The sensory experience of messy play has far-reaching benefits for brain development, creativity and risk-taking, says Anne O’Connor, Nursery World.

**Photographs courtesy of Siren Films**

**Practice in Pictures**

**Mud, mud...**

Tristan is in the park with his mother. He steps into a muddy puddle and squats down to investigate it further. He uses a finger to gently poke at the mud. After a while, he scoops some up on his finger, steps out of the puddle and carefully makes marks on the ground with it. He checks with his mother before he goes back into the mud and does it again.

How many of us remember the joys of playing in the mud? Getting mucky and playing in the mud isn’t just about fun – it’s hugely important in building our brains!

Sensory experiences help build connections in a young child’s brain, by sending electrical-chemical messages across the synapses between the neurons in the brain. These messages strengthen the synapses and the connections in the brain pathways. This helps the child to make sense of their repeated experiences by enabling the brain to build a powerful ‘image’ of the way the world around them works. Connections are made through repeated sensory experiences which shout tiny bursts of electricity across the gaps, wiring the neurons into well-connected circuits. Getting messy in the mud isn’t just about fun – it’s hugely important in building our brains!

As well as helping a child make connections with their previous experience, playing with ‘messy’ materials also confuses their brains in a very useful way. Piaget’s concept of cognitive disequilibrium describes how thinking has to change in order to incorporate new information.

Bernadette Duffy, in ‘All About... Messy Play’ (Nursery World, 4 December 2004) suggests there is a strong link between this concept and the processes involved in messy play: ‘Children’s interpretation of the world is challenged when they take on new information and find that they now have two contradictory views of the same event.’

The mud in Tristan’s puddle looks as if it might be solid but when he pokes his finger into it the sensation is very different. ‘The creative process,’ as Duffy notes, ‘is characterised by risk-taking, trying things out and experimenting, and an insight often occurs at the very moment we are confused and have to look deeper’.

Although being cautious, Tristan clearly enjoys messing about in the mud. But some children who are touch-sensitive or ‘tactile defensive’, are much less inclined to experiment and play with messy materials of any kind.

Although it is true that some children learn to be wary of getting dirty or messy, because of the negative reactions from the adults around them, some children may have a sensory processing or modulation disorder. This means that they have a heightened sensitivity to touch and tactile experiences and can be easily overwhelmed by sensation.

Mud play, in general, rarely has a finished product or outcome – and this is a very valuable feature of this kind of play. It is all about the direct experience unique to each child, although it is worth recording the process with photographs and children’s comments as they play.

When he concentration is intense as he carefully marks the ground with his muddy finger. Mud is a perfect material for triggering and supporting emergent mark-making and writing. Moulding, shaping, splodging and poking gives children immediate satisfaction as well as a sense of control over the material. Scraping, dabbing and daubing, with fingers or tools, gives positive, but not permanent, feedback, which offers a pressure-free experience in which to explore making marks.

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Tristan chooses to experiment with the mud by taking it out of the puddle on his finger and then making marks with it on the dry path.

As practitioners, we may have our own sensory or emotional issues around dirt or messy activities. Sadly, this can sometimes lead to a reluctance to make these activities available – and, of course, there are the organisational issues of all that mess to clean up afterwards!

Naturally, the outdoors is the perfect place to encourage messy play and where you can usually rely on the weather to help in mud production.

In her book, ‘Playing and Learning Outdoors’, Jan White gives useful advice on making the most of sand and soil outside for digging areas. She suggests buying high-quality loam topsoil from garden centres or builders’ merchants and advises that post-base compost is environmentally unsound and shouldn’t be used.

Take care to cover up skin cuts with plasters or gloves, and think about how you can make handwashing afterwards as accessible as possible. Encourage reluctant practitioners to experiment and play with messy materials alongside the children – and remind them that we are never too old for a bit more brain-building!

**References and Further Reading**

- **Playing and Learning Outdoors – Making provision for high quality experience in the outdoors** by Jan White (Routledge/Nursery World, 2008)
- **Making My Own Mark – Play and writing** by Helen Bromley (Early Education, 2006)
- **Sensory Integration and the Child by A Jean Ayres (Western Psychological Services, 2005)
- **All About..., Messy Play** by Bernadette Duffy (Nursery World, 4 December 2004)

**Further Information**

The stills are taken from Siren Films’ “Two Year Olds Outdoors – Play, Learning & Development”. For more information, visit Siren Films at www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 01912327900.

**Links to the EYFS**

- **UC 1.1 Child Development**
- **EE 3.3 The Learning Environment**
- **L&D 4.3 Play and exploration**
- **L&D 4.4 Creative Development**