



The Mud Center: Recapturing Childhood

Becky J. Jensen and Julie A. Bullard

Mud is an art medium, one that we can mold, dry, and decorate. Unlike many other media, mud permits us to make mistakes. We can experiment repeatedly, knowing there is a limitless free supply. One of the most basic elements of the earth, mud allows us to develop an appreciation for the environment as we experience its diversity. As adults we can continue to enjoy the sensory experience of mud through mud baths, mud facials, gardening, and barefoot walks with mud oozing through our toes.

This is the story of an early childhood program staff's decision to share the joys of mud with children through the creation of a mud center.

The provocation

It all began at a staff meeting of the lab school at the University of Montana—Western campus. This community of learners includes children ages three through eight, parents, staff, and college students earning early childhood degrees. At this particular meeting, 18 staff and students immersed themselves in fond recollections from childhood. Some of us visualized these in our minds, others wrote about them in journals, and still others drew pictures. When it came time to share, we were amazed to find that our favorite memories revolved around a common element—unstructured time spent playing outdoors. Many of us recalled sensory, messy, creative activities. For several, mud was the medium of choice. We reminisced about the pleasures of creating mud pies and mud sandwiches and holding tea parties with a variety of mud treats. We remembered the deep sense of satisfaction in baking mud pies for the entire neighborhood.

As we reflected further, we realized that the children in our program rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to play in mud. Many live in modest apartment complexes or married-student housing where the outdoor play yards are extremely small grassy areas with a set of swings and a teeter-totter. Digging in them would be considered a grievous act. We found that even in rural Montana, "Children's access to outdoor play has evaporated like water in sunshine" (Rivkin 1995,2). Like Rivkin (1995), we found that our children are affected by traffic, lack of space, and schedules that allow little time for outdoor play.

At staff meetings in the past we had decided to create an outdoor dramatic-play area, since dramatic play is a favorite center. We attempted to duplicate a traditional indoor center outdoors, using dolls, dress-up clothes, cradles, and a child-size playhouse. Although the new play area was popular with the



children, we teachers had misgivings. We felt that the outdoor environment should provide new experiences rather than just reproduce those already available. The outdoors offers children the freedom to make messes and noise, to engage in large motor play, and to move about in open space (Rivkin 1995). We wanted children to take advantage of this freedom. Hence, the idea of a mud center. It would encourage dramatic play, but it would also allow for the messy, creative, sensory experiences we remembered with such joy.

Development of the center

A real stove with an oven (rather than a child's play model) became the highlight of the center. We chose a defunct drop-in range, just the right height for the children. Other equipment included a child's play refrigerator, a play sink to wash hands before cooking, and a large picnic table (covered with a vinyl tablecloth) for a mixing and cooking space. Children could use several nearby tables for serving. A metal cabinet with open shelving made materials accessible. We stocked it with real pots, pans, lids, pie tins, cupcake tins, cake pans, bread pans, cookie sheets, serving plates and bowls, measuring cups, and teaspoons and tablespoons. Stirring and cooking utensils were available: spoons and forks in different sizes, a ladle, a whisk, funnels, spatulas (plastic and metal), plastic knives, a potato masher, ice cream scoops, and pastry brushes.

We filled assorted spice shakers, sugar sprinklers, and condiment containers with found items such as sawdust, crushed eggshells, dried coffee grounds, dried and ground orange peel, pinecones, crushed leaves, dried grass, reeds, twigs, and pebbles and stones of various sizes. The children went on foraging trips to replenish their supplies and expand their collection. Woodchips, sand, small pine needles, green grass, crushed colored leaves, dried flowers, and a variety of dried seeds were added by the children as the center took shape. Since the children loved experimenting with colors in their cooking, the teachers contributed bottles of colored water and crushed colored eggshells.

And of course there were large buckets of dirt and water. We continually replenished the buckets with different kinds of soil for cooking experimentation. Collecting soil became a challenge as winter approached and the ground froze. Fortunately, a construction site nearby provided ground that had been disturbed and was therefore softer.

We incorporated three other large buckets into the center—one for discarding unwanted mud creations to avoid their being dumped in the play-yard, one full of soapy water for cleaning cooking utensils, and one full of plain water for rinsing them. The cleanup area of the center also included a tree stump with attached strainers for drying clean utensils. The children could then hang up the utensils on a Peg-Board,



matching them to outlines on the Peg-Board. Initially, cleanup seemed fun and inviting, but later it became a challenge for some children when the novelty wore off. One child remarked, "This is hard work. I should get paid for this."

Since mud creations can get very messy, we provide waterproof vinyl smocks to protect the children's clothing. As children left the mud area they washed, rinsed, and dried their dishes, and in the process they also washed their hands and smocks. An area for hanging smocks, damp washcloths, and towels was also available.

Emerging interests

By observing and documenting uses of the center, the staff extended children's play and learning opportunities. For example, after a foraging walk to gather additional spices, Sarah and John added colorful fall leaves to their mud pies. They stirred excitedly, wanting to know if their pies would become yellow or red. Observing this, the staff added bottles of colored water to the center. Experimentation with color continued through the winter, with children combining colored water and snow to create cookies, which in turn led to colored snow sculptures. One of the more successful cooperative sculptures was a gigantic snow pizza. Children packed snow into variously shaped containers and colored the snow with water to represent different ingredients such as pepperoni, sauce, red peppers, green peppers, and olives. When the staff supplied new colors of water and new spices, more experimentation resulted.

Children also experimented with cooking various dishes, creating stuffed mud pies, layered pies, soups of all kinds, muffins, birthday cakes, teas, stews, and more. Children trying out new recipes often wanted to share them with friends. Noting this, teachers added recipe cards and pencils, and children began to write recipes. Using pictures and words, the staff also wrote out recipes on large sheets of paper for the children to follow. The recipes led to an increased interest in measuring, with several children discussing and debating the correct way to measure. Teachers offered impromptu lessons on measurement and introduced many new measuring utensils, such as liquid measuring cups, measuring spoons, and quart mixing bowls with measurements marked on the side.

How children learn from mud play

Children express their creativity, enhance their fine motor skills, and practice literacy, science, and math skills while using the mud center. The mud is an art medium that children mold and decorate in unique, creative ways. The creations become the center of children's play. They sell them in stores, eat them in restaurants, present them at birthday celebrations, and serve them at family dinners. The children use



the cooking utensils with control and intention, stirring, flipping, and pouring. Adding small ingredients to their creations allows them to use their fine motor skills.

They have many opportunities to practice emergent science and math skills, such as making before-and-after comparisons; investigating solids, solvents, and solutions; examining components of various soils; exploring changes due to freezing and melting; measuring; investigating volume; practicing one-to-one correspondence; investigating questions; solving problems; and testing hypotheses. On foraging trips they learn the names of plants, trees, and seeds. Because foraging trips are frequent occurrences and continue through several seasons, children observe the changes in the foliage.

Literacy is also an important component of the center, with posted picture and world labels, written directions for cleanup, and written recipes. Children begin to see print as a source of information and a way to communicate with others. They practice reading and writing skills, match symbols and print, and increase their vocabulary.

The mud center encourages the development of positive dispositions: independence, cooperation, communication, curiosity, and responsibility. Children learn to work cooperatively in small groups, complete tasks, develop independence, enhance communication and social skills, and experience pride in completed creations.

Why the mud center is successful

The mud center is rich in resources, inviting, challenging, exciting, and developmentally appropriate. The idea for the center emerged from the interests of children and adults, and it appeals to both groups. Experimenting with dirt, water, sand, and makeshift spices and toppings enables children to use their senses to engage in active, hands-on learning. Providing a variety of dirt, frequent foraging trips, and continual additions based upon the children's emerging interests increases the mud center's appeal. Materials are added, removed, and changed as needed.

The center is open ended, allowing for a range of challenges to meet different developmental levels and interests. Some of the younger children simply enjoy the sensory experience of playing in the mud, while other children are serious about measuring precise quantities of water and dirt to create the perfect mud dish. The center also enhances curriculum skills, dispositions, and knowledge in an integrated way.

The center is child friendly and well organized for ease of use and cleanup. The teachers equip it with the necessary supplies. For example, buckets of dirt and water are always available, even in winter. The



center is thoughtfully introduced to the children. The staff explain and reinforce the rules to ensure that the center is emotionally and physically safe.

Conclusion

Although some specialists strongly recommend that early childhood programs develop outdoor dramatic play centers (Esbensen 1987; Henniger 1993), studies indicate that this does not usually happen (Monroe 1985; Frost, Bowers & Wortham 1990). While some suggest that such centers should duplicate the indoor environments (Esbensen 1987; Henniger 1993), we believe that the outdoor dramatic play center should be uniquely different, taking advantage of the additional freedom available outside. We encourage programs to consider creating a mud center. Consisting of scrounged items, the center is inexpensive. It enhances skills in many areas. And best of all, it allows us to share with children some of our treasured memories and the joy of mud.

Implementing a Mud Center

Each mud center is different, based upon the needs and interests of the children and the imagination and creativity of the staff. Materials can be added and taken away as the center is used and new interests emerge.

Necessary materials (borrowed, scrounged, donated)

1. Cooking appliance—old range or box made into an oven
2. Pots, pans, cooking tins
3. Large metal or plastic bowls
4. Cooking utensils
5. Dirt
6. Large buckets of water for cleanup
7. Pitchers of water for cooking
8. Recycled containers to hold spices
9. Recycled or found materials representing spices and condiments
10. Labeled storage unit (we used milk crates wired together to make shelves)
11. Smocks to protect children's clothing



Materials that enhance the mud center

1. Recipe cards, pencils, recipe box
2. Tables and plastic tablecloths
3. Canisters to hold different kinds of dirt
4. Play sink and refrigerator
5. Peg-Board for hanging utensils, drainer for dishes
6. Sifter, colander
7. Towels, dishrags, pot holders

References

Esbensen, S. 1987. *An outdoor classroom*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

Frost, J.L., L. Bowers, & S. Wortham. 1990. The state of American preschool playgrounds. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 61 (8): 18-23.

Henniger, M.L. 1993. Enriching the outdoor play experience. *Childhood Education* 70 (2): 87-90.

Monroe, M. 1985. An evaluation of day care playgrounds in Texas. In *When children play*, eds. J.L. Frost & S. Sunderlin, 193-99. Wheaton, MD: Association for Childhood Education International.

Rivkin, M.S. 1995. *The great outdoors: Restoring children's right to play outside*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Used with permission. Copyright © 2002 by the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](http://www.naeyc.org)

© 2004 by Community Products, LLC