

The beauty is I can change the contents and leave them ready for discovery after a nap time, incorporate them into pretend play, take them away for a while to be discovered with glee a few weeks later, or leave them out empty for the girls to fill with their special things of the moment and then cart around for the day or use them to collect the eggs!



PEBBLE & BALL BASKET PLAY



# Pasta & Playdough Toddler Play

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

# INTRODUCTION

I have been trying out a few new activities to keep the toddlers busy while indoors! Tara really enjoyed sitting down with some empty jars, pom poms, pasta and filling and emptying.

There was such method and concentration to her play it was lovely to sit back and watch! Easy setup with a few pom poms and bits of pasta in each jar, some smaller containers and patty papers.



1



First the fun of taking things out.

2



Then putting back in!

3



Then pouring into other jars.

Then really beginning to organise the jars and their contents.



Then emptying and starting all over again... she stayed with this activity for about 20 minutes which is a long time for my very on-the-go twin!! Really turned out to be a great toddler activity!



We also had fun with some of the coloured pasta we dyed recently. The girls are beginning to show an interest in threading so I got out a few balls of playdough, pressed some spaghetti into them and put a basket of pasta in front of them.



I placed one onto the spaghetti and then the girls took it from there. I broke the spaghetti in half to make it a little easier! It was also lots of fun to take the pasta back off and push the spaghetti sticks into the dough!



Tara soon came up with the idea of pressing pasta into the playdough for added fun.



Ruby enjoyed playing with the spaghetti sticks on their own for quite awhile, fabulous for fine motor skills!

We extended the activity to different sorts of sticks we could press into the dough... this was even more fun! Very simple, basic activities with little clean up afterwards, just what we all needed!







# Toddler Threading Towers

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I'm sharing one of our favourite toddler fine motor activities. It is such a simple activity but one that is a lot of fun and doesn't cause too much frustration even for younger toddlers. I love that it is the sort of activity that can be varied to cater for different skill levels and stages.



I offered the children some large rigatoni pasta and also some cut toilet rolls to provide an easier option. I used some craft sticks from the \$2 shop (although I have also used pipe cleaners and straws) and stuck them into some playdough which I moulded around the base. I provided baskets of the pasta and rolls and sat back to enjoy the toddler 'work'.



The toddlers love threading activities and this is one of the few fine motor activities that keeps their interest past a few minutes. I think because they get such a sense of satisfaction so quickly in return for their efforts!



TODDLER THREADING TOWERS



***"I'm not eating the dry pasta really."***

Picking up the pasta pieces as well as being able to push them down onto the stick provides wonderful practise for those fine motor and hand-eye coordination skills. This activity also challenges their spatial awareness skills wherein they need to work out how to fit the items onto the stick.



Tara liked to have 2 towers going at once - one with the cardboard rolls and the other with pasta, a toddlers got to have options you understand!!!



Tricky and important work this threading business. But such joy and satisfaction when it all comes together! This one definitely remains in the favourite basket for fine motor fun. What does your toddler like to thread?



TODDLER THREADING TOWERS



# Toddler Cottonbud Painting

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I've got another easy and thrifty fun activity to share with your older toddler today. Preschoolers will also love this one. My own toddlers enjoyed getting out into the sun to do some cotton bud painting with their watercolours!



The only materials you need for this activity is some water colours (I used my edicol dyes and water but you could just use food colouring in some water too) and cotton buds.

We actually used some of the baby type cotton buds which we were given to us for a shower present before the girls were born but as we don't use cotton buds with the girls I decided to use them for fun instead!

My tip is you only want shallow containers for the younger toddlers and there may be some tipping involved. We do these sort of activities outside so we don't need to stress about any mess which will take away some of the fun of the activity. It is all about experimentation at this age!



There was some discovery play at first as they had never really seen cotton buds before and apparently they are fascinating!



TODDLER COTTONBUD PAINTING



They soon worked out that they could dip the buds into the paint and then make patterns onto the paper and paper towel.



TODDLER COTTONBUD PAINTING

I like to add paper towel for younger toddlers as it soaks in the paint and makes some lovely patterns for them to enjoy. They also made patterns on the plain paper but were more interested in the paint soaking into the paper towel as they dabbed.

Fantastic for those fine motor skills!



TODDLER COTTONBUD PAINTING

Tara decided her favourite little toy of the moment would also like to join in the fun!

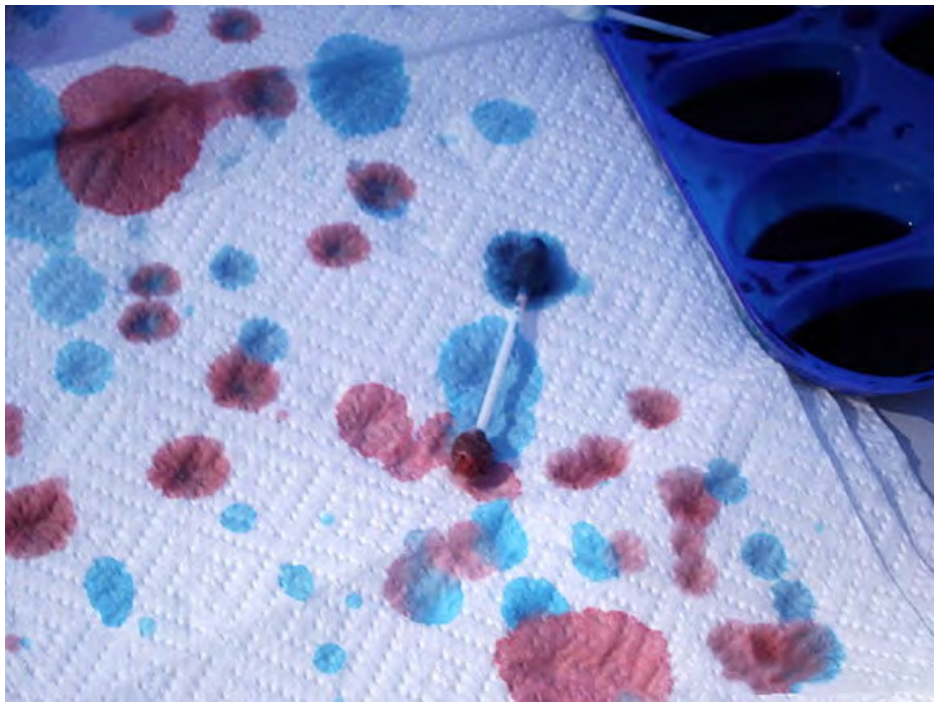


Ruby my sensory gal had to explore with her mouth. Of course, I would never recommend that you leave your toddler on their own with cotton buds but with a little supervision and common sense, you can certainly let them explore a little and have some messy fun with a new 'tool'!



TODDLER COTTONBUD PAINTING

I find it much easier to have 2 of everything when we are painting at the moment as they both like to play in different ways and I am happy to encourage this (it saves many a tantrum too!)



TODDLER COTTONBUD PAINTING

Older children will love this activity too. I have seen many wonderful dotted paintings and creations using cotton buds during my time working in child care! A child's imagination and creativity is a truly wonderful gift isn't it?

Tara really seemed fascinated by the difference of the water paint running off the plain paper but not off the paper towel. It made for a great language activity as well as being fun!



TODDLER COTTONBUD PAINTING



Ruby spent a lot of time mixing her colours and dropping them onto the paper towel. She had a cotton bud in each hand for most of the activity!

It made a great colour recognition activity too as we have just started talking about colours. I try to encourage language as much as I can during these activities to support Ruby with her speech development. I just use simple words such as 'paint', 'red', 'blue', 'stamp', 'paper' and ask simple questions as they both play.



# Muffin Tin Play Ideas

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

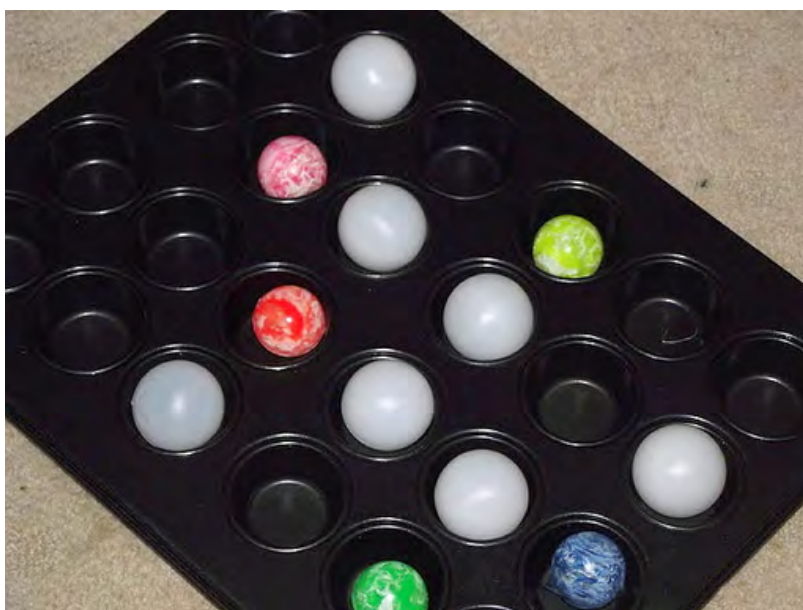
Muffin tins are little treasures that make a wonderful play item for toddlers and not just for baking. My toddler twosome loved investigating and playing with their muffin trays and I thought I would share some of the fun you can have with them too.





## MUFFIN TIN BALL PLAY

This activity is so quick and easy to set up and yet it keeps toddlers busy for ages. We started with a few different sized muffin tins - my tray of mini size holes then added some different sized balls I had collected for a rainy day. This tray has some little bouncy rubber balls and some ping pong balls.



This tray has larger holes and fit a few craft styrofoam balls.



The girls had great fun taking them out and fitting them back in again. They soon learnt which balls fit into which size holes, great for practising spatial awareness and eye hand coordination!



Tara had such fun making little patterns and arranging her balls in particular ways. She also seemed to enjoy making the tray hold either all white or all coloured balls before then mixing them up again!

Options to extend this activity are endless. I find it best to have a few different sized trays with different sized and textured balls. Although I have twins so no doubt one tray would be just as much fun for one child!

## MINI CUPS & PASTA TRAY

Another easy yet fun activity is to provide some large macaroni pieces, some pom pom balls of different sizes and some mini plastic cups (they are party shot glasses but they don't have to know that!) and some different sized muffin trays again.



The toddler twosome absolutely loved these cups and it kept them busy as they fit them into the holes then filled them with pompoms and macaroni. Having a tray each really helped them to play in their own way at their own developmental level and most importantly avoid fights!



Ruby was interested in stacking her cups and pulling them apart over and over!



Then putting them in the tray again to fill. They are just right for little hands and fit into the muffin trays easily which avoids the frustration that toddlers can often encounter during fine motor type activities. Who would have thought that stacking and unstacking these cups would be so much fun?

I hadn't even thought of that when I first put them out. I love what watching these girls play can teach me about their thinking processes!



## SHINY SANDY MUFFINS

Set up a little mini muffin making station for the girls with a few shiny sparkly things: some spoons, a tray of sand and a little water. along with some bowls and of course the muffin trays!



I stood back and waited to see what they would do. There was some pasta to sprinkle into sand cakes and lots of mixing and sharing as muffin tin creations were made!



It wasn't a really messy activity as I only had this little tray of sand and minimal water. So these are a few ways we have enjoyed with our muffin tins!

I hope you found some inspiration to perhaps try out with your toddler. Sometimes the best activities turn out to be the most basic don't they? Helps to have a muffin tin or two I always say....



MUFFIN TIN PLAY IDEAS



# Blue Sponges for Autism Awareness

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**



## INTRODUCTION

Choosing just one colour to focus on when setting up craft activities can be a fun way to introduce basic colour recognition. In this activity we decided to do some blue themed activities for Autism Awareness Day here in Australia.



I have been researching and learning a little more about Autism and the spectrum recently. I have realised that although I thought I knew a fair bit because of my early childhood training, I was saddened to realise that I too had come to believe many of the myths I had read.

Anyhow, I decided to collect some different shaped sponges from around the house to provide the girls with a different painting experience full of sensory possibilities! Using our trusty tray I dumped some blue cornflour paint onto the paper on the tray and let the girls choose the sponge they wanted to explore.

They squished (I wouldn't quite say dipped at this age!) and then stamped.  
Different sponges made different patterns!



BLUE SPONGES FOR AUTISM AWARENESS

We had sea sponges, bath/shower soft scrubbers, and kitchen sponge cut into strips and pegged to use as handles when dabbing. Pegs clipped onto strips of kitchen sponge are always good fun for toddlers and great to dip into water paint too as they have their own little handles to hold!

We also had large, soft bath sponges that I wrapped in vegetable netting collected from the shopping. And lots and lots of blue!





We stamped on paper on the tray but we also just stamped on the tray for clearer patterns! Of course, then we had to mess all the patterns up because we are toddlers! Older children enjoy making their stamping patterns a little more distinct!



BLUE SPONGES FOR AUTISM AWARENESS

Very budget-friendly and quick to prepare but lots of fun involved. It's just the way we like it. Of course I had to share this picture as she stamped the side of her face and this is the reaction!



Ruby was really fascinated with these sponges and just loved exploring the rope and patting them to her face!



BLUE SPONGES FOR AUTISM AWARENESS



# Simple Trays and Tubs

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

# INTRODUCTION

It can be a challenge setting up activities for toddler play – they have short attention spans, love to scoop, dump and leave a trail of treasure in their wake and activities never seem to go to plan! My big tip for parents and educators planning for toddler play is to keep it simple!



And develop a love for trays and baskets of all shapes and sizes – they will become your best friend when trying to simplify setup, interaction and clean up of toddler activities. Don't believe me? I've collected a huge list of ideas to share with you that I have used over the years.

The reality of working with toddlers is that they are exploring boundaries, they have lots of new skills developing daily and want to challenge what they can already do.

They also demand your undivided attention, get tired quickly and are apt to then lose the plot over the wrong coloured cup or need to go to the toilet at the worst moment. That's reality (and developmentally appropriate by the way!). So rather than fighting against this try and go with their unique personalities and flow, take steps to be organised ahead of time.

I've worked with toddlers and babies in child care centre rooms as well as in mixed multi age environments in occasional care and family day care so I've picked up a few strategies to save my sanity yet keep the learning playful for the children over the years.

## MY TOP 3 TIPS WHEN WORKING WITH TODDLERS

**Plan ahead of time** – have all the materials you need ready to go, the paint in pots, a bucket of water and washers for hands so there are no endless trips to the bathroom to wash hands

**Do activities outside whenever possible!!!** This way you can leave the tables or activities set up for a little longer and meet a toddler's need to drift back and forth between running off some energy then coming back to focus for a little bit on an activity before they head off again. When you only ever set up these types of activities inside frustration can occur on both sides because educators often try and direct the play to 'keep it at the table' or give up and wonder why they took all that time to set something up they played with for 2 minutes. When you go outside you will find they play with it a lot longer!

**Love and use those trays, tubs and baskets.** Why? Because there is often not enough time when playing with toddlers to prep, interact then clean up before everything seems to go downhill and you need to attend to nappies, toileting, tears and tantrums!



I use trays and tubs because it means I can prep everything before children arrive, throw them all into the tub or tray and leave somewhere I can grab quickly and head outside without a lot of juggling and bringing things in and out which takes up valuable time – and trust me, toddlers need the attention on them....when they suddenly realise you aren't focusing on them with all this fussing around to setup an activity the attention seeking behaviour will begin!

The other great thing about doing activities with toddlers outside and using trays and tubs is that you don't have to clean up straight away – you can remove paint and other messy bits and pieces you would rather be out of reach when finished and throw back in the tub or on the tray, put it up high then simply hose off the table or pass out the sponges and water so they can help you clean. Worry about cleaning the stuff in the tub or tray later – like rest time or late afternoon as they play.

So with those tips in mind and my philosophy of keeping play simple for both children and educators I thought I would share a few examples of ways I have used trays, tubs, baskets and outdoor play over the past few years.

There is a lot of photo inspiration to scroll through here and because they are so simple there is little need for me to write about each activity so I'll just add a tip here and there because the idea is not to try and recreate the activities shared exactly but to take some ideas and new energy away with you to modify and share with the children in your care.

Most of these activities work very well for 3-5 year olds as well and were often used within a multiage group environment. Tweak them to suit your own resources, setting and ages but above all **keep it simple and keep it playful** – complicated does not mean more opportunities for learning in the early years!

## KEEPING ACTIVITIES FOR TODDLER PLAY SIMPLE

If you have younger toddlers and older babies why not put some little treasure baskets together of simple materials (I usually source mine from the op or thrift shops or \$2 store). Keep safety in mind obviously but don't underestimate the power of simple resources – open ended materials allow children to use the 'toys' in any way they want to without some goal or purpose to try and meet. Let them experiment with some simple basket ideas.



## BASKETS IN THE GARDEN

The garden is a wonderful environment for investigation, colour, counting, sorting and sustainability concepts as well as social interaction and language development. Pass out the baskets and encourage children to find their own natural treasures or introduce baskets of leaves, flowers, vegetables, grasses, herbs etc they can add to their own play.



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## BASKETS, TUBS & TRUCKS PASSIONFRUIT STAND

This activity works with any fruit, vegetables or herbs from the garden that the children help to grow and collect. Toddlers love to be helpful so involve them in growing and caring for plants in their environment when you can! We turned our glut of passionfruit into a fruit stall/shop and I passed out the baskets and tubs then let the play evolve as the children's imaginations took over.



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## BUBBLE WRAP CRUSH & STICK TRAY

Egg shells make a fantastic resource for craft but they are better crushed to avoid the sharp edges – we coloured ours another day with some edicol dye in water and when dry I added them to a tray lined with bubblewrap – another sheet of wrap over the top for extra sensory fun then the toddlers went to work with their hammers. The popping of the bubble wrap and the crunching of the eggshells is so much fun.

We extended the play by rolling in paint with a little PVA glue added then rolling across our eggshell trays.



## PLAYDOUGH FINE MOTOR BASKET

If you see wooden rings of any kind then make them yours seems to be my motto! So I enjoy presenting them in different ways. This simple activity used playdough as a stable base to press craft sticks into then little hands practised threading the rings onto the sticks. I also left the hammers out and some preferred to hammer their sticks into the dough first then add the rings!



## MUDDY ANIMAL WASH TRAY & TUB

All you need is a tray or two of shaving foam with a little brown edicol dye (or food colouring) to create mud trays – or you could of course just make your own real mud and use that! Add some jungle or farm animals, shaving brushes and nail brushes (easier for little hands to hold and move around) and a tub of water. Show them how to mix the foam with the dye to make a colour then play with the animals in the mud.

When they are finished they can dunk them in the water and scrub all the 'mud' off with their brushes. They will go back and forth many times with this one!



## THE WASH & CLEAN TUBS

So simple it needs no explanation I'm sure but I will just say make sure to mix up your props and the size of your buckets and tubs to add interest to the simple task of washing dishes!



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS



## BREADMAKING BOARDS

This one is so much sensory fun but I do advise setting up beforehand and doing it outdoors as it does get messy. I also find it helpful to give each child their own board and dough to create with in their own space in the way they want to. Make your bread dough with the children or make the dough ahead of time and just have fun kneading, squishing and forming into shapes to bake then eat!



## PEBBLE OPEN ENDED PLAY



Don't shy away from using pebbles and stones with toddlers – yes they need a little extra supervision but there are so many ways they can choose to add them to their play and if you are consistent with how to look after and use them they will probably surprise you! In the water tub with some scoops and trays is an absolute favourite with all ages!



## TRUCK PEBBLE HUNT POTS

Another way to introduce pebbles and gems. Add some pots and trucks then also scatter a few around the yard and they will be so busy searching for their treasures and loading their trucks that you won't see them for ages!



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## POTION POTS

You can often find plastic pots like this cauldron in the \$2 shops – I also use the large boiling pots that I find in the op shops. Add some simple real kitchen tools like spoons, whisks, cups and ladles, a few loose parts and some greenery then stand back and watch the potion making and cooking begin!



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## MOBILE BOXES

Adding elements to smaller spaces like shoeboxes and wooden boxes allows toddlers to explore more closely and also move them around if they choose to do so.



## SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## ICE CUBE SCOOP & SORT TUB

You can pretty much find these plastic ice cubes anywhere now but you could of course use something similar you already have. Pour them into a tub of water, add some egg carton trays, tea strainer 'nets', tongs and spoons then watch them go fishing to scoop then fit into their tray! Add some bubbles and whisks to extend the fun.



## COLOURFUL BEAR CATCH & SORT TUB

If you have some of these little counting bears why not take them outside and add to a tray of watered down goop -the sticky goop is just under the surface of the water so they need to 'rescue' the bears using spoons, tongs (or hands to make it easier). You can easily extend it into a counting, sorting and colour recognition game – it's a whole lot of sensory fun!



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## BEANS & BOTTLES TRAY

Some dried beans, juice containers from the recycle bin, formula scoops and tweezers come together to create a fun fine motor activity. Who can fill their bottle first? Screw on the lids tightly then shake them to make music!





## BALLOON TARGET PRACTICE TUB

Fill some sauce bottles with coloured water, a tub with water and a few half inflated balloons then see who can hit the targets! Challenge older children by making them stand further away.



## BALLOON SCOOP & DROP TUB

Use the balloons in a different way the next day by providing some sieves and a water tray for the children to practise eye-hand coordination and fine motor control as they catch and drop in some balloon fishing fun!



## SALTY SENSORY TRAY

Line a tray with salt, fill some small spray bottles with coloured water (I just use edicol powder dyes and water) then stand back and watch the patterns and colours appear.

What colour did you make there? How does the wet salt feel different to the dry salt? If the younger toddlers struggle with the spray bottle lever use some juice bottles with a small hole punched in the lid so they can just squeeze the bottle to spray paint onto the trays.



## BALL FIT & SORT TRAYS

Muffin trays of all shapes and sizes are the perfect base for this ball or rock activity. Easily modified for different ages – you can start without the cardboard tubes and just fill the trays first for younger ones.

Is that ball too big for that tube? Why did that ball go inside? Can you balance the ball on top of the tube? How many balls do you have in your tray? Is that ball bigger or smaller than that one? So many more possibilities to explore!



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## SLIPPERY BALL TRAYS

A little lumpy cornflour paint coloured green and added to trays along with some balls, tongs and plant pot bowls makes for an interesting and engaging activity. How many can you collect? Is it slippery? What colours did you catch? How can you help each other to collect more?



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## KNOCK EM DOWN TRAYS

Small baking trays collected from the op shop and filled with sand are just the right size for toddlers to use. Hand out the spray bottles, line up some little people, dinosaurs or animals in the sand along with a few other 'obstacles' then see how many they can knock down with their spray!

Doing this activity outside also allows toddlers to explore their creativity by using their spray bottles in different ways around the yard. I use edicol dye so it just washes off at the end of the day and easily comes out of clothes!



## WOOD SCRAP BIN & BASKET PLAY



I always have a few bins or tubs of wood offcuts and often just wheel it out into the yard for the children to add to their play in different ways.

A few pots of paint and some brushes led to some interesting construction projects.



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## WHISK & SCOOP BUBBLE TUB

Toddlers love to work and play in their own little space so where possible I try to provide the option of a few tubs and trays for them to use. This activity encourages them to use fine motor muscles, explore bubbles and learn how to make them using their whisk (add a little dishwash liquid). Sieves add to the fun – can you catch some bubbles? What do they feel like? What colour shall we make them?





## PLAYDOUGH SORT & CREATE

After matching our teddy bear counters to the same coloured playdough the activity soon turned to mixing colours then a basket of spice jar lids led to many interesting creations. Open ended play is so much fun and I love seeing what different ages create and how they use the materials in different ways!



## BEAN BAG BOXES

This is an old favourite and so easy to do (the older children actually love this one too!) I make my own beanbags from material scraps then fill with dried beans or rice but you can use any old beanbags of course. Add some boxes and watch them continuously throw into the box then take them out and start again.

Adding some shredded paper to the same boxes is also messy but keeps them busy playing for ages!



## BABY WASHING BOWLS, TUBS & TRAYS

Also a classic and so easy to setup but try and think outside the box a little and try different spaces and materials each time. These are some of our favourites below...



Squeeze bottles filled with soapy water add a little extra fun to bath day for the babies!



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS

## BABY WASHING BOWLS, TUBS & TRAYS

Extend the play by adding some pump bottles and dolls with hair so they can do some shampooing. The pump bottles also challenge those fine motor skills!



When the bathing is done, throw in some whisks to the tub and watch the interest reignite!



SIMPLE TRAYS AND TUBS



# Fizzing Fine Motor Trays

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

Setting up opportunities for open ended sensory and fine motor play doesn't need to be difficult or overly complicated. The activity I'm sharing today is one that evolved after my girls pulled out the box of pebbles and gems along with a \*ahem\* small container of milk container lids.

I often read comments on social media telling other educators that they need to get rid of the 'popular brand toys', 'plastic toys' and pretty much everything that isn't classed as a loose parts, natural or open ended material. I don't believe in this action. I love loose parts and do prefer them but sustainable practice means that we also try to find alternate ways of using the materials we already have to encourage more open ended play opportunities.

It's not about throwing out what we already have and buying new expensive wooden or 'recycled' resources. It's about thinking outside the box, simplifying and reusing or upcycling where possible.



When we did this activity my twins had a strong interest in all things cause and effect as well as Frozen dolls (and some weird baby things that come in a ball but I can't remember the name of them) at the moment but they also loved their loose parts so I decided to offer some trays for them to create their own small worlds and direct their own play.

Such a simple activity suited to an age range from 3-8 years depending on the materials you provide. Want to give it a try? You'll be amazed at how quick this activity is to set up!

## WHAT YOU NEED

- Baking trays or flat surface tubs with a raised side.
- 2-3 cups bicarb soda (this will depend on how many trays you are setting up).
- A sprinkle of epsom salts to add to the sensory exploration (optional and not needed for the fizzing!)
- Loose parts of your choice – we used old scoops, gems, coloured flat stones, and plastic milk lids.
- A few bowls or cups of vinegar with food colouring mixed in (or edicol paint dye which is what I used).
- Old medicine droppers or large turkey basters.
- Figurines, cars, dolls, animals or other small toys the children are currently interested in.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW



This activity is so simple to setup and then you can step back and watch the play unfold in different ways.

Add the bicarb soda to the baking trays to form a thin layer across the bottom. Leave the loose parts and other toys easily accessible for the children to self select.

Before introducing the vinegar and droppers just allow them to explore the sensory tray with their hands and begin arranging their own small worlds.

Ruby became very involved in making pathways for the babies using the gems. The lids became pools, puddles at even boats at different times throughout the play.





To extend the play and encourage investigation and experimentation add the bowls of coloured vinegar to the table and show the children how to squeeze droppers to draw up some of the liquid then release onto the bicarb tray.



As the vinegar drops onto the bicarb there will be a fizzing reaction and little eruptions. My girls began to target where they wanted to add their 'fizzes and colours' – obviously younger children will just drop the vinegar anywhere, but it will provide just as much fun. If they find the droppers too difficult at this stage just add a few teaspoons for them to use.

You could of course use jugs and cups but in my experience the activity then finishes very quickly and you only end up with one or two fizzing puddles and they lose interest. The droppers and teaspoons slow down the play!



The milk bottle lids became spa baths with fizzy water and much more as the imagination and play evolved.



The beauty of introducing open ended materials to experiences like this is that the children can decide how they want to extend their own play and make decisions about how they want to use the materials alongside the more closed or traditional items like dolls. There is room to combine both types of resources when it comes to play.

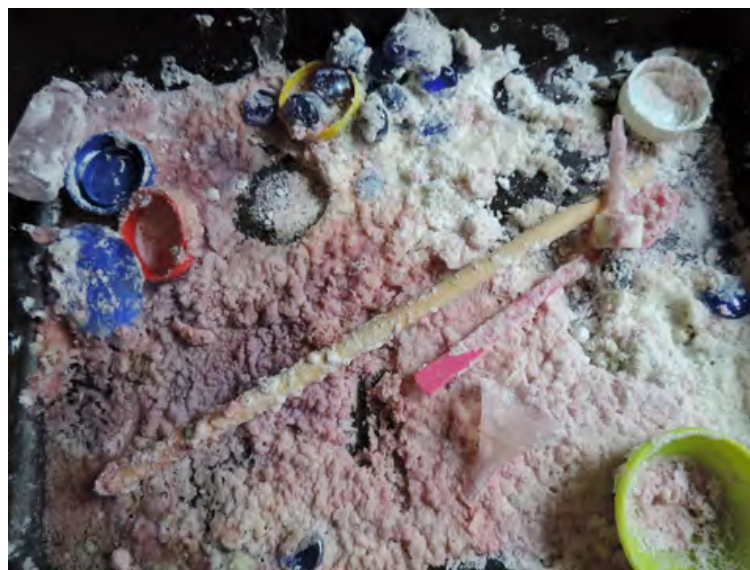




These sensory trays might not look like the pretty small world setups or invitations that you usually see – they are messy, unstructured and don't have any sort of theme. BUT they are **unique, child led, creative, fun for little fingers and imaginations and encourage investigation and experimentation** with different sensory materials.

**One little tip though** – don't forget to tip out the trays and wash everything within a few hours like I did or you might end up with a lovely rock hard landscape like this that is VERY difficult to clean.

On the positive side, because we also used a handful of epsom salts for extra sensory fun....we also created our own crystals a few days later! I'm pretty sure my baking tray is now a play tray forever though #keepingitreal !!





# Sensory Squirt Salt Tray

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

I love finding ways to help toddlers explore and get messy through sensory play and this salt tray squirt activity quickly became a favourite!

Such a simple little activity but one that will keep all ages busy and engaged for a long time! I simply put out a little cooking salt on a tray and let the toddlers and preschoolers explore however they wanted to.

This looks like more salt than there is, it spreads quite a long way and don't worry if you don't have a tray, the table or a few smaller trays would work just as well.



Let them play with the texture and write in the salt for awhile before introducing some spray bottles to add to the fun.



I fill our spray bottles with a little water and some edicol powder dye to make some nice bright colours that easily wash out of clothes and off little hands. Try food colouring if you don't have any edicol dye.



**SENSORY SQUIRT SALT TRAY**

Then it is just a matter of encouraging them to squirt into the salt. Lots of practise for those fine motor skills and it can be tricky for younger toddlers to master the squeeze action so you might need to help a few times first.

**We talked about:**

- Colours they were making in the salt
- How to make lines and dots
- What the water was doing to the feel of the salt



It was soon discovered that the wetter the salt got the more they were able to move it around and begin making little piles and clumps as it stuck together.



**Interest then turned to colour mixing and investigation:**

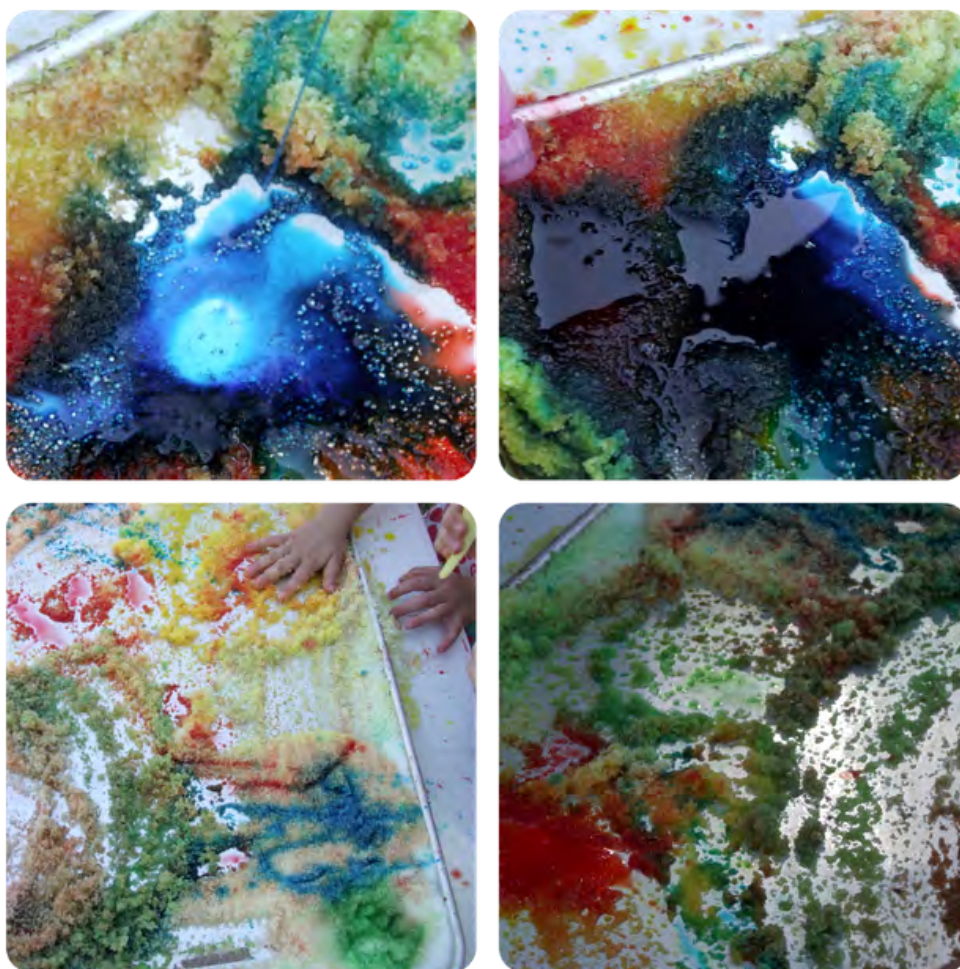
- How do we make purple?
- What happens when we mix red and blue together?
- How do we make puddles?
- Why does the salt go lumpy?
- Why can we see the grains better in the watercolour?

So many questions to explore!



Wet salt can be quite a challenge for those with sensory sensitivities like Ruby so I made sure to keep a bucket of water close by to wash hands. Providing a few paintbrushes to draw in the salt can also allow SPD kiddos to engage in the activity without actually having to touch the wet, sticky salt.

As more watercolour is added, patterns can be made and little rivers and roads can be discovered. The imagination gets used just as much in this activity as the senses do!



Eventually the darker colours dominated the tray and we were left with a green blue sludge! Little mountains were made as it is easy to mould the salt when really wet. A squirt of the spray bottle and it can topple again... Lots of fun to squish and mould in the hands at this stage!



If you would prefer a relatively mess free activity just stick with the salt tray and add a few little tools to draw with such as paintbrushes, straws and wooden sticks. If you are up for a little mess and colour though then just look at what your children might create. I think it's beautiful don't you?





# DIY Bath Salts

**PLAYFUL LEARNING WITH FINE  
MOTOR ACTIVITIES**

## INTRODUCTION

DIY Bath Salts are one of the easiest gifts that children of all ages can have fun making for a special someone – perfect for Mother’s Day! When children are creating their bath salts they are also engaging in some wonderful sensory and fine motor play.

We made these bath salts to share as gifts and although we have now done this activity many times it is just as much fun each time and simple enough to do whether you are creating with just a few children or a large group!

Want to try making your own bath salts? Follow my simple recipe and steps below – I’ve also included a few modifications for younger children.



## HOW TO MAKE DIY BATH SALTS

What you will need:

- 3/4 Cup Epsom Salts
- 1/4 Cup Bi-Carb Soda
- 1/2 Cup Coarse Sea Salt
- Few drops of food colouring (optional if you want coloured salts)
- Around 10 drops of your favourite essential oil (we used lavender and a 'breathe easy' mix)
- Measuring cups, bowls, spoons for mixing
- Small mason or washed glass jars from the recycle bin

This mix makes enough for 2-3 small jars or 1 medium jar. I usually double this recipe to make enough for 5 children using smaller jars. The ingredients are very budget friendly so it provides the opportunity to make more if you need to without breaking the resource budget!



DIY BATH SALTS

## WHAT YOU DO NOW

Now comes the fun part – make sure to involve the children at every step of the process. I like to have a few measuring jugs, spoons and bowls so that everyone can have a turn at measuring out ingredients – if you only have a small group of children why not allow them to have individual bowls to work with?

For larger groups of children I suggest using a wide shallow tub or tray so that everyone can see what's happening and take turns measuring, pouring and mixing from all sides.

You don't need to leave toddlers out of the fun – they will enjoy pouring and mixing using some plastic cups and their hands! Use large tubs on the floor or a low table so they can access easily. Obviously you will need to supervise closely to stop it ending up in little mouths but I have included toddlers in this activity many times and they are always fascinated by the texture of the salts and the opportunity to fill and empty using containers.

Measure out and add the dry ingredients to the bowl/bowls and then mix together well. Now it's onto the next step....





Add a few drops of food colouring now if you wish to colour your bath salts (don't go overboard or you will end up with guggy bath salts and a bath full of colour). We added a few drops of natural purple colouring as I only wanted a subtle touch of colour -you can off course just leave them white too! Now add your essential fragrance oils and get those hands in there squishing, mixing and experimenting.

- What can you smell?
- What colour is appearing as you mix and squish?
- What does it feel like?



DIY BATH SALTS

Now comes the tricky part for little hands – filling the jars. To challenge older children you can use smaller jars and we also used a few narrow bottles as well – filling with teaspoons and fingers. Messy but fun!

Toddlers will love helping you to scoop into a wide mouthed jar using their hands or a cup. Hand/eye coordination and fine motor skills really get a workout during this step!





You can decorate your jars in a way that suits the age of the children doing this activity. This time around I was working with 6 year-olds so we picked some flowers and they chose some ribbons to tie around the top. However, when I do this activity with younger children we usually paint the glass jars first in their own style to create a truly unique child made gift.

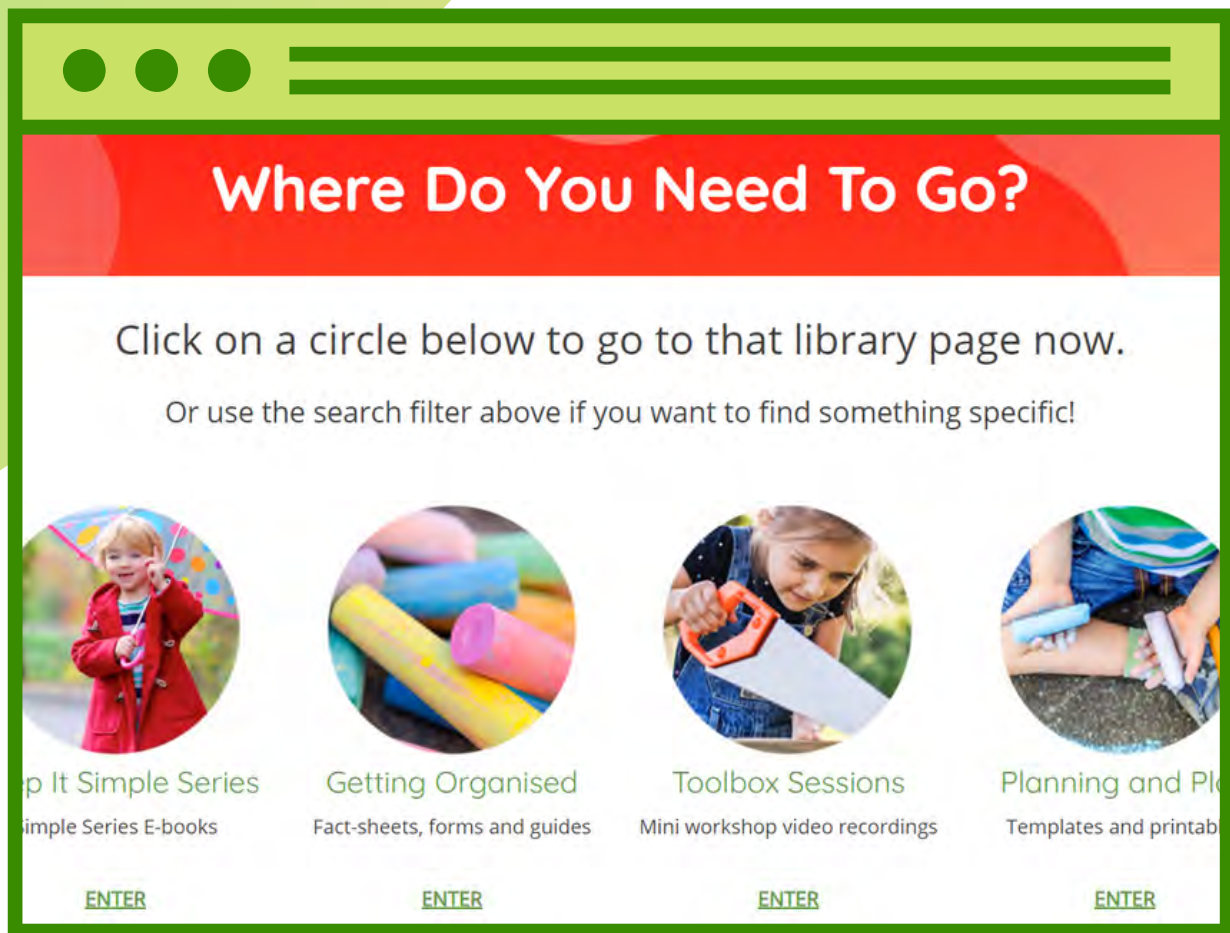
We often add a little tag with a drawing by each child and I add the directions of 'sprinkle 2 spoons or a handful into a warm bath then relax!' onto the tag before tying around the neck of the jars.



Mums and special carers often don't take time out to pamper themselves very often but the lovely smell of these bath salts made by the special little person in their life will guarantee Mum a beautiful long soak in the tub.





I hope you have fun making these DIY bath salts with the children – it really is a simple and budget friendly gift idea for Mum or Grandma that the children can be hands on and fully participate in, easy to set up and clean away too!

DIY BATH SALTS



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