

# QUARTERLY *Conversations*

Resources and Tips from  
**Say Yes to the Mess: The Power of Messy Play**

## Our Panelists:

**Gisela Jorge, M.S., OTR/L and Jessica Alfonso M.S., OTR/L:** Owners of **Inside Out Kids**. They are two bilingual pediatric Occupational Therapists who love all things sensory processing, nature-base, fine motor, emotional regulation, and gross motor. We use a child-led and play-based approach with DIR Floor time strategies to lead our practice. We also lead inclusive nature-based playgroups. Our main goal at Inside Out Kids is to nurture the inside to bring full potential out.

**Dr. Jessie Guest, Ph.D.** is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the **University of South Carolina** where she received her Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision. Jessie is the coordinator of the Graduate **Certificate in Play Therapy** and a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor Supervisor and Registered Play Therapist Supervisor. Jessie's clinical experiences include working with children and adolescents in foster care and their families as well as the LGBTQ+ population. Jessie's research interests and publications consist of Social Emotional Learning, mindfulness, **play therapy**, countertransference, and trauma.

**Dee Ray, Ph.D., LPC-S, NCC, RPT-S** is Regents Professor and Elaine Millikan Mathes Professor in Early Childhood Education in the Counseling Program and Co-Director of the **Center for Play Therapy at the University of North Texas**. Dr. Ray has published over 150 articles, chapters, and books in the field of play therapy. Dr. Ray is author of multiple books including **A Therapist's Guide to Development: The Extraordinarily Normal Years**, **Advanced Play Therapy**, **Multicultural Play Therapy**, and most recently, **Playful Education: Using Play Therapy Strategies to Elevate Your Classroom**. She is chair-elect of the Association for Play Therapy and a founding board member and past president of the Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling. Dr. Ray also co-created and oversees the international certification program for Child-Centered Play Therapy and Child-Parent Relationship Therapy. Dr. Ray additionally operates the counseling practice, **EmpathyWell**, in Highland Village, TX where she facilitates play therapy, training, and supervision.

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# Resource Materials

## The Profectum Parent Toolbox

This Workshop showcases the innovative online “Profectum Parent Toolbox” (PPT) Webcast series. This FREE online resource consists of 37 Webcasts that demonstrate strategies to mobilize a child’s relationship-based interactions. Parents and families are guided through the “hands-on” video series and a companion downloadable workbook to learn how to tailor interactions to their child’s individual profile. This unique learning resource is presented in a parent-friendly manner that enhances adult learning: all strategies are demonstrated through video examples with children of all ages and developmental profiles. By completing the PPT Webcast series, parents will gain a greater understanding of the uniqueness of their child, and how they can better connect and foster their relationship as a foundation for enhanced developmental growth.

## Guidance from our Panelists

### What is Messy Play?

Messy play is broad. It can be anything that YOU deem messy i.e., Paint, Water, Shaving Cream, Water Beads, Sand, etc. The beauty of messy play is the exploration of textures and mediums. It also teaches children that messes aren't necessarily a bad thing. Messes can be fun, and they can be cleaned up.

Messy play is distinct in that it is the ultimate free play. Children have so many demands and rules at home, and at school. During messy play they just get to be free. It is also distinct in that it prepares children for the messes of everyday life. The world is full of messy things (soap, toothpaste, water, mud, etc.). Interacting with these messy substances is important for development.

### Why is Messy Play so important?

During free and messy play, you get to see the child's imagination and creativity in action. You see what they understand about the world. It allows for spontaneity and you can observe when children start working during their play to solve problems.

Play causes the brain to release Dopamine which is the chemical responsible for happiness. When others, especially parents, play alongside the child it causes the brain to release Oxytocin which is the chemical responsible for love. It also has major Kinesthetic benefits which are encouraged by hands-on experiences, and doing instead of reading or listening to instructions.

Messy play can lead to improvement of self-awareness, and self-management. It can improve social awareness when playing with other children. Children are also making active choices to do and not do certain things during play.

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## How do we structure Messy Play?

Consider the location of the messy play. Is this a room you're comfortable with getting messy? wet? dirty? If you feel uncomfortable with the area/location getting messy, the child will also be uncomfortable, and it will limit their play.

If at home, look around the room, what needs to be removed? Is this something that would be better outdoors?

Messy play doesn't mean no boundaries. Use bins, tarps, and containers to create boundaries. When you see a little one becoming so excited that they leave the boundary let them know you see how excited they are and you want them to keep having fun but that it needs to be inside the boundaries you've created.

Find your messy play comfort level. Some of us are ok with water-play, some of us prefer water beads. Some of us are ok with paint, some of us prefer paint markers. If you're uncomfortable with wet messes choose dry textures like rice or dry beans.

## Tips and Tricks

Messy play doesn't have to be expensive. You can find a lot of materials at the dollar store. You don't want the cost to prohibit the fun, especially for parents who are doing it at home. Remember, one child can go through all the materials so you don't want it to be so expensive you can't buy enough to go around.

Don't overthink it. Adding everyday tools like spoons, cups, or funnels to the mix can go a long way. Tools can help with grip strength, motor skills, and intrinsic muscles.

If you have a child who tends to put items in their mouth be mindful of the materials you use i.e. shaving cream, water beads, etc.

For museums, you can add Plexiglass to the walls for easy cleaning. This is an affordable option if you plan to use the space frequently for messy play.

Adding soap to paint makes it easier to clean up.

Depending on the objectives of messy play, decide whether or not you want the child to help clean up after. If goals include teaching a child how to help clean up, then you can make it apart of the play.

However, if your messy play is meant to provide opportunities for respite, or you have social emotional therapeutic goals in mind then you may not want to have the child help clean up. The goal should just be play.

## Important things to keep in mind during messy play:

Your plan may not go the way you wanted. In fact, it probably won't. But the child will likely take it to an even better place than you had planned.

Play should not be rewards based. You want the child to play how they want to without worrying about any expectations from adults.

Social emotional dynamics are at play the whole time during play. You can bring awareness to how they're feeling. Ex. I can see you're feeling really excited or I can see that you're getting frustrated.

If you find it difficult to engage with the child during messy play one of the easiest things to do is reflect what the child is doing. Follow the child's actions verbally by narrating and using reflective responses. Ex. I see you decided to mix two paints together! Children are communicating through their behaviors, reflective responses and narration let the child know you're with them.

Messy play is important for EVERYONE. Children, adolescents, and adults. For many adults messy play brings up memories of their childhood. Many people have emotional reactions to messy play and emotional reactions always prompt growth.