



Art in Early Childhood

MATERIAL RESEARCH OFFERED AS CREATIVE PLAY

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ABSTRACT

A new edition of the book 'How Children Learn and Create Using Art Play and Science, Understanding through your Hands', was recently published in English. This originally Dutch book is practical and full of inspiration for how to be creatively engaged with children, but without the standard colouring books and uniform handicrafts projects. The book is about having a different attitude towards the creative process of children and using a different kind of material. It shows how to work with children, without giving them examples or showing how to do things as an adult. In this article, the authors tell you how you can make a start with material research offered as creative play.

MATERIAL RESEARCH

Material research is the ultimate way of learning to understand the world. Give children the chance to experiment. That way, they have new experiences that they add to their learning process. If, in a handicrafts' activity, they are obliged to deliver a product thought up by an adult, the process of experimenting is blocked. Does that make working based on a theme too binding? Not necessarily. A theme can give direction and be a source of inspiration. What's important is that children become amazed and intrigued by being offered materials from the real world. If children are personally motivated, they are eager to research or want to make something by themselves. Don't steer them towards an end product you have thought up; just watch and listen to what the children themselves do, and what interests them.

EVERYDAY MATERIALS

Don't give an assignment, but invite children to undertake material research and mark making. That's in line with children's need to research and play freely. As they go from one mark to another, they will get associations and ideas about what they want to make. Use everyday material, often familiar but surprising for children to use in creative activities. You can find it in nature, the supermarket or a do-it-yourself store. Recycle a cardboard box, wooden rings or bottle caps; collect acorns or pods. Invite children to start simply by scribbling and drawing on a A6 size paper. After a while, give them shallow containers with wallpaper glue and small amounts of material that might be in line with your theme. Sand, paint and dried leaves for the themes spring, autumn, nature, for example. Offer little spoons to scoop the sand for more focus and magic in the process. Rethink a theme as suitable material. For example, if winter is the theme, you can make tracks on packing paper using ice cubes. That way, you bring the world indoors.



Personal mark making books

STUDIO EDUCATOR

How do you put that into practice? Studio educator Titia Sprey visits children's daycare centres with her studio case. She works there with the toddler and pre-school groups. She usually starts by having the children quietly drawing in a small format at a table. To get them to focus, she puts out only a few materials at the beginning: for example, an A6 card for each child with a black pen, two felt-tipped pens, a hole punch or scissors, laid out with care. A bit like how you would set a table in a restaurant, in such a way that it makes you want to sit down and try the food.



A6 drawing table



Studio in a case

PLAYING STATIONS

Titia works with 'playing stations'. A 'free playing station' might be a shallow container on the floor, containing a lot of one kind of material: paper snippets, crown caps or cocoa husks. This material is being recycled so you could also work with (over date) raw food like lentils or beans. This way you can work with young children from the age of ten months without having to worry about the health risks. Such a container full of one material is as popular with the youngest ones as it is with seven-year-olds.

Once the children are intrigued and concentrated, Titia wants that to last longer, so she always keeps material or tools in reserve. For example, she might provide two big magnets at the crown cap container. And for the children modelling with salt bread dough, new and exciting tools appear in the form of a garlic press or scissors, for example. At the marks/drawing table, she offers extra A6 cards, a fluorescent highlighter or sticky tape. She lays it down without saying anything, so that the children can carry on uninterrupted but still know they have been seen.

Titia: "Since the children follow their own ideas, they discover what they want and how to achieve it. I watch them attentively, consider what they might need and give them that". Children who are allowed to choose their own path like this learn to listen to their intuition. They build an inner compass that way. And that's something people sorely need in the world. I believe that it's good to maintain and develop that line to the inner self. It's how children learn to trust their own judgement and ability.



Free choice play stations



Play station flour recycling

PICTURE BOOK AS STARTING POINT

If you want to connect to a theme, you can start a creative activity by reading aloud from a picture book. Let the children sit in a circle, on their knees so they can use their chairs as drawing tables with just a black pen and a small A6 card. Let them make marks, scribble or draw freely. It doesn't matter if whatever the children make is unrecognisable for us as adults. Children understand their own visual language. Ask them if they want to tell something about it. You will be surprised by their stories. If you document this, it demonstrates to children that you value their work. It shows the layered nature of a visible creative process and values the wealth of play experience.

MAKING THEIR OWN MARKS

Children generally don't know what they're going to make. It's good to let them scribble on their piece of paper and try out all sorts of things. That frees up space for imagination; an idea. That idea can keep changing. The things that children explore of their own volition are in line with their own interests and are always at their own level of development. Let them play and make their own marks. That's how children make discoveries - 'wow' moments. And that's when they literally understand through their hands. Adults often find it difficult not to set a goal beforehand. They fish for the result, by asking: 'What are you making?' That way, they jump to the end of the process while children are still at the beginning of it contemplating what does this material do? That's how children get their experience - valuable experience for the well-being of children of all ages and their developing brains. That's why play is the optimum form of learning.

So, by making room in creative activities for material research, you get children who are engaged. That's a precondition for being able to learn. Material research goes much further than handicrafts or making something nice. *Letting them discover for themselves is essential for the brain* (Mark Mieras). Let children experience as many different things as possible and come up with their own solutions. You can rethink every theme in terms of material, rather than hatch a premeditated craft assignment. That way, you'll be working process-oriented, instead of product-oriented. Adults understand a theme rationally but children need, above all, to experience a theme sensorily; they understand through their hands.



The wonder of clay

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Sabine Plamper and Titia Sprey from Atelier in een Koffer (Studio in a Case) offer an online course in English, yearly in May. <https://atelierineenkoffer.nl/product/international2day/>

You can also find more information in their book, *Understanding Through Your Hands*.

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