

Sensory Play and Crafts in Daycare Centres



Region of Waterloo
PUBLIC HEALTH AND
EMERGENCY SERVICES

What is sensory play?

Sensory play and making crafts are popular and valuable components of childcare programs. Children use sensory items and crafts to enhance their sense of touch, sight, taste, smell, and hearing through hands-on play with different materials. However, some sensory and craft items are not suitable for group play and can make children sick. Children can become sick when they are exposed to germs (viruses, bacteria, parasites or fungi) that may be present in sensory and craft materials. Child care providers must take steps to create a safe and healthy environment for children during play.

What steps will help to keep children safe and healthy?

1. Keep the play area clean at all times. Clean play area weekly and when soiled.
2. Clean and sanitize play surfaces, including sensory play tables before and after each use. Clean with soap and water. Rinse with clean water. Sanitize with a freshly made bleach solution (two teaspoons (10 millilitres) of bleach to four cups (one litre) of water) or an approved disinfectant. Allow bleach and water solution to stand wet on surface for two minutes. Discard items that cannot be cleaned and sanitized after use.
3. Always read product labels and warnings. Choose age-appropriate, non-toxic, non-allergenic, non-edible arts and crafts materials that are safe to use, and easy to clean and sanitize. Use products that do not require special handling. Do not use products if labels indicate that gloves or other protective equipment should be worn to avoid inhalation, absorption or ingestion.
4. Encourage children to wash hands before and after handling sensory items. Hand washing is the single most important way to stop the spread of germs.
5. Refrigerate re-usable items such as homemade play dough, at the end of each day and between uses.
6. Store sensory and craft items in clean, sealed and labelled containers, out of reach of children.
7. Discard sensory items, such as play dough, when visibly contaminated and at the end of each week. If you cannot clean it, do not re-use it for more than a week!
8. Stop group play with sensory and craft items during a suspected or confirmed enteric or respiratory outbreak.
9. Supervise children closely during sensory play and craft activities. Children should not eat or drink when using sensory and craft items to avoid illness.
10. Use only dry food items (e.g., dried beans, pasta) for sensory play and craft activities.



Craft items to avoid	Rationale	Alternatives	When to replace
Play dough (store bought or homemade) with fruit-flavoured gelatin or fruit-scent dye	Children may be more likely to eat the play dough. They could get sick.	Unscented play dough.	At least weekly and when visibly contaminated.**
Styrofoam chips/shells	May be a choking hazard.	None.	n/a
Used egg cartons, toilet paper rolls, and meat trays	Cannot be cleaned and disinfected. Not intended for re-use. May contain Salmonella and E.coli bacteria.	Use new, unused egg cartons and meat trays. Use paper towel rolls or gift wrap rolls.	n/a
Instant papier mâché	May create inhalable dust and may contain lead or asbestos.	Make papier mâché using newspaper and white paste.	n/a
Powdered tempura paint	May create inhalable dust and may contain toxic pigments.	Liquid tempura paints.	n/a
Pastels, chalk, or dry markers	May create inhalable dust.	Oil pastels, crayons, or dustless chalk.	n/a
Glues and adhesives (epoxy, instant glue, airplane glue, rubber-cement glue)	Emit toxic fumes that can be inhaled.	Use water-based products only.	n/a
Permanent felt-tip markers	May contain toxic solvents.	Use water-based markers only. Choose markers marked 'non-toxic'	n/a

Sensory play items to avoid	Rationale	Alternatives	When to replace
Wood chips and shavings from commercial and domestic woodshops	Often made from plywood and particle board. May contain splinters and formaldehyde which is poisonous.	Cloth pompoms, felt shapes. Wood shavings purchased from a craft store.	At least weekly and when product is no longer intact.
Potting soil	May contain fertilizer and other toxic chemicals that can be absorbed across the skin.	Use silica free play sand.	Play sand – replace weekly.**
Bird seed, talcum powder, sawdust	May create inhalable dust. May contain toxic materials.	Cleanable plastic aquarium rocks, play sand.	Clean and disinfect reusable sensory items weekly. Play sand – replace weekly.**

Items to be cautious of	Rationale	Alternatives	When to replace
Natural toys from the outdoor environment: Feathers, pine cones, leaves, sticks, seeds, seed pods etc.	May contain contaminants such as feces. May not be cleanable and disinfectable.	Collect items from a clean outdoor source. Purchase items from craft supply store.	Replace as often as needed.

**Dispose of these items during confirmed or suspected outbreaks.

Adapted with permission from Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health

Reference: Well Beings, Third Edition, A Guide to Health in Child Care, Canadian Pediatric Association.

Alternate formats of this document are available upon request.

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