

Play with Clay

Most adults caring for children have experienced and offered playing with play dough and modeling materials, often called “clay.” But have you ever tried using natural or real clay? Because clay comes from the earth, it’s a natural material. Since children love natural materials (think rocks, sand, water, mud, pinecones, and sticks) clay will probably be a hit, too. Natural materials are a springboard to creative thinking and a connection to nature and the arts (along with many developmental skills!).

Play with clay: You and me

Although there are some adults who have never experienced natural clay, many early childhood providers believe that playing with clay should be a regular experience for young children (just like outside time, water play, or painting). This brings up an important question: When we offer children materials to play with, shouldn’t we know what it’s like to use these materials? And for that matter, shouldn’t we understand what developmental skills they support and how they benefit children?

Before introducing clay to children, try playing with clay yourself to get an idea of what it’s like. Observe children as they play with clay. Each child is different, so adapt the experience to their abilities, needs, and interests. When working with clay, there really is no right or wrong; just what works best for the children and your program.

Children and clay

Introducing clay to young children provides multiple outlets for their individual ideas, feelings, and developmental skills. For young children, clay holds no preconceived ideas as to what it is or how it is supposed to be used. Children will show many parts of themselves through clay experiences:

- ▶ Approaches and reactions to a new material (imagination, steps of involvement, temperament, feelings)
- ▶ Initiative, curiosity, and problem solving
- ▶ Technique and manipulation (what they do and what skills they use)
- ▶ Physical development (small and large motor skills)
- ▶ Ideas in representational forms (connecting ideas to meaning, symbolic demonstrations)
- ▶ Expression and communication (language, literacy, and social and emotional skills)
- ▶ Interactions and progressions over time (with other people, other materials)

* We can also easily identify many Early Learning Standards. Visit your state’s Department of Education to learn more about Early Learning Standards. In PA go to http://www.pde.state.pa.us/early_childhood/cwp/view.asp?a=323&q=124729&early_childhoodNav=|10744|&early_childhoodNav=|.



Tips for clay play

- ▶ Safety first - Any material for children must be safe. Choose clay that is clearly labeled Certified Non-Toxic and meets the guidelines set forth by the **U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission**. Go to <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PUBS/5016.pdf>
- ▶ All children need to be well supervised
- ▶ Be aware of and do not offer any choking materials for children ages three and under
- ▶ Find a reputable site to buy **certified non-toxic** clay labeled by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission
- ▶ Have proper work surfaces: large tables, protected floor space, or individual boards for children to work on (wood, heavy cardboard, etc.)

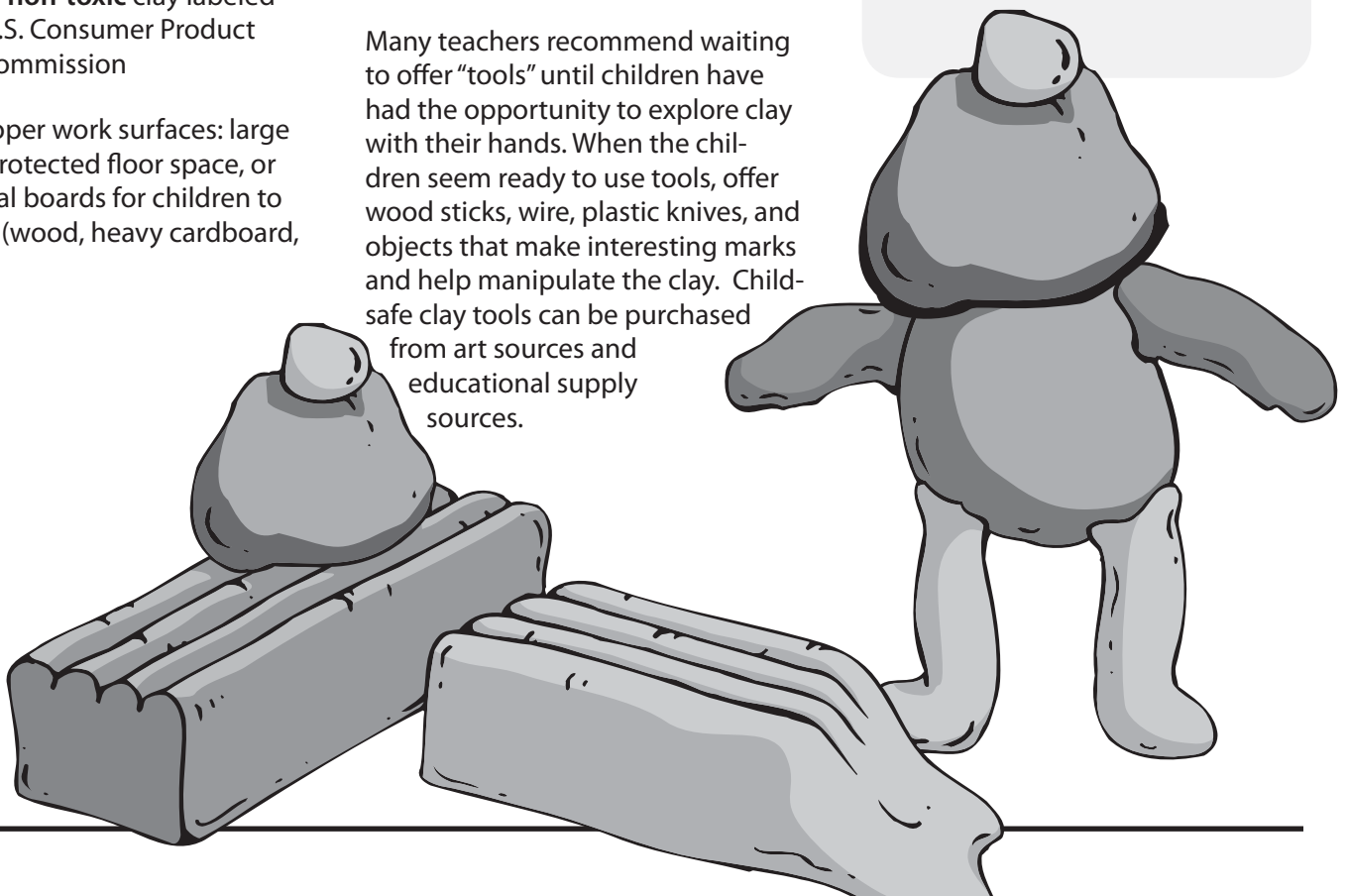
More tips for CLAY PLAY!

Some teachers recommend the first clay experience be in a small group, with one large slab of clay (children will interact). Others suggest offering each child a small slab, balls, or rolled "snakes" or coils (thinly rolled "snakes" that are rolled into circles or onto other pieces of clay).

It's helpful to store clay in sealed tight containers. To keep clay moist, place small amounts of water in the container, either using a damp cloth or by poking holes in balls of clay and adding a small amount of water to the holes. To cut clay, you can use thin wire or dental floss.

Many teachers recommend waiting to offer "tools" until children have had the opportunity to explore clay with their hands. When the children seem ready to use tools, offer wood sticks, wire, plastic knives, and objects that make interesting marks and help manipulate the clay. Child-safe clay tools can be purchased from art sources and educational supply sources.

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Supported and produced with funds from the Office of Child Development and Early Learning, a joint office of the Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare, and the Penn State Cooperative Extension Better Kid Care Program.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

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