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'Let's talk about children getting dirty'

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There has never been an easier time to cope with the aftermath of children who like to explore mud, sand, clay, paint and other irresistible materials. Most households have washing machines, dryers, bathrooms and showers. Some settings have these facilities for families without. So what's the problem?

Educators say that parents don't like children spoiling clothes and are worried about health risks when children get dirty. Some educators don't like getting dirty. But when children naturally want to know about their world, getting dirty is inevitable.

Finding out what the world is made of is something that matters to children. This involves being out in the natural world in all weathers- touching, getting stuck in, engaging all senses to explore and work with materials- mud, sand and water, clay, and use art materials of all kinds. Then children can be creative, take risks and manage themselves. They learn to make judgements about whether to get involved, how far to go and whether to hold back. They learn to manage the consequences of not holding back, or making a slip up. They see the sense of establishing a simple routine for getting clean and dry; they can be involved in cleaning themselves, changing clothes and deciding whether to go back for more.

Parents are less likely to object to activities which are highly valued. When educators provide opportunities for hands-on, hands-in, full engagement with materials they not only acknowledge that this matters to children but give a clear message that this is valued in the setting. When educators get involved, they offer children a real life example of how to manage getting messy and its consequences. Children see that educators may need to cover up, clean down or change clothes.

Inevitable though it is that children will get dirty, no parent wants a child to appear neglected. Having a simple 'Dirty statement' offers a guide to parents. It can help to reduce concerns and shows what is valued. A useful start is:

'Children in this nursery will have plenty of opportunity to engage with

- materials from the real world*
- a full range of art materials*
- opportunities for cooking.*

On occasion children may get dirty or require a change of clothes. It is helpful if children wear easy-wash clothing.'

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Further reading

- First hand experience, what matters to children* by Rich, D., Casanova, D., Dixon, A., Drummond, M.J., Durrant, A., Myer, C., (£25, www.richlearningopportunities.co.uk, 01473 737405)