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Embracing Messy Play: Using Documentation to illustrate a Partnership of Community, Teachers, and Nature Education.

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Mud Glorious Mud: Embracing Messy Play
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Experiences in Nature
The growing body of evidence supporting nature education and the benefits of providing opportunities for children to have frequent contact with nature is undeniable. Natural environments provide an ideal backdrop for early childhood investigations and exploration. When children play in natural environments, their play is more diverse with imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills (Moore & Wong 1997, Taylor, et al. 1998, Fjortoft 2000). In addition, play in outdoor environments stimulates all aspects of child development more readily than indoor environments (Moore & Wong 1997).

For early childhood educators at the Ruth Staples Child Development Laboratory School at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, the perfect companion to nature is messy play. Allowing children the opportunity to touch, prod, splash, toss, and experience the natural world through their senses is a must. Teachers aim to create opportunities for children to wonder, engage and marvel in the natural world through hands on experiences. One such experience began with the laboratory’s first celebration of International Mud Day on June 29, 2012. Teachers planned, created and implemented open-ended activities to foster children’s messy play with one of the most natural materials available.

Messy Play
A variety of experiences were planned to engage children in the simple combination of dirt and water. Mud permeated every aspect of the day, allowing children the freedom to explore and learn about its properties, uses, and characteristics. Explorations of mud were intentionally prepared with the uniqueness of children in mind so each child could participate at his/her comfort level. Mud was presented alone and with a variety of tools, allowing children choices on how to explore, investigate, and create. Through this ongoing exploration, children demonstrated outcomes in every domain of Teaching Strategies GOLD. The environment and children’s natural curiosity easily connected to goals and objectives for authentic assessment.

Children experimented with creating shades of colored mud. Brushes, sticks, hands, and feet were used to paint masterpieces on paper and canvas.

Children and teachers used a colander to create a shower of mud.

Children who preferred to explore with a more familiar material were provided water and soap to clean rocks, watching their clean water quickly turn a soupy brown.

“A Clean Mud” was made from soap, water, and toilet paper.

A mud slide featuring a sensory-rich puddle of mud became the main attraction as children reveled in the joy of messy play. Children maintained interest in the area for hours. Experimentation of speed and position of body took place to see who could make the biggest splash, slide the furthest, or get the most mud on them.

Natalia, 4 yrs. “I went squelch, squelch, just like in the Bear Hunt”
Stella, 4 yrs. “Swoosh—it’s warm.”

Shared Experiences
Prior to the event, families were informed about the special occasion verbally and through weekly newsletters. This communication led to the participation of parents and siblings of children enrolled in the laboratory school. Because children were able to share this experience with important people in their lives, a united culture for combining the natural world and messy play was created. Children discovered the power of experiences in the natural world while adults re-discovered the joy in messy play!

Collaboration
Utilizing an established relationship with the landscaping department on campus, an idea was presented for several loads of dirt to be brought into the outdoor space. The landscaping crew responded with enthusiasm by constructing a six foot high mound of dirt. A water source in close proximity was used to transport water to the dirt for several hours, resulting in a mountain of mud complete with a mud slide. The crew embraced the idea of natural, messy play and supported the transformation of the outdoor area for children’s exploration.

“Clean Mud” was made from soap, water, and toilet paper.

Parents and children engage in muddy exploration together, creating an atmosphere that encourages exploration and enjoyment of the natural world.