



Food Messy Play Ideas and Activities
to try with your child

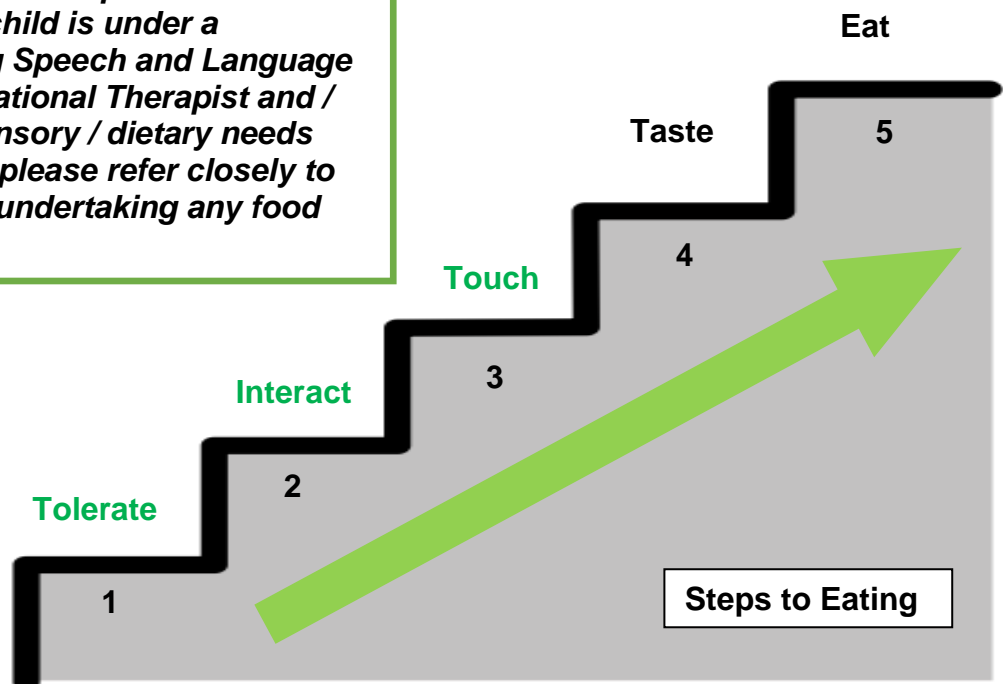
The advice in this Food Messy Play sheet is designed for children who may be at the *start* of the process of beginning to explore food textures (Steps 1, 2 and 3 below) by helping your child to begin to:

- Develop **tolerance** of food textures
- **Interact** with food textures using utensils or tools
- Develop willingness to **touch** food textures with their hands

The Steps to Eating (based on K.Toomey, Steps to Eating) below set out the small steps that may be needed before your child might be ready to eat a range of food:

1. **Tolerate** ~ Accept food on a table / nearby or on a plate.
2. **Interact** ~ Begin to touch food with a utensil.
3. **Touch** ~ Smell or touch food with finger/s, hand or body.
4. **Taste** ~ touch food with teeth or bringing it to the lips or licking.
5. **Eat** ~ taking a bite, chewing and swallowing food.

Some children will have particular sensory / dietary needs requiring supervision and guidance from relevant specialist agencies. If your child is under a Specialist Feeding Speech and Language Therapist / Occupational Therapist and / or Dietician for sensory / dietary needs relating to eating, please refer closely to the advice before undertaking any food related activities.





- ✓ The main aim is for your child to enjoy exploring food messy play in a relaxed way ~ at this point, it is not about eating food, but about beginning to **tolerate, interact** with or **touch** textures and have fun.
- ✓ Invite your child to join you in the food messy play ~ never insist or force your child to experience a messy food texture. The experience should be positive so that your child develops positive memories and may then become confident to explore the texture next time.
- ✓ If your child has an allergy, check the ingredients list for any allergens particularly for any new food(s) that you are introducing.
- ✓ Start with textures that your child likes and is happy and comfortable to explore and that are safe if your child were to put them in their mouth.
- ✓ Show your child how to play and that you are having fun ~ if you are modelling fun without any pressure on your child to join in, they might begin to try it for themselves.
- ✓ Build in natural opportunities during the day to explore food, e.g. at meal times, involve your child in preparing food or encourage them to serve food.
- ✓ Find a calm and quiet time and space during the day to do messy food play activities ~ turn off and remove all electronic devices.
- ✓ Observe your child and go at their pace, small steps are fine.
- ✓ Try to do a fun movement activity with your child before you start (e.g. slow and gentle swings in a blanket, *'Row, row, row the boat'* bouncing your child gently on your lap / space hopper or on a trampoline). This can help calm your child and have them ready to explore.
- ✓ Do not worry if the activities do not work or your child does not want to play – try again another time.





What you need ~ basic equipment:

- A large tray / bowl / box to contain the messy play.



- Different sizes and types of straws, spoons, forks or other cutlery, funnels, colanders, sieves, potato ricer etc.



- Spray bottle/s, squirting bottle/s, bowls, zip lock bags or smaller containers to hold various ingredients.



- One of your child's favourite toys that you / your child does not mind getting messy ~ this could also be letters, numbers, shapes if your child is interested in these.





- A range of edible, differently textured foods (pick from the Activity / Idea section below based on your child's current preferences). Ensure you check for any allergens if your child has a known allergy.



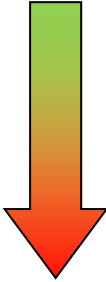
- Paper-towel, wet wipes or towel.

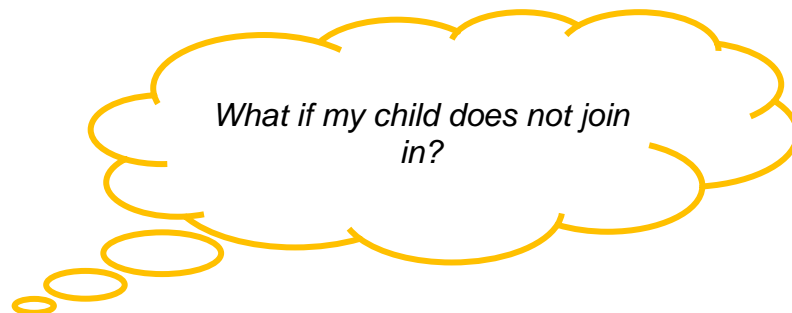


How to do it:

1. Find a small table where you and your child can sit or stand.
2. Place a plastic sheet or towel under the table so that it is easy to clean up afterwards.
3. Keep wet wipes or towels near so that your child can clean their hands quickly if they need to.
4. Pick a texture from the list below ~ start with a texture that you know your child likes.
5. Pour the texture into the tray or container in front of your child ~ try to use the same container each time
6. Encourage them to help you to pour the messy play into the container but if your child does not want to help, that is fine.
7. Follow the instructions for the activity / idea in the list below.
8. Show fun and enjoyment.
9. If your child does not like a texture or looks like they may get upset - wipe their hands immediately but you can continue to play with it so they can watch you.
10. Keep the play going for as long as your child is showing enjoyment of the activity.
11. When you finish ~ tell your child how well they have done and try to finish the activity on a positive note so that your child remembers the experience as positive.
12. Over time, gradually introduce a wider range of experiences so that before you go to the next texture, your child has explored lots of different types of one texture category.



Texture category	Order of Introducing Textures	
Dry	Dry textures do not leave a residue on the hands so can be the easiest to touch. As you progress, damp, wet and semi-solid textures will then provide greater challenge. Sticky textures can be the most challenging to touch because they require hand washing for the texture to come off the hand.	
Damp		
Wet		
Semi-solid		
Sticky		



- ✓ Look at the list below and see if there is a less challenging texture that your child might join in with.
- ✓ Use utensils or put the messy food play in container (ziplock bag, bottle, box) to explore.
- ✓ Put your child's favourite toy in the messy food play to see if they will be happy to fish it out.
- ✓ Use long armed utensils such as large wooden spoons.



*What if my child tries to eat
the messy food play?*

- ✓ Ensure that you only use food for this activity that is edible, e.g. if your child likes to put dried uncooked pasta in their mouth, offer foods with a similar texture that are edible, e.g. pretzels, cereal, crisps etc.

*What if my child will not let me
introduce new textures?*

- ✓ It might be that your child needs a little more time to explore the texture that he or she is comfortable with.
- ✓ Try and introduce a wider range of textures within one category before moving on to the next one.
- ✓ Keep the texture that your child enjoys and is happy to explore and add a small amount of the new texture ~ or leave the new texture near by without doing anything ~ they might be at the 'tolerate' stage and so might need time to learn to tolerate it near them before they can interact with it.



Activity / Idea	What you need	How to do it
Dry textures ~ Introducing dry texture		
<p>Start with one dry food, e.g:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cornflour Rice Pasta Beans / Lentils Breakfast cereals Oats Cous cous.   	<p>Different sized cutlery, brushes, toy tools, tongs etc. Pouring jugs, containers to hold various ingredients Food colouring</p>   	<p>Start with one dry food that you know that your child likes.</p> <p>Pick up, pour / crunch the food texture in your hands to show your child that you are having fun. Let the food pour onto the surface of the tray and listen to the sound, watch the food bounce around.</p> <p>If your child does not want to touch the texture with their hands, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use their favourite toy to 'hop' around in the tray. • Use a tool / spoon to scoop up the food or a jug to pour the food. • Arrange the food textures in an inviting way by changing the colour or making shapes with them such as stripes or spirals. • If your child likes colours, they could sort the food according to colour. • Make a cereal track for your child to 'drive' their car on.



Dry textures ~ Increasing the range and types of dry textures

When your child is happy with the one dry food then slowly introduce new dry foods that are similar to the texture that your child likes.



Smaller containers to hold foods
Bowls
Utensils e.g. spoon, masher etc.
Favourite toys
Cups
Letter / number moulds



As above
Add another dry food by helping your child to pour the food into the plate or bowl.

Different activities to try:

- Your child could 'crunch' the food with a potato masher.
- Squash the food with their favourite toy.
- Make tracks in the food with a toy car or train.
- Pour the food from one cup into another.
- Thread cheerios onto spaghetti stuck into a piece of playdough.
- If your child loves letters or numbers, you could hide the letters or numbers in the food / make number shapes.
- Make a ramp from the inside of a kitchen roll holder and pour the food down the ramp.

Add a wider range of dry foods:

- Spaghetti
- Crisps (Quavers / Wotsits)
- Rice Krispies / Coco Pops, Shreddies
- Cocoa Powder

Smaller containers / zip lock bags to hold foods
Colander / Sieve
Black / dark coloured paper
Favourite toys
Rolling pin

As above
Different activities to try:

- Spaghetti ~ push the spaghetti through the small holes in the



- Noodles
- Biscuit / cake crumbs
- Breadsticks
- Crackers
- Rice cakes
- Meringues
- Ice cream cones
- Icing sugar
- Cocoa powder
- Granulated sugar
- Hundreds and thousands
- Sugar cubes



- colander and watch them disappear.
- Pour some crisps onto a tray or plate. Your child can then use their favourite toy to press down breaking the crisps.
- You can place a black piece of paper or tray in front of your child. Place different objects that your child enjoys on the paper / tray and shake flour over them using a sieve. You can then remove the different objects and see the picture you have created.
- Pour cereal into ice cream cones.
- Roll a rolling pin over the texture.

Damp textures ~ introducing slightly wet textures by adding liquid to the dry texture

When your child is happy to touch and explore a range of dry foods then add a tiny amount of liquid.

Spray bottle/s, Squeezy bottle/s
 Pipettes
 Sponges
 Zip lock bag/s
 Food colouring
 Brushes
 Essences (vanilla / mint etc.)
 Dry textures from the dry textures section



Help your child to use the spray / squeezy bottles or pipettes to add tiny amounts of water to the dry foods.

Different activities to try:

- Sprinkle some chocolate powder onto a tray or black piece of paper. Use



the water spray to add small amounts of water to the chocolate powder creating 'muddy puddles' for their toys or hands to jump in.

- Paint bread with food colouring.
- Decorate biscuits with runny icing.
- Cover a bowl of water with cling film and put a hole in the top to feed raisins / cereal through.
- You can place rice, raisins, pasta or flour etc. into a zip lock bag with some liquid. Place one small hole into the bag. Explore the closed bag by pressing / pushing on the surface. Encourage your child to join you. As your child explores, some of the water may leak out. If this is a positive experience for your child you can increase the number of holes. Only do so if your child is comfortable. You can add food colouring and oil to the water or sweets for colour and texture or even an essence to add smell to the play.



Damp textures ~ increasing the range of damp textures

When your child is happy to touch and explore a range of slightly damp textures then begin to add more liquid in each time or find foods which feel damp to the touch such as:

- Grated cheese
- Vegetable peelings
- Any uncooked vegetable or salad
- Cooked spaghetti or pasta
- Mashed potato
- Any fruit ~ banana, apple, orange, lemon, kiwi, grapefruit etc.
- Pancakes



Watering cans
Sieves
Juice containers
Bowls
Potato ricer



Continue to support your child to pour the liquid into the dry textures. If your child pours liquid in too quickly and finds it uncomfortable, always have a paper towel or a towel ready for them to wipe and say, e.g. *'Oh dear too wet, let's dry our hands'*. Only offer the towel to dry if your child is uncomfortable.

Different activities to try:

- Squeeze fruit into different bowls. Your child can hold the skin of the fruit to keep their hands dry but some of the fruit juice may touch their hands.
- Mash banana or potato with a masher.
- Squeeze the food through a ricer.
- Make a banana tower from chopped up pieces of banana (or any other fruit or vegetable that you can manage to stack in a tower).
- If your child can use scissors they could cut the cooked spaghetti.
- Using a flour



shaker, sprinkle flour or cocoa powder over the spaghetti.

- Hide letters or numbers in cooked spaghetti.
- Make pancake towers / faces.

Wet textures ~ introducing wet textures

When your child is happy and ready to start to explore wet textures start with water play.



- Bowl
- Tray
- Food bag
- Jugs
- Sponges
- Spray bottles
- Food colouring
- Ice cube tray
- Lolly pop stick
- Paper
- Favourite toy
- Small fishing net



Encourage your child to help you pour water into a bowl. You and your child could scoop, pour or splash the water. Add other food items in the water, e.g fruit that your child is happy to touch.

You could place the water in a food bag and add food colouring.

Gradually open the bag and watch the water spill out as you press the bag.

Use spray bottles or sponges to spray or squeeze water onto your hands or your child's toy.

Put your child's favourite toy in the water to see if they can fish it out or freeze some toys in water.

Pour food colouring over ice cubes.



Make ice cube paint by adding food colouring to water then freezing with a lolly stick. Use to make patterns on the paper.

Wet textures ~ Increasing the range of wet textures

When your child is happy to touch and explore wet textures you can introduce a wider range of wet textures such as:

- Yogurt
- Custard
- Cream
- Mousse
- Jelly
- Soup
- Ice cream
- Spaghetti hoops



Mixing bowl and a cup
Tray
Zip lock bags
Food colouring
Potato masher
Spoons
Pots
Whisk
Spaghetti or wooden skewers to pick up spaghetti hoops
Sprinkles / jelly beans
Salt dough (2 cups of flour, 1 cup of salt ~
Add 1 cup of water gradually)
Cornflour (cornflour or custard powder with water until you reach a thick but running consistency)



Encourage your child to help pour the yogurt / custard / mousse / soup into a bowl or tray. Encourage them to help you open the packet.

Put the food texture in a zip lock bag and encourage your child to press and push the bag.

Different activities to try:

- Custard painting / hand prints ~ Add food colouring to the custard and encourage your child to finger paint with the colours.
- Hide a toy in the jelly / custard / yogurt to see if your child can fish it out ~ they might need to use a spoon to do this the first time.
- Make trails with a car in the custard /



- yogurt / cornflour.
- Make shapes with your fingers or hand prints.
 - Make prints with a toy, e.g. press the wheels of a car into the custard and make prints on a black piece of paper.
 - Pour sprinkles over the food and stir ~ encourage your child to point to the sprinkles or find them.
 - Pour food colouring into the food and encourage your child to stir.
 - You will need two bowls. One filled with water and soap and then the other with soup / mousse / yogurt. Lightly place some objects or enjoyed toys in the food, e.g. dinosaurs, cars etc. Your child can then take the toys out and place into the washing up bowl to clean.
 - Using spaghetti / skewers, try to pick up spaghetti hoops.
 - Using a tea set, have a 'soup' tea party.



Sticky textures ~ textures that stick to the hand and require repeated wiping to clean

When your child is ready to start to explore more challenging textures, introduce one of the following at a time:

- Squirty whipped cream
- Thick porridge
- Squeezy sauce toppings
- Mashed banana mixed with water
- Rice pudding
- Jam
- Honey / syrup
- Cooked pasta in a sauce, e.g. macaroni cheese
- Mashed baked beans
- Chocolate spread
- Ketchup
- Marshmallows and pretzels
- Marshmallow 'Fluff'



Utensils such as spoon, masher, fork etc.

Favourite toy

Containers

Zip lock bags

Food colouring



Encourage your child to help you scoop or pour the food into a container. They could open the lid and squeeze the bottle or scoop out the contents.

Place the food into zip lock bags or containers that your child can add water or other items such as dry uncooked pasta to. Gradually open up the bag so that a little of the food comes out at a time.

You could 'bounce' your child's favourite toy on the bag to make the food squirt out.

Different activities to try:

- Squirt wipped cream into a tray, create a race track for the cars to race through. You can use animals as well in this.
- Hiding the toys in the jelly pot. Slowly open the jelly pot and encourage your child to search for the toy.
- Mash the banana with a fork and make banana sandwich, or banana faces with



rasin or a banana milkshake.

- Make a trail on the tray using a squeezezy bottle and watching the sticky texture leave a trail.
- Make marshmallow towers.
- Make Marshmallow 'Fluff' paint ~ add food colouring to the 'Fluff'.
- Put Marshmallow pieces into a bowl or tray of water ~ scoop them out with your hands or use a spoon.
- Make a small mashed potato mountain or volcano and allow your child to play with their toy dinosaurs by stomping in the potato.

To find out more / Useful links

- If your child has an Occupational Therapy programme or is under the Specialist Feeding Speech and Language Therapist / Dietician, please consult with them before undertaking any of the activities in this information sheet.