

Playgroup would not really be playgroup without playdough, paint and water and sand play making a weekly appearance on the program. Each of these activities allows children to engage in imaginative, unstructured play which focuses on the process, not an end product. The variations for each activity are unending. Props can be added to complement a theme or to extend the potential for imaginative play.

## Playdough

Playdough can be warm (heated in the microwave oven in the middle of winter!) or cold. It can be made almost any colour with food dye or left plain. It can be manipulated with fingers and hands or with a variety of implements. It can be different consistencies. It can have glitter, sand, rice, and many other components added to change the texture. Add 1-2 drops of essential oil or ½ teaspoon spice. It can be used in a home corner as a prop for pretend cooking. Add plastic animals, or other washable toys to the playdough table for imaginative play.

Younger children and some children with a disability may put playdough in their mouths. They may not perceive the extremely salty taste that would cause us as adults to spit it out. **Salt is toxic in large doses, particularly for small children. If there are children in your playgroup who eat playdough it would be safer to make a fresh batch of playdough every week, omitting the salt.** The texture and consistency will not be affected, but the playdough will be unsafe to use more than once without the preservative effect of the salt.

## Quick Fool-proof Playdough

### Ingredients

2 cups plain flour  
4 tablespoons Cream of Tartar  
2 tablespoons cooking oil (olive oil is kind to skin)  
1 cup cooking salt (omit if necessary for safety)  
2 cups boiling water  
Optional (choose 1 or 2 of these additions): food colouring (Eddicol makes brilliant colours and can be mixed to make almost any colour and shade); glitter; 1-2 drops essential oil (lavender, geranium or peppermint are good choices); ½ teaspoon of aromatic spice powder (cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom, cumin, etc.); ½ cup clean sand, rice or small pasta shapes (knead rice or pasta into the dough after it has cooled to avoid softening them).

### Method

Mix all the dry ingredients in a heat-proof bowl. Make a well in the centre, add oil and mix lightly into flour. Carefully pour the boiling water into well in centre of the flour mixture and gradually mix together with a wooden spoon until the ingredients are combined. Turn the dough onto a clean surface and continue to knead it until smooth. Will keep indefinitely if stored in a dry airtight container, but replace regularly to ensure freshness; if salt is omitted use only for one session.

**Safety note** - The water must be boiling in order to cook the dough. Take care not to splash. Do not pour boiling water directly onto the unmixed oil to avoid potential splashing. Do not allow children to help or be nearby while you add the boiling water. Take care when kneading the dough as it will still be very hot – use rubber gloves or the back of a wooden spoon until it has cooled to a safe temperature. Do not give the playdough to children until you have thoroughly kneaded it to ensure that there are no hot spots, and it has cooled to a lukewarm temperature.

## Water

Water is a wonderful medium for play, as it allows the child to engage in a sensory experience with absolutely no expectation of an end result other than getting wet. Water can be used with a wide range of props to add variety and stimulate the imagination. It can be used in a pretend kitchen, for "cooking" and "washing up" games. Dolls can be washed and dried. Objects that float and sink can be added. Soapsuds and colour extend the sensory experience. Water can be squirted, sprayed and brushed, on fences, people (in summer) and paper.

Safety and personal boundaries should be taught to the children, and supervision around water is essential.

## Sand

Sand can be outside in a sandpit or inside in a tub. It provides endless possibilities for tipping, pouring, moulding (add a little water for a firmer consistency), squeezing through fingers, digging holes, building castles, hills and roads. In a sandpit, sand is a great medium for 2 and 3 year-olds to play alongside each other; just provide enough containers, spades, and other sandpit toys for everyone. A wide variety of toys can be used; they should be washable and robust enough to take the weight of sand.

A lot of the playgroup conversations happen around the sandpit, because it is an opportunity for the adults to kick back and relax while the children are busy. The worst that is likely to happen is sand in the eyes, and children will need to learn that throwing sand results in time-out from the sand-pit.

Out-door sand-pits need a tight-fitting cover to keep animals out, and must be raked thoroughly before use to make sure there are no sharp objects buried in the sand.

## Paint

Paint activities can be presented in many different ways for interest and to cater for different ages. Younger children enjoy painting with one colour at a time, so it can be fun to have colour theme days, and rotate through the different colours. As they become comfortable with manipulating a brush and getting paint onto the paper, extra colours can be provided. Three colours at a time is a good maximum; the more colours used the more brushes and pots have to be cleaned out, and the effect of mixing more colours is usually brownish-purple gunk, which may be an interesting experiment once or twice, but can result in a lot of art-work not being taken home!!

Add interest to painting by using a variety of "implements"... brushes can be replaced by sponges, crumpled-up paper, fingers and hands! Stamping and stencilling can be fun. Some children enjoy handprints and footprints, while others have to overcome a dislike of "mess". Speaking of mess, having a tub of water next to the painting activity for quick washing of hands can save a lot of cleaning up later.

One of the most important aspects of painting activities is to recognise that the main value and enjoyment to young children is the experience and the process of getting paint onto the paper (or whatever surface is being painted). The adults at playgroup may need to be coached to stand back a bit and give their children the freedom to make a "mess" and not expect a recognisable "picture" to be produced. At the same time of course, the children need to learn that painting is done within limits, which includes not painting other children's faces or clothing, not painting various parts of the room, and putting the paint-brush down before heading off to do the next activity.