

# MUDDY PLAY



S, S and D are able to jump and splash in the mud to their heart's content because they are dressed in appropriate rain gear, including rain pants, jackets, hats and boots and each have an extra set of clothes to change into.

March in the Pacific Northwest is more often than not, cold, grey and rainy. The garden is quiet and the plants have yet to grow back. At outdoor preschool though, March is a very fun month. It is full of adventurous puddle stomping and muddy play. Just like in our favorite Calvin and Hobbes comic, a trickle of rain can book our whole day solid. We spend our days building dams, bridges and floating sticks and leaves. The students practice conquering fears and pushing physical limits. Just as they get practice becoming chefs of mud pie kitchens and project managers on a construction site.

There is a deep thrill to getting really, really dirty and messy play is extremely important for a child's development. Messy play provides children with an exciting tactile and sensory experience that inspires their curiosity, allows them to explore the world around them, and enhances learning. Muddy play is a lesson in how to be carefree, adventurous, spontaneous, and live in the moment. It takes a good muddy day to remind the teachers of just how important this kind of play really is.



## How to See Muddy Play as Beneficial to Child Development

<p>Common Arguments Against Muddy Play In A Preschool Setting</p>	
<p>“They will get too dirty”</p>	<p>The students do get dirty but a little dirt never hurt. Research has shown that the number one reason you should let your students go outside, play in the mud, and just get dirty is that it introduces their body to essential microorganisms and can in fact help to strengthen children’s immune system.</p> <p>Learn more in Jack Gilbert’s book <i>Dirt is Good: The Advantage of Germs for Your Child’s Developing Immune System</i>.</p>
<p>“The classroom will get too dirty”</p>	<p>It is true that muddy play outside can often lead to a lot of clean up and feel like too much cleaning for teachers. But ask yourself, who is the preschool experience designed for? Is it for the benefit of the teachers? Or for the students? The students getting dirty is a good learning opportunity. After playing in the mud, teachers can help children change out of muddy rainy gear into a new dry set. This is all part of the fun for the students. They like to get cleaned up, wash their hands in warm soapy water, get cozy again, and put their dirty clothes into a special bag to take home.</p>
<p>“The parents don’t want them to be muddy at the end of the day.”</p>	<p>Every family has a different comfort level with their children getting dirty. There are also important cultural differences to take into account when considering adding muddy play as part of your preschool program.</p> <p>Be sensitive to the different cultural norms and talk with families about their comfort level with their kid being dirty. If they are uncomfortable with their child being dirty at the end of the day, be sure to change that child into clean clothes before pick up. If they don’t mind, you can let go of that stress.</p> <p>Be sure to talk with parents about sending their children to school in clothes they don’t mind getting dirty and offering rain gear to families who may not have it at home. At the Playgarden we have two stocked bins of extra clothes that students can borrow clothing from.</p>
<p>“They will get too cold”</p>	<p>Outdoor play in March in the Pacific Northwest can be very cold. This is a serious concern for the children’s health and safety, and of particular concern for children with physical disabilities who may have a limited ability to change clothes themselves and move their bodies to warm up. The cold is also a concern for younger children or children with communication disabilities that limit their ability to tell a teacher if they are getting too cold.</p> <p>Be sure to watch when students are getting wet, pay attention to how long they have been playing in the mud/rain and be ready to change them into dry clothes soon after they are done playing. At the Play-Garden we warm up with a hot snack or lunch, have access to warm water to wash hands, blankets to curl up in, and give out hand warmers to students when needed.</p>
<p>“It takes too much time to change them.”</p>	<p>There is no getting around that muddy children take a little extra time to change. However, for preschoolers, learning to zip up a coat, put on mittens, or kick off muddy boots are key skills needed for their development. Time spent changing clothes is not time wasted. Make it part of your daily routine.</p> <p>You can set up simple systems to help students change clothes and make it easier on the teachers, such as doing a bathroom train in small groups, having the students get their bags themselves, rules about taking off boots at the door, and changing clothes to a specific song. It can help to establish, with the students, a certain time of day when they can get really muddy so that you are not changing students right from the get go in your day.</p> <p>At the PlayGarden, all of the teachers clean up at the end of each day. Cleaning time is some of the most critical time for our teaching staff. We use this time to have debrief conversations with each other about what is going on at school. Being able to talk while cleaning saves times that would otherwise be spent in separate meetings. It is also when good ideas often spark.</p>



## Worms and Mud go Hand in Hand

March is a great time to start teaching students about worms. Looking for worms, saving worms from rain puddles, learning about their body parts, and how they help decompose food are all great places to start.

### What to read:

During March some of our favorite books to read include: Duck in the Truck, Yuck! Stuck in the Muck, Yucky Worms, & Diary of a Worm.

### Accessibility tip:

Though Mud can be super fun to play in it can make spaces less physically accessible for students that use walkers, strollers or wheelchairs. Find creative solutions for keeping paths in your garden as solid as possible and try to reduce the occurrence of potholes.

At the PlayGarden we cover our garden paths with burlap sacks pinned down with garden staples to keep the paths smooth and easier to navigate.

## Building a Mud Pit

There are a few key considerations to keep in mind when building a mud pit:

1. Set aside a specific place where students can dig as much as they like. Our mud pit at the PlayGarden is in a central location in our garden yet distinctly it's own place. In the fall, winter and early spring it will fill itself with rain water to make mud. In the summer, students can retrieve water from a cistern and add it to the mud pit. This is an activity that can entertain students for hours.
2. A mud pit is an intentionally designed space. Add elements that spark wonder. For example, we have Wilbur our Pig nearby. He loves to roll in the mud and get mud baths and be hosed down in the summertime. The mud pit is also near the garden so students can pick flowers to add into their mud pies.
3. To make an exciting mud pit, add stumps, logs and rocks to sit on and allow students to move materials around to make bridges and dams.
4. Pay attention to its depth and edges. The best mud pits are deep enough to pool but not so deep that they are dangerous for young children to play in. Students will often try to make the mud pit bigger by digging from the sides. We keep a close eye on the pit to ensure that the wheelchair accessible paths around it are still wide and flat enough for our students in wheelchairs to use and to protect the garden.





### **Building & Maintaining a Mud Pie Kitchen**

Preschoolers love to play make-believe, role-play, play family, kitchen and restaurant. Watch children play in a mud pie kitchen and you will see, they love to practice serving each other and making mysterious sounding concoctions like witches stew. A mud pie kitchen area is a great learning environment to set up for your students that integrates all of these kinds of play.

### **To create a mud pie kitchen that is accessible and fun for all**

1. Make sure to have tables or surfaces at different heights and that allow for wheelchair access.
2. Have tools on hand like muffin tins, watering cans, pitchers, spoons, whisks, and measuring cups out that students can access on their own.
3. Be sure to have enough supplies that multiple students can play at the same time.
4. Build your mud pie kitchen area near a water source as well so students can continuously make more mud.
5. Remember that the whole environment around the mud pit is key. If the tools are all tucked away or out of reach students won't start playing with them on their own. If however, the tools and cooking utensils are easy to access and there are a few enticing things, like some flowers left on the table, or an example of a mud pie, students will be drawn into the space.
6. For the mud pie kitchen to stay fun it is important for the space to be cleaned up and put back together just like an indoor play space would be cleaned after students play there. At the end of the day have teachers, rinse off utensils, wipe down the tables, and put the tools back in the right places.
7. Remember, to let the children guide the play.