

# 1

## Earth

### Chapter objectives

In this chapter, I aim to:

- consider the properties of earth as a medium for play
- explore the potential of mud
- discuss the topography of settings
- look at the opportunities for risk and adventure.



### Introduction

Tactile play is a staple of early years settings. We know that this is one of the earliest ways in which very young children learn about their world, and is the way we make contact and express affection with each other throughout our lives. It provides comfort, knowledge, stimulation and pleasure. Tactile activities are used to support development with children who are difficult to reach, and with adults who are traumatised. We hold hands in times of heightened emotion, and hug each other at important moments. We cannot truly understand the nature of an object or a setting unless we can make contact with it – which is why all the informative television in the world cannot replace an actual experience. So it is that as we live on the earth, we need tactile contact with it.

In settings we provide tactile play. Sand and water play are commonplace, and we each provide our own favourite variants, such as corn-flour and water, ‘slime’, finger paints, etc. With younger children, we also acknowledge the sensory value of babies playing with their food, and we know that feeling it squidge through their fingers encourages their manipulative skills (DfES, 2007: 57). We take messy activities outside in the summer, in order that they do not create as much mess

indoors, and to offer opportunities for extensions such as foot painting. We are missing the main tactile ingredient that the outdoor environment offers us.

Earth is all around us, but usually we don't pay it very much attention. It is described as dirt, grit, mud and other such derogatory terms. It is something to wash off our hands, scrape off our boots and wipe off our coats. And yet it comes in an amazing variety of colours and textures, and is our constant partner in outdoor play. It is not only brown. Sit and look at some earth, and see how many colours you can see in it. Earth is one of the things that most children love and some adults don't, a theme that will recur throughout this book. This may well have something to do with the 'earth + water = mud' equation, so we will start by confronting this prejudice head on, and consider the potential of mud. Some will feel that there is a risk element here, which we will consider.

After mud comes digging. As a child, I spent holidays on the wide beaches of north Norfolk, constructing canal systems and castles – something I will return to in the next chapter. Here I will write about digging the earth to create changes in levels, with bridges and roadways, digging that increases team-working skills and cooperation. This will develop into links with Chapters 2 and 5. This digging can be an adventure, to create something new and big and together.

I will then consider the value of changes in levels in general, such as those created or discovered by adults to make the topography of the area to be used more interesting, followed up in the Points for practice section. This will lead into consideration of the opportunities for engagement with earth in the wilder environment, and the adventure element that is inherent in it.

## Mud and its potential

The EYFS (DfES, 2007: 57) talks about using gloop, etc. to encourage mark making with very young children. Figure 1.1 is a demonstration of spontaneous mark making by a three-year-old. Not surprisingly, it is the first letter of her name, her personal identifying mark. When children have learned the first letter of their name, they like to practise it and use it, often to express their presence and sense of belonging or of ownership. She has used sticks, as the earth that day was hard (which gives a better contrast for the photograph), but on other days the stick became the tool to make marks in the mud. Consider mud as both a slate and a clay tablet. Here are links to the history of writing, as well as to the development of writing in young children. The expression 'ontology echoes phylogeny' roughly translates as 'the development of the individual echoes the development of the species'. So it is that the



**Figure 1.1** My name is Anya

youngest child makes marks into a soft surface (food, mud, clay) and with sticks, as our ancestors did before the invention of paper. As they grow older, the mark making becomes more ornate, and it carries a clearer meaning.

It is difficult for us to know what the meanings of marks made by babies and toddlers are, if there are any, but we know that the rehearsal of the marks is an important part of the development of writing, just as the marks in clay tablets found in archaeological digs had meaning in ancient civilisations, and in some cases were the precursors of the forms of writing we use today. This is a roundabout way of saying that our youngest/least able children deserve opportunities for exploring mud, too! By doing so, they are developing concepts of what mud is and what it can do as well as strengthening muscles and developing the flexibility and control that they will need for manipulating and writing. Heuristic play will be covered in Chapter 6, which will include further consideration of the practicalities of enabling this to happen.

Mud comes in so many forms. At a simple level, it is a smooth surface that enables the youngest children to experience the qualities of a mud floor. It is often cool, it is rarely as hard as concrete and it makes a good surface for dancing on. You can use it as a clean slate to provide a background for creations and collections. On a hot day, it will cool you if you lay on it.

Mix in more water and it becomes more malleable, but its properties will depend on what the soil is that you start with. Light soils do not stick together like heavy clay soils, which is an interesting discussion

point with older children. It also links to Chapter 5, where gardening is talked about. Heavier soils can be moulded more easily, and malleable mud can be an artistic medium. One popular activity is called muddy faces, described in the activity below. It can also be a building medium, creating small walls, or a substitute for refined clay, making bricks, pots or candle-holders. This last category is one where practitioners can sensitively extend ideas in order to develop children's skills, once they have exhausted the sensory experience of squishing the mud between their fingers.

As with all new experiences, children should not be rushed into making something before they have finished exploring the qualities of the medium. As Jensen and Bullard (2002) report:

our favorite memories revolved around a common element – unstructured time spent playing outdoors. Many of us recalled sensory, messy, creative activities.

The feel of the raw materials, and the way they change as they are put to use is the first lesson about the nature of the materials, and one that needs full concentration to extract the most from the experience. It needs uninterrupted time, and opportunities to experiment, so that the full muddiness of mud is understood. This is so important that it may need to be repeated – do you still stand in mud puddles and rock your feet to make the mud move, to gauge its texture and consistency? If not, try it, and do not deprive your children of repeating this experience each time that they go out.

This reminds me of an outdoor session one muddy Ash Wednesday (the day after Pancake Day or Shrove Tuesday). Nearly all the children had had pancakes the night before, and there was much discussion about fillings and flavours as we walked to the wood. Many of the children seized on the opportunity afforded by the mud, created by several days of rain, to scrape up handfuls and mould them into pancakes. The adults were kept busy deciding on their favourite fillings and 'eating' the pancakes offered. This was a rich opportunity, both for language development and for emotional bonding, the shared play recalling the community experience in spontaneous child-initiated play. For some, it was the start of complex role play, for others a diversion soon tired of on the way to other play opportunities.

We can link this event to the exploration of mud as a therapeutic element. So far we have largely considered using mud in our hands, but as adults we might have had mud facials and mud baths. Perhaps this is going too far in settings! But children can have the opportunity to enjoy walking through mud in the summer, with it squeezing between their toes, or to jump in it in the winter, and see the splashes.



### Activity: muddy faces

There are variations on this activity, so it should be adapted to suit the ages and stages of the children, and developed along their lines of interest. In its simplest form, mud or earth is collected in a bucket – if stones can be avoided, this is a good thing. Water is added to create a stiff paste – too much, and the faces will slide; too little, and they won't stick.

Take a handful of the paste, knead it in your hand, and then slap it onto a tree. You can use a fence post, but the rougher surfaces give a better adhesion. Find sticks, leaves, etc., to turn the blobs into faces.

You can use these to start stories, or however you wish. See Figure 1.2 for an example.

When we discuss the safety of using mud, hazards can be identified and dealt with in the same way as with any activity, and we will look at this in more detail in Chapter 9. So it is that we know babies will put the mud in their mouths, because that is how they learn about it. Individual practitioners will need to consider the quality of that mud – if it is likely to contain faeces, for example, it may not be the best mud for babies – and the age/stage of their babies, as well as considerations of whether it is the best time of year to undress them enough to enjoy the experience.

There will be a need for explanations to parents and discussions with colleagues the first time this happens. These are not reasons to 'protect'



**Figure 1.2** Muddy faces on a tree

children from experiencing mud, but each practitioner will need to feel comfortable that they can manage the situation to ensure that it is in the best interests of the children in their care. There *will* be a summer's day and a bowl of freshly mixed mud that will provide the right chance. And on a cooler day with naturally occurring mud, older children will enjoy jumping in it, stirring things into it and scooping it into pots and pans to 'cook'. Washing hands afterwards should suffice for them to make the hazard a reasonable risk.

## Digging

Many children like to dig. In the first Forest School that I ran, a group of four-year-olds began an earthwork project. I think it started with one boy digging a hole; it certainly had nothing to do with any of the adults. Soon there were six children (not all boys) working under the leadership of the first boy to create channels with bridges and tunnels that ran over a wide area of cleared forest floor. Where an obstacle occurred, such as a tree root, they discussed how to overcome it as a committee, and then one or two worked on that section. There was no water to move, no cars to drive down the created grooves, just the intrinsic pleasure of creating this interlinking network, which went on over three weeks. At the end, the game faded away, and the next heavy rain started the process of smoothing it into memory. While it had been going on, observing adults (none of us were invited to join in) could see team work, cooperation, problem solving, negotiation, planning, reflection and many other valuable skills being practised and developed. One child did wear a hole in his trousers, and quite a bit of ivy was cleared, but they were the only casualties. The developmental value of the project was immense. All we had provided was a space, one that could be utilised as the children wished and then left alone until the next visit, and some strong trowels and hand forks, plus time and freedom from interference. And as well as all the skills that were exercised, there was knowledge, about the nature of construction and about the environment: the earth, the tree roots, the ivy, and in the end, about the effects of the rain.

Forest School provides opportunities for all ages to spend time on their creations, something that otherwise is restricted to children in the Foundation Stage. Time is a precious gift that early years practitioners can offer their children, so it is worth considering whether you, too, have a space in your outdoor setting that can be set aside for a project to evolve over time. The group working skills that such a project offers are of huge value, particularly at a time when many practitioners are reporting behavioural issues that often stem from children's inability to communicate and work together. The fact that it may look less than lovely or even somewhat untidy to adult eyes is far less important than the life skills that are being learned. Perhaps a 'men at work' triangle

would help deter adults from tidying up ongoing construction schemes. These projects can constitute an adventure, as children take ownership of creating something together, and take emotional risks in negotiating, planning and dealing with failures as well as successes.

Digging for a purpose may follow on from just digging for creative pleasure, or may be more attractive to some children rather than making empty canals. Gardening is one such activity, one increasingly finding a place in our schools and nurseries. In Steiner schools in particular, children may have opportunities even in their earliest years to grow food and then eat it. I will return to this theme in Chapter 5. Another purpose for digging is to move water around, which can stimulate a range of developmental opportunities. Making watercourses will be covered in Chapter 2.

In this section, I have described activities suitable for three-to five-year-olds (and above), but there are many opportunities for younger or less able children to help them connect to the earth. You will need to find implements for smaller hands to dig with. Plastic is not the best option; whilst plastic shovels, etc. will cope with sand, when used in earth they can snap, leaving sharp edges and frustrated children. In Appendix 1, I have included some suppliers who stock proper tools scaled down for smaller people. The less dextrous and skilled the child, the more important it is to provide them with the correct tools made from good-quality materials and designed for their size of hands.

## Earthy slopes, often in wilder areas

Natural spaces where the earth is less likely to be flat provide more opportunities for adventure and risk associated with the earth. Sliding down a muddy slope is one such opportunity, described in the activity below.



### Activity: slippery slopes

First locate your slope. It should be long enough and steep enough for you to feel comfortable that your children will enjoy sliding down it without exceeding their capabilities. It needs to be bare of vegetation other than grass. One that ends in a small ditch is good, and if you have a water source to hand you will be saved the labour of carrying containers too far. You will also need some strong plastic sacks for the children to use as mud sledges. Water the slope to give a surface for sliding. The aim is for the children to slide down the slope seated on a plastic bag. You may need to tow/push the children until they develop their own techniques, and you will need to keep the slope watered. They will be learning about balance and steering, braking and rolling, as well as about the slipperiness of muddy slopes.



**Figure 1.3** The dragon at Bishops Wood

Slopes are also useful to roll or run down, but getting to the stage where that is a reasonable risk can take time. Simply negotiating slopes can be a risky adventure for new walkers. Settings can help by providing early opportunities with small hills and tunnels. Figure 1.3 shows a construction where a 'dragon' has been laid down on a flat play area, creating slopes and an underground space for a secret den (dens will be referred to again in Chapter 8). Smaller, simpler mounds will also provide opportunities for learning to balance on slopes, and the kinetic play possibilities of slopes, rolling wheeled toys, etc. In this way, when children encounter natural slopes that may be steeper, they will have the genesis of the skills for dealing with them, and will not find them so intimidating. In time, they will have developed the confidence to tackle other sloping scenarios, and know how to keep themselves safe.

At this point, I would like to refer readers back to the introduction, to reinforce this message. Children need diverse experiences to draw on, to create an internal map or schema of how to deal with similar experiences in the future. These give them confidence, not only for the specific instance, in this case of dealing with slopes, but in more generalised terms. They will have learned that difference is not necessarily frightening; it should be examined and given a chance to be interesting and exciting, too.



 Points for practice

In the introduction, I suggested that if you want to make your outdoor play more adventurous you need to start with an audit of activities offered. Practitioners considering the potential use of earth in their settings need to progress to an audit of their space. Whether it is a flat piece of tarmac or a square of grass, it is possible to make it more interesting, changing levels in different ways and adding in some earth. The aim would be to keep the materials used as natural as possible, as these offer more variety and flexibility as well as helping children to connect with the world around them.

When redesigning an outdoor play space, or starting anew, good practice means that practitioners should consult and find out what clients, in this case children, want. This can be difficult with very young children, who will naturally be constrained by their experiences of spaces so far. You can record their needs by observing their play in a variety of circumstances and analysing what their behaviour and responses are telling you about the constraints on their opportunities. You can use pictures and visits with the children (and with fellow practitioners) to develop these leads into suggestions. The Forestry Commission's Roger Worthington has a booklet *'Nature Play: Simple and Fun Ideas for All'* (2008) which gives some easy ideas. Lancaster (2010) suggests other ways to consult with children, and gauge their opinions. Do not limit initial explorations with practicalities. Only when you know where you and your children want to be should you start to consider how to get there, and it may have to be in stages, but it is better to succeed slowly than to compromise quickly.

The DCSF Play Strategy (2008) means that every council in England has a Play Builder scheme, developing play spaces in your area. Some of these are very imaginative, and it is worth contacting your play builder and finding out about new play provision in your area, to see if there are opportunities for your children to access more adventurous opportunities than will fit into your space.

Once you have access for your children, you will need to consider whether to provide protective clothing for them. There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing (Knight, 2009: 16), and similarly getting dirty is a natural consequence of being outside, so it should be managed, not avoided. Appendix 1 gives some suppliers who provide suitable clothing for young children.



### Discussion points

Discuss with colleagues what you can achieve to enable earthy play in your setting:

- Can you add a mound or dig out a dip?
- Could the mound be hollow, if you started with a concrete pipe, for example?
- Could the children dig into the sides of the dip to create interesting gullies and holes?
- Can you make a space for mud?

### Further reading

Casey, T. (2007) *Environments for Outdoor Play: A Practical Guide to Making Space for Children*. London: Paul Chapman.

Elliott, S. and Davis J. (2004) 'Mud pies and daisy chains: connecting young children and nature', *Every Child*, 10 (4). Available at: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au) (accessed 13 March 2010).

Jensen, B.J. and Bullard, J.A. (2002) *Community Playthings: The Mud Center – Recapturing Childhood*. Available at: [www.communityplaythings.com](http://www.communityplaythings.com) (accessed 17 March 2010).