

Developing children's creative imaginings



A guide for parents

Introduction

Being creative starts with being interested.

As adults we need to find out what interests our babies, toddlers and young children, support those interests, and become interested in them ourselves. Adults support children by giving meaning and words to what they are experiencing. When we allow them to get creative, they begin to represent their interests in all sorts of different ways.

“Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun.”

Mary Lou Cook (Actress 1908-2008)

Creativity relies on allowing children to play with all their senses - what they see, feel, hear, smell and taste. It's important that they have fun and that their creativity is allowed to flow.

Look for the [links](#) on each page for more ideas and information.

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Recognising creative possibilities in nature

Outings provide children with first-hand experiences which can be a stimulus for their innate creativity. Exploring the natural world is a really good place to start.

Possible outings could be:

- to the park
- to woods
- in the street
- to the seaside
- to the farm
- to the zoo

Getting creative with your baby

If you are in the park with your baby, think about the following.

You might say, 'What are you looking at?'

Follow your baby's eye gaze - perhaps the baby is looking at the leaves blowing on the tree.

You could say, 'Oooh! look at the leaves on the trees!'

Pick up a leaf and show it to your baby, let them feel it and wave it up and down.

Or perhaps they are looking at the duck in the pond.

You could say, 'Look at the duck!'

'Listen! What does the duck say?'

'Quack, quack, says the duck'.

Let your baby watch the ducks for as long as they are interested, and then when you get home read a story and sing a song about ducks or maybe play with some in the bath.



Getting creative with your toddlers and young children

Small children love to pick things up. You could help them to make a collection of things - leaves, stones, conkers, sticks, shells and make patterns and pictures with the things you have collected.

'Transient art' is a non-permanent creation made from loose pieces of anything.

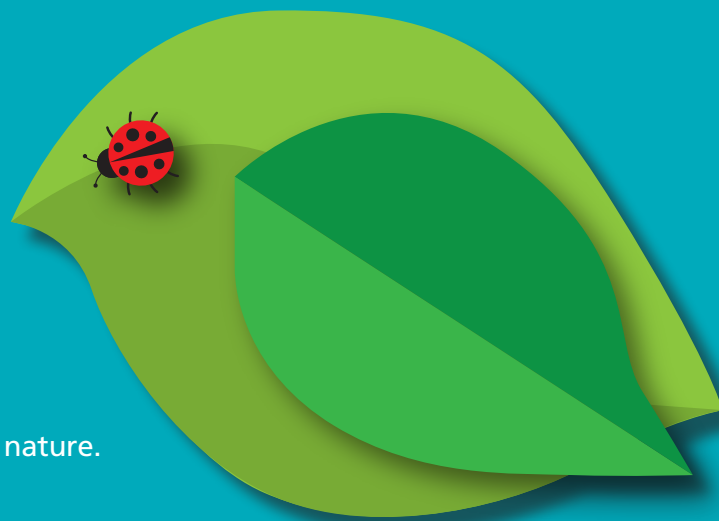
Artists *Richard Long* and *Andy Goldsworthy*, create transient artworks using things from nature.

Encourage children to:

- Look closely.
- Make dens, sand castles, make marks in the sand or the mud, and recreate stories in the woods.
- Pick up sticks and imagine what the stick might be. Have a look at [Not a stick](#) by *Antoinette Portis* or [Stick Man](#) by *Julia Donaldson*.
- Run and enjoy moving in big spaces. Perhaps you could play some music on your mobile phone and dance together.
- Splash in puddles. This is one of the most enjoyable, creative things for small children to do. Make sure they are dressed appropriately and let them jump and splash. Even if it's not raining you can go out and look for puddles, where might they be? Can you look into a puddle, what can you see? Teach your child some songs and rhymes about puddles and rain, some favourites are, 'Rain, rain go away, come again another day', 'Incy Wincy Spider' and don't forget about 'Dr Foster, who went to Gloucester in the pouring rain. Stepped into a puddle, right up to his middle and never went there again'!

Don't be put off

- **By the weather;** there's no bad weather only wrong clothing. Dress to experience all weathers!
- **By getting muddy;** children love to make imaginary soups, cakes or biscuits!
 - **By creepy crawlies;** children are fascinated by bugs and insects and love to see the beauty in the wings of the butterfly or move like the wriggly worm.



Malleable Materials

- Malleable materials are defined as materials that can be manipulated with hands or tools such as rolling pins, forks, knives, scissors, wooden spoons and pastry cutters.
- Malleable materials include, but are not limited to: clay, playdough, plasticine, slime. These materials are open-ended which means they enable your child to explore them in their own way with endless possibilities.
- When your child plays with malleable materials, they are exploring textures, developing vocabulary and learning to handle tools safely.
- Your child may add other things such as sticks, flowers, leaves, small people (or anything else they are fascinated with!) to add detail to what they are making. They will use what they are interested in and what they have previously experienced.
- Playdough is easy to make and will give your child hours of fun, creative play. They can also help you make it!

Here, and on the following page, are some easy playdough recipes you can make at home:

Playdough recipes

You will need the following equipment:

- large mixing bowl
- wooden spoon
- large saucepan
- cup and tablespoon

You will need the following ingredients:

- 2 cups of flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ of a cup of salt
- 2 cups of water
- 2 tablespoons of cooking oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ of a cup of cream of tartar

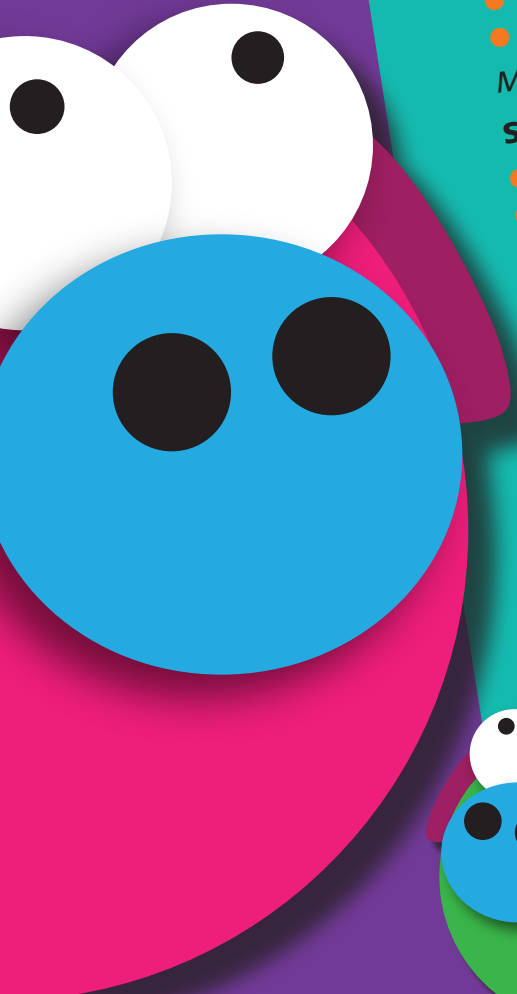
Method

- Mix all the ingredients together in the mixing bowl.
- Transfer the mixture to the saucepan.
- Cook the mixture over a low heat, stirring all the time.
- Cook until the playdough is completely formed and no longer sticky.
- Allow to cool before using.

Tips!

- Always store the playdough in an air tight container, as it will then last longer and can be used over and over again.





Cooked recipes

Modelling dough

- 2 cups salt
- 1 cup cornflour
- 1 cup warm water

Mix in pan on low heat.

Cornflour dough

- 1 cup cornflour
- 1 cup warm water
- 1 tbsp oil

Mix and cook until thick.

Salt dough

- 4 cups salt
- 1 cup cornflour
- Water

Mix salt and cornflour in pan.
Add water to form paste.
Cook over medium heat stirring constantly.

Sand dough

- 1 cup sand
- ½ cup cornflour
- ¾ cup hot water

Mix and cook until very thick.



Non-cooked recipes

Playdough

- 1 cup salt
- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup hot water
- 1 tbsp oil

Mix together.

Moon dough

- 1 cup hair conditioner
- 1 cup cornflour

Mix in bowl.

Cloud dough

- 8 parts flour
- 1 part baby oil

Mix together, it will be soft but hold together like wet sand.

Clean mud

- 1 bar of soap
- 1 roll of toilet paper
- ½ litre of water

Layer up toilet roll.

Grate soap and sprinkle over paper.

Add warm water.

Leave overnight.

'Oobleck'

- 1 cup cornflour
- Water

Add water slowly until runny.



Painting

Allowing your child to explore paint using lots of different resources is important so that they can develop their own creativity.

What you need

- Brushes - artists brushes, decorating brushes, rollers, anything that will make a mark e.g. leaves, shells, toy cars, hands and feet.
- Different sizes and types of paper.
- Aprons or old shirts to protect clothes.
- Paint - ready mixed paint can be bought in good toy shops but you can also get powder paint that you mix with water and watercolour blocks. Powder paint and watercolour blocks give your child a different experience for mixing colours.

What you might see your child doing:

- Exploring the texture of paint with their hands, feet or mouth.
- Making intentional marks.
- Sorting and matching colours.
- Naming colours.
- Mixing colours.
- Painting in blocks of colour.
- Exploring different brushes.
- Choosing a brush for a purpose.
- Beginning to represent objects and patterns.
- Introducing more detail and accuracy.

These are only examples and you will see plenty of other things happen as your child invents, experiments, takes risks, breaks rules, makes mistakes and has fun!

Collage and sticking

'Have you got anything I can stick?' Children love to stick!

What you need

- Glue sticks.
- Sticky tape.
- PVA glue is messy but it sticks quickly and can create a lovely 'glaze'.
- Papers of various colours and surfaces.
- Magazines and newsprint.
- Collections of fabric, wool, string, buttons, sequins, beads.
- Natural materials.
- Lolly sticks.
- Scissors.

What you might see your child doing:

- Exploring and enjoying the feel of different textures with a range of senses.
- Tearing and crunching paper, card or foil.
- Exploring glue.
- Exploring how objects stick.
- Sticking one item repeatedly.
- Using collage to represent a picture or pattern.
- Manipulating materials by cutting, tearing and scrunching.
- Making informed decisions about what and where to stick.

Remember these are only examples and you will see plenty of other things happen as your child invents, experiments, takes risks, breaks rules, makes mistakes and has fun!



The joy of a cardboard box

Have you ever noticed that when children receive a present, they seem more interested in playing with the box?

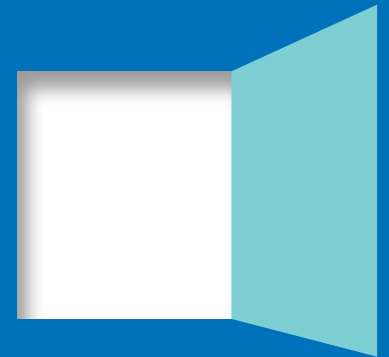
Antoinette Portis in her brilliant book, ***Not a Box*** asks, 'Why are you sitting in a box?' It might look like a cardboard box to you but to a child there are no limits on what it might be. Remember Baby Bear who found a rocket in the cupboard under the stairs? (***Whatever Next*** by *Jill Murphy*). He flew to the moon in his cardboard box and had a picnic with an owl.

A cardboard box is what is often referred to as an 'open ended resource'. This means there are no limits on what a child might do with it and it lends itself perfectly to becoming whatever is in the child's imagination.



Things to do with a cardboard box:

- Cut holes in it.
- Paint or draw on it.
- Stick things to it.
- Put a blanket over it.
- Add fabrics and other boxes.
- Take it outside.
- Turn it upside down.



How to support your child's imaginative play:

- Let your child lead - they are making up the story and you can help further their imagination by giving new words or helping them to remember experiences you shared. For example, 'Do you remember when...?' 'That's like the time when...'
- Scarves, hats, bags and shoes can help children take on the role of being somebody else, literally feeling what it's like to be in somebody else's shoes! For example, filling the shopping bag with boxes and feeling what it's like to be a mummy or daddy carrying a heavy shopping bag back from the shops.
- Things from the kitchen such as bowls, sieves and saucepans can extend your child's imaginative play.
- Pens, paper, scissors, tape and glue will encourage your child to decorate a box or make buttons and levers to enhance their play.



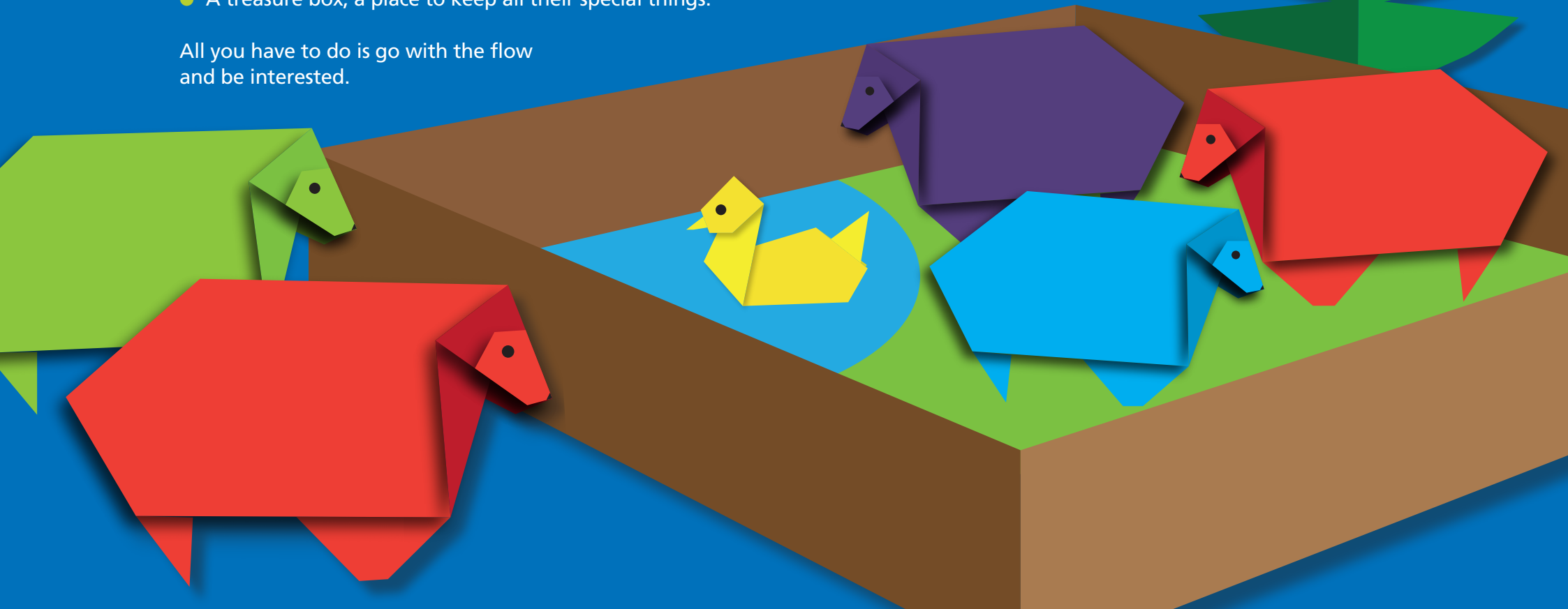
The joy of a small cardboard box

Smaller boxes, such as shoe boxes are great for creating 'small world' play, that's when children play with things in miniature.

They could make:

- A house for a small doll, animal or teddy.
- A farm, zoo, cage or a field for animals.
- An environment scene, such as under the sea, in the forest or up in the sky.
- A story box, Goldilocks and the three bears and use the toys to help tell the story.
- A garage, a garden, a shop, the possibilities are endless!
- A treasure box, a place to keep all their special things.

All you have to do is go with the flow and be interested.



Reused & Recycled materials (Junk Modelling)

Most of us can remember making things with cereal boxes, yoghurt pots and toilet rolls when we were children. One of the many pros of 'junk' or recycled materials is that it is a readily available resource that gives your child the freedom to build what they want.

The materials can inspire their ideas and these change and evolve, as your child creates, especially with your support.

Getting some materials to 'stick' to each other can sometimes be tricky and children often have more success with sticky tape rather than glue. They might need you to show them how to cut holes in boxes, or to hold something whilst they tape it in place.

Recycled materials can be combined with a variety of other tools and materials, buttons and beads; natural objects such as feathers, stones, twigs and seed pods. What can begin as a simple but pleasurable activity of connecting materials together can result in constructing a myriad of structures.

Some ideas:

- Empty tissue boxes - they have a hole like a guitar.
- Shoe boxes - they have lids for hiding things.
- Egg boxes - they have hinges that open and close like a crocodile's mouth.
- Cardboard rolls - they are amazing for firing the imagination - and rockets!
- Milk bottle tops also make great wheels.

Follow your child's lead, encourage but don't instruct, leave it up to your child to create what they want. Let them invent, experiment, take risks, break rules, make mistakes and have fun!

Health and safety: Ensure all recycled materials and objects are clean, non-toxic and there are no sharp edges. Keep tiny items away from very small children.

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And finally...

The delight your child displays when they show you what they've made is precious but it's not the most important thing. What is important is the creative process that they have engaged in. It's about the fulfilment they got from solving that problem while expressing their own ideas and thoughts, not from colouring in someone else's ideas. You have given them the opportunity to experiment, take risks, break rules, make mistakes, grow and have fun.



This book has been created by the London branch of Early Education as part of the 2023 Centenary Festival 'Playing, Learning, Living', celebrating 100 years of understanding the importance of play for small children.

Early Education was founded in 1923 as the Nursery School Association. In 1972 it became the British Association for Early Childhood Education and is now known as Early Education for short.

One hundred years later, we continue to campaign for high quality early childhood education for all children, and especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom it can make the most difference. We also continue our role of bringing together early years professionals to share experience and expertise with one another, and to benefit from continuing professional learning. We have members across the UK in all types of roles and organisations, who share our commitment to high quality early childhood education.

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100 YEARS
1923 - 2023
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