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We explore the benefits of sand play and how to support children's learning and development through this versatile activity.



GRAINS OF IMAGINATION

Words: Katie Smith. Images: iStock

Outdoors or indoors, at the beach or in a tray, with wet or dry material, alone or with others, sand play can be applied in many different settings. From building sandcastles to burying objects, this type of play is

important in children's growth.

Childminder Sam Goldsworthy, who is based in Cornwall, says: "Sand play is unstructured play that encourages imagination and supports independence and ownership of children's

own play as there are no expectations or rules."

The benefits are wide-ranging. Michelle Brinn, Lecturer in Education and Childhood Studies at Swansea University, explains: "Sand play is crucial for physical and motor development,

social and emotional skills and sensory play.”

Michelle, who was previously a practitioner for 30 years, adds: ‘It’s an amazing material for developing fine motor and drawing skills. When children start writing they become overly concerned with making mistakes. But if you’ve got sand in a tray, mistakes don’t matter because you can rub them out.’

Sam adds: “It allows for problem solving and critical thinking too.”

When filling up their bucket, she says, children wonder if they will be able to carry it. Do I need a friend to help me? Will dry sand make a castle? What will water do to the sand?

“Sand play develops social skills and teamwork to carry the buckets or dig a big hole,” she says. “My children work together to make a big castle, then pour water from the stream in the moat. It always soaks into the sand, so that’s how they learn.

“It aids imaginative play as sand is a blank canvas. It can be added to soup in a mud kitchen or moulded into whatever they choose.”

Michelle agrees: “We did treasure hunts – if we had a pirate theme, we’d hide jewels in the sand.”

Importantly, sand play ties into schemas such as enveloping, transporting and enclosing.

Encouraging play

The practitioner’s role is crucial, Michelle says. “If you put millions of things in the sand and just expect it to be an effective tool then it doesn’t work.

“It’s good to have loose things in there so they can explore but if you’re trying to get specific benefits out of it, then understanding what it is you want out of it, what it can do, and what resources you need to support that are essential.

“The way you do that with your children is by observing them first, so it’s still child-led but you have the background knowledge to understand how to use it flexibly.”

Not all children will be drawn to sand play. “It’s our job to encourage children who may not be overly confident to access sand,” Sam says.

“If we have a reluctant child, we may add resources that are of interest to them, like cars for a vehicle-loving child. At home, sand is the child’s choice though.”

For those with sensory needs, Michelle says: “Take the sand to the child rather than the child to the sand.

TIPS FOR ORGANISING Sand Play

1 Be flexible in your approach – whether that’s structured play or observing behaviour

2 Take the sand to the child rather than the child to the sand

3 Provide socks, shoes or gloves for those with sensory needs

4 Use toys in the sand that children are familiar with for those who are not overly confident

5 Have some long-handled tools nearby for those reluctant to use their hands

6 Offer new language while the children play

7 Encourage exploration of sand with materials such as water or rice

8 Ensure children are aware of health and safety risks

Sand: A Safe Space

Sonia Murray, an education consultant and social worker registered with the British Association of Play Therapists, says: “Sand is one of the essential tools of play therapy.”

It’s used as effective communication when working with complex trauma, she explains. Using a sand tray and miniature figures, children unable to articulate their feelings can create worlds that reflect their own struggles. Trained play therapists are able to manage responses and build relationships with children in a safe space.

“There’s something about the borders of the sand tray that provide containment,” Sonia adds. “Whatever happens in there stays in there.”

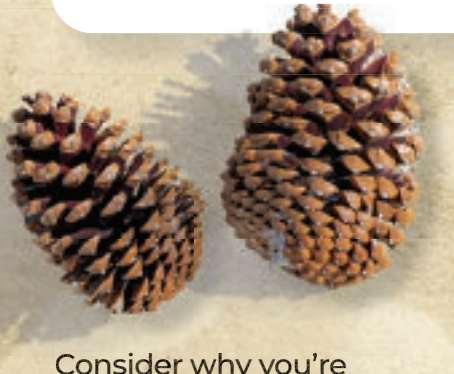


Importantly, the child is in control. “They don’t have to tell me what those characters are or make up a story,” she says.

“I’ve got one little boy who would play at one end of the sand tray while I would play at the other. We had guards and soldiers and he would direct me. My soldiers were obliterated every time but as the play progressed he became more cooperative. Instead of fighting against each other, the soldiers began to work together to save the planet.

“He was then able to replicate this with his peers at school. That’s when it becomes healing.”

For more information on play therapy or to find a practitioner, go to bapt.info



Consider why you’re making the child go into the sand, and if it’s for sensory experiences that widen their abilities to cope, then do it in small steps.”

This incremental approach helps practitioners identify the sensory experiences the child is struggling with.

“It may be that particular type of sand, so try different types. For some children, it’s a horrible substance, so provide socks, shoes or gloves.”

Sam adds: “If a child doesn’t like getting messy

then start with dry sand or use a car to make tracks so their hands aren’t touching it.

“Our most important role is providing lots of new language while they are playing, such as crunchy, moulding, sandcastle and moat, as well as asking them what it feels like.”

Safety first

Risk assessment is key. This includes covering sand pits outside, regularly changing the sand and disinfecting any toys.

“We make sure the sand is safe from harm, so there is no litter or glass at the beach and no animals using it as a

litter tray in the garden,” Sam says.

Michelle adds: “If the flooring is tiled, children could slip. We had a rug underneath while we were doing sand play inside.”

Children should also be aware of this, she says. “We had a dustpan and brush so if they spilled things they knew they had to clean it up.

“Before we changed the sand, we allowed children to put things in there that you wouldn’t want all the time like rice or flour, so they got a completely new exploration of sand.” 