



# ***“Messy Play Consultation”***

A report from a children's consultation event about messy play at Horsington Primary School, Somerset.

With children from Key Stage 1.

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## **Horsington Primary School**

Following the conference, "Promoting Risky Play; Supporting Childhood" many organisations that cater for the under 5s requested help in finding practical ways of using the information they'd gained at the conference to change practice. Horsington Primary School had secured an area to develop for messy play in their school grounds. We saw this as an ideal opportunity to join the children's participation work undertaken by Barnardo's with Somerset Play Forum's expertise in promoting risky play. Therefore we developed this consultation on messy play to lend support to the design of the messy play area at Horsington Primary School.

Rachel Chainey  
May 2007

### **1 Background:**

- 1.1 52 children from Key Stage 1 were consulted for one day at Horsington Primary School.
- 1.2 The consultation was conducted by Barnardo's for Horsington Primary School on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2007.
- 1.3 All the activities undertaken were supervised with a high staff-child ratio. Because many of the activities involved a high level of risk this ratio was necessary to reduce the potential risks involved.
- 1.4 The consultation consisted of practical play activities as follows:

### **Introduction**

- 1.5 Children were taken onto the field so that we could explain what we were going to do and why.

### **"I Like Playing With ..." Questions**

- 1.6 The children were asked to sit in a circle.
- 1.7 The children were asked if they liked playing with a variety of natural and messy items.
- 1.8 If they wanted to answer yes the children went to the centre of the circle and returned to a different place in the circle afterwards.
- 1.9 The same activity and questions were used at the beginning and at the end of the day.

### **Natural Pictures Activity**

- 1.10 The children were divided into small groups.
- 1.11 They were given the task of using natural materials to make a picture, either individually or large or small groups.

### **Sand Activity**

- 1.12 The children were divided into small groups.
- 1.13 They were given dry sand, wet sand, extra water, a variety of buckets, spades and scoops.
- 1.14 Some of the sand was in a container; some was loose on the ground.
- 1.15 In their groups the children were asked to play with the sand. Each group had a chance to play with the wet and dry sand and the sand on the ground and in a container.

### **Stream Activity**

This activity was not planned, but because of large numbers we needed something to run alongside the sand activity.

- 1.16 The children were divided into small groups.
- 1.17 They were asked to play in the stream that runs through the school grounds.

### **Mud Activity**

- 1.18 The children were divided into small groups.
- 1.19 They were given dry mud, wet mud and extra water.
- 1.20 All the mud was loose on the ground.
- 1.21 In their groups the children were asked to play with the mud. Each group had a chance to play with the wet and dry mud.

## **2 *Collecting and interpreting the data***

- 2.1 Throughout the consultation notes were taken by staff about children's behaviour as they made comments and expressed opinions. Video footage was used to record some of the results, main discussions and the activities. A selection of the video footage has been made into a short film, copies of which are available on request.
- 2.2 "I Like Playing With ..." Questions - Every time the children were asked a question, they moved if they wanted to answer yes to that question. The number of children who moved was recorded by staff. Exactly the same questions were asked at the start of the day as at the end of the day so that we could monitor any difference in preferences that the day's activities had made. The number of children who answered yes to each question was percentaged and graphed (appendix 1).

- 2.3 Natural Pictures, Sand, Stream and Mud Activities– Comments made by children during and after each activity were recorded. At the end of each separate activity positive responses to the questions were recorded, percentaged against the number of children who were asked the question and graphed. Some questions were prepared in advance; these were asked to every group. The staff with each group added questions according to the activities that the children were involved in. The children were also asked to highlight activities that they especially liked and wanted recorded in this way (appendices 2 to 5).



- 2.4 General Comments – Because the consultation was carried out on the school field some of the materials had to be brought in for the children to play with, therefore they can't be described as being in a completely natural setting. Making Natural Pictures comes close because children were working in and around hedgerows and collecting their own materials. Playing in the stream was a completely natural setting and activity.

### **3 Results from the “I Like Playing With ...” Questions**

- 3.1 Overall more children liked messy play activities once they had experienced them (6 out of the 9 questions asked had more positive responses at the end of the day, appendix 1).
- 3.2 The largest increases in children liking an activity were for playing with dry sand (27% increase) and playing with sand and water (21% increase) (appendix 1).
- 3.3 There was a decrease in the percentage of children who like playing with leaves (-27%), dry, crumbly mud (-27%) and sticks (-12%).
- 3.4 The most popular messy play activities were the same at the beginning and end of the day (wet sand, sand and water and wet, sticky mud, appendix 1).
- 3.5 If the data is grouped into dry activities and wet activities it is noticeable that at the start of the day children preferred dry messy play almost as equally as wet messy play (dry 49%, wet 59%). Whereas at the end of the day only 38% stated that they liked dry activities compared to 71 % who liked wet activities (appendix 1).

## **4 Results from the Natural Pictures Activity**



- 4.1 When playing with natural materials the most popular items to play with were leaves (100%) and grass (71%). None of the materials scored less than 50% (appendix 2).
- 4.2 The variety of comments made by the children during the activity illustrates the wide variety of activities that were going on and the wide range of benefits from the activity.
- 4.3 The children made a variety of pictures and worked in a variety of different sized groups and individually. This did not seem to affect their enjoyment of the activity.
- 4.4 Two children's comments were recorded:

*"My favourite thing is playing outside."*

*"I really enjoy playing outside."*

- 4.5 Staff working with the groups made the following comments:

*"All 12 children enjoyed the activity. Most stuck to making similar things even though in pairs and small groups."*

*"Mine were enjoying it so much they carried on into break."*

*"3 small groups chose to do something a bit different."*

*"They got really involved and enjoyed it. They all worked as one large group and all of them were involved."*

## **5 Results from the Sand Activity**

- 5.1 When playing with sand the most popular types of sand activities were sand and water (85%) and wet sand (81%) (appendix 3).
- 5.2 Staff also noticed a preference for wet sand:

*"A lot of children preferred the wet sand; as soon as the children got to the dry sand they went and got some water!"*

5.3 Comments from the children included:

**Sand with water**

*"I like being a magician"*

*"I like standing in it"*

*"I like making cement"*

**Dry sand**

*"I like making flower pots"*

*"I like making sand castles"*



## 6 Results from the Stream Activity

6.1 When playing in the stream the most popular activities were jumping in streams (87%) and making dams (82%) (appendix 4).

6.2 Every child enjoyed playing in the stream. Originally we had planned not to get wet or muddy until after lunch, however due to the number of children this was not possible. Staff comments illustrate this:

*"They were having a great time, but it was difficult to get the children to come out of the stream. They kept drifting back to it all afternoon and asking if they could have more time to play in it."*

*"All liked doing this and got very wet!"*

*"10 children really liked building dams, 3 didn't want to do it"*

6.3 Children's comments include:

*"I like the secret location"*

*"I like getting wet"*

*"I like telling people to do the work!"*

*"I like jumping over the stream"*

*"I like splashing"*

*"I like making the water go fast"*



*"I like jumping in it"*

## **7 Results from the Mud Activity**

- 7.1 When playing with mud the most popular activities were jumping in mud (77%), mud to squelch wellies in (73%) and throwing mud in the stream (69%) (appendix 5).
- 7.2 Before lunch staff heard several children stating that they didn't want to play with mud after their break. However, no-one refused when they returned.
- 7.3 Children's comments include:

### ***Mud to get hands in***

*"I like it because it's gooey"*

*"I like it because it's squidgey"*



***Dry Mud***

*"I like making something or building with it"*

*"Dry mud is boring"*

*"I liked to find creatures in the dry mud, like worms, centipedes and snails"*

### ***Mud to squelch wellies in***

*"It's squidgey"*

*"Makes your wellies dirty so it's good"*

### ***Mud to dig in***

*"Digging in mud is good to get the stream to go quicker"*

*"Good to find stones"*

*"Good to find bugs"*

### ***Sticky mud***

*"I like putting it in the stream"*

## **8 Comparing Results From Different Activities.**

- 8.1 Playing with leaves was less popular at the end of the day (-27% appendix 1), yet immediately after the Natural Pictures Activity 100% of children stated that they like playing with leaves (appendix 2).
- 8.2 Wet, sticky mud (89%) and mud and water (81%) were the third and fourth most liked items to play with at the end of the day (appendix 1). Yet when children were asked immediately after the activity wet and sticky mud were liked by 62 to 65% of the children.

- 8.3 The same contradiction occurs for Dry Mud the popularity of which decreased by 27% in the questions at the end of the day (appendix 1), yet which was selected as a material children liked by 67% immediately after the activity (appendix 5).
- 8.4 Using the results collected immediately after each activity the most liked activities and items to play with were; leaves (100%), jumping in streams (87%), sand and water (85%), making dams (82%) and wet sand (81%) (appendices 2 to 5). The data collected from the questions at the end of the day is similar, the exception being leaves (as stated in paragraph 8.4) and jumping in streams (this question was not asked because the Stream Activity was not planned).
- 8.5 When asked if they liked activities immediately afterwards the following percentage ranges were recorded (relates to appendices 2 to 5):

Activity	Percentage range from:	Percentage range to:
Natural Pictures	54	100
Sand	42	85
Stream	77	87
Mud	46	77

- 8.6 When asked if they liked activities immediately afterwards the following average percentages were recorded (relates to appendices 2 to 5):



Activity	Total percentages	Average Percentage
Natural Pictures	428	71%
Sand	332	66%
Stream	315	79%
Mud	643	64%

## Key Messages

- The majority of children like messy play.
- More children like messy play if they are given the opportunity to experience it.
- More children like wet messy play activities than dry activities. If they're given the chance to experience wet messy play the number of children who enjoy it increases.



- Whether children play individually or in groups does not affect their enjoyment of messy play activities.

- Children like getting wet and messy.
- The educational and sociological benefits of the activities to the children were not specifically measured. However, their enjoyment of the activities increases motivation and this is proven to increase educational and sociological attainment. (Playlink, 1998.)
- The activities were not linked to any curriculum targets or outcomes. But this could easily be achieved without losing the free, risky or messy elements of the activities.



- The more messy and risky the activity, the more the children seem to enjoy it.



### ***Recommendations:***

The messy play area being developed needs to:

- Include as wide a variety of materials as possible.
- Include more space for wet than dry activities.
- Include facilities that let children keep materials separate as well as facilities for mixing materials.
- From a practical point of view; include facilities that will enable children to stay reasonably clean if they have a short space of time to use the new area as well as providing the opportunity for them to get wet and messy if they have longer to spend in the area.
- Use the average percentages given in paragraph 8.5 as a guide to the amount of space each type of messy play activity should be given and use the data collected immediately after each activity to judge the amount of space different types of each activity need (appendices 2 to 5).
- Nationally there is a huge drive to promoting natural play by the government and the Big Lottery Play Programme. Because the results of this consultation are positive it can be recommended that all schools try to find a way of increasing the opportunities children and young people get to experience more natural, messy, risky play opportunities during the school day.

### ***Further Support***

Further support and advice on children and young people's play opportunities can be obtained from Rachel Chainey, Play Services and Development Worker, [rachel.chainey@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:rachel.chainey@barnardos.org.uk)

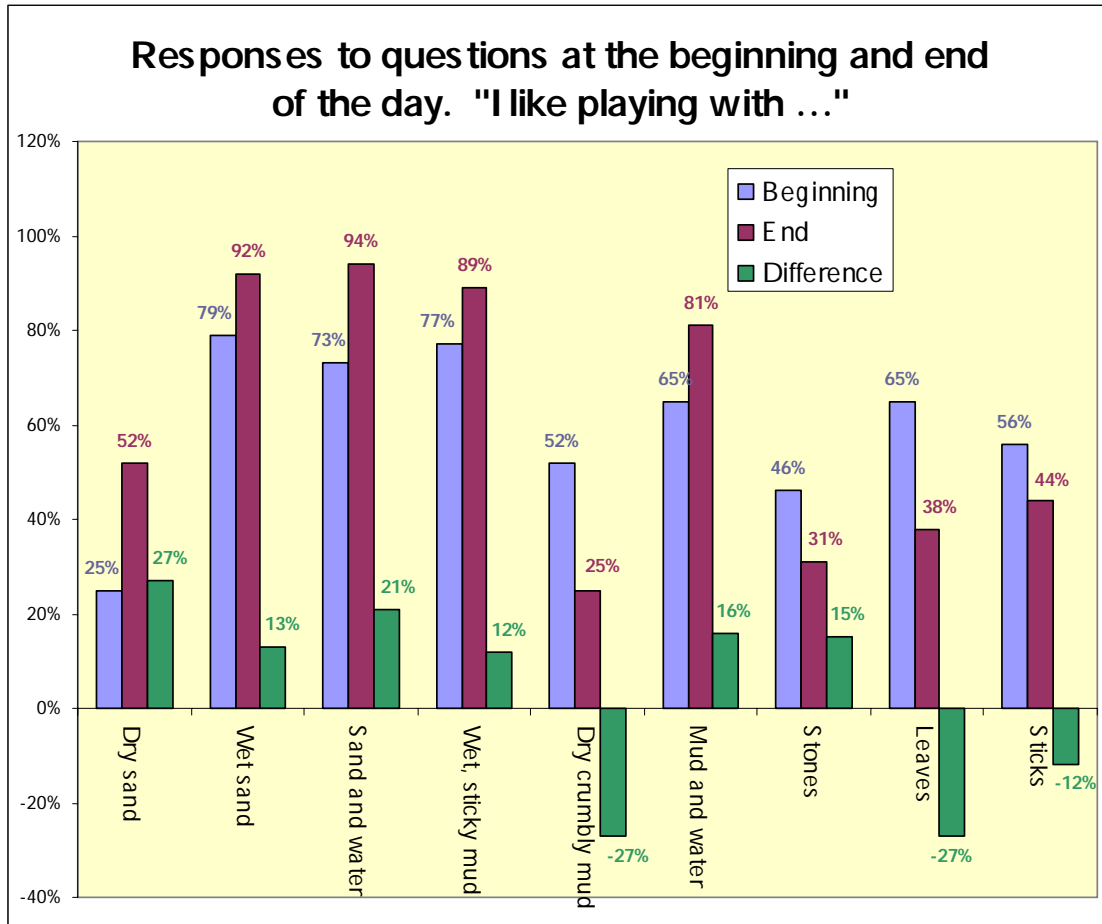
01935 381855

Our thanks to Horsington Primary School Key Stage 1 children and staff for spending the day playing and to the additional staff who helped supervise activities for the day.

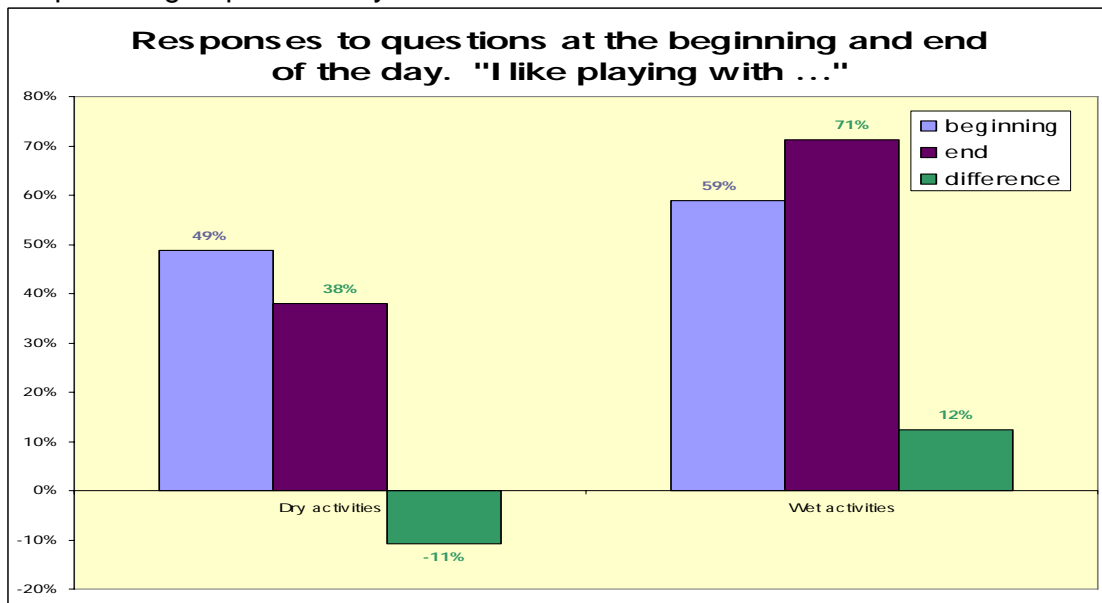
### ***References***

Playlink (1998) "Play At School Scheme" available at <http://www.playlink.org.uk/publications/documents/pas.pdf>

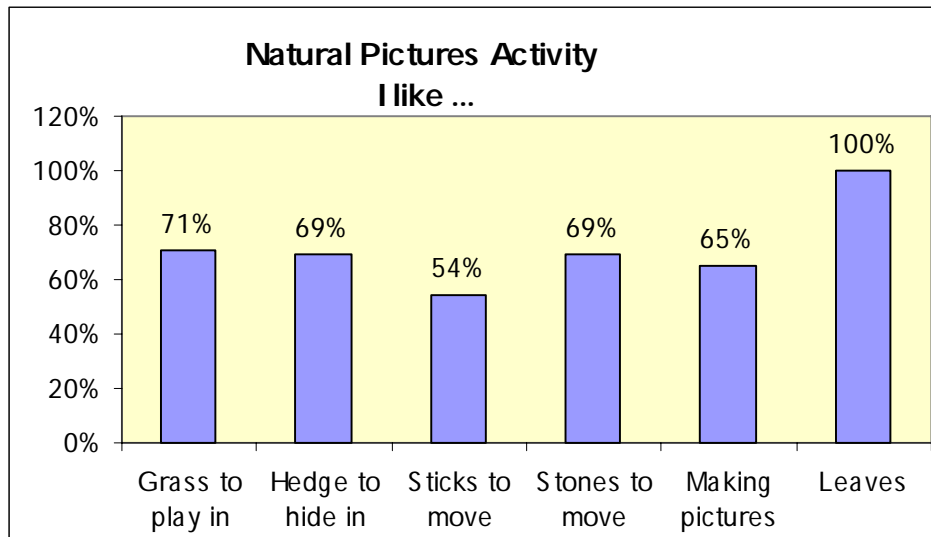
## Appendix 1



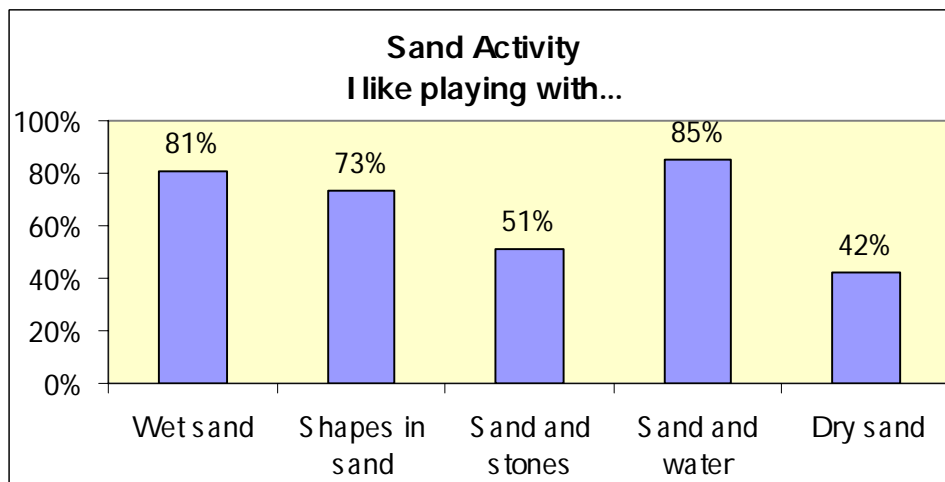
Responses grouped into dry and wet activities:



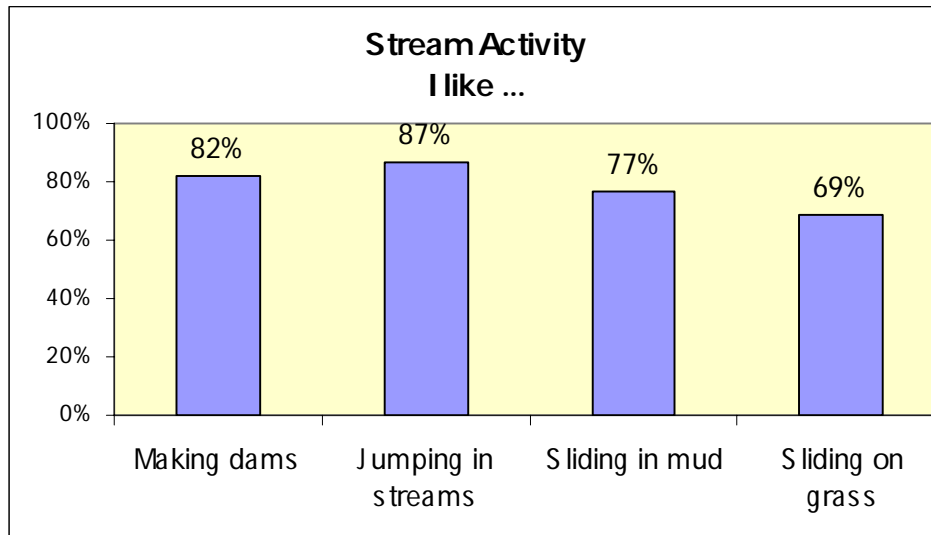
## Appendix 2



## Appendix 3



## Appendix 4



## Appendix 5

