

Messy on Purpose: The Power of Playful Learning for Children - Program Ideas!

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Jackson Pollock-Style Splatter Painting

Teach kids about artist Jackson Pollock, his painting style and process (there are videos of him painting!), and why his messy-looking paintings are considered art. Then, follow up by creating a painted mural in the style of the artist.

Supplies:

- Washable tempera paints, pre-poured and separated into containers
- Multiple bowls or other wide-mouthed containers for paints
- Spoon, craft stick, dowel, or other stirring implement
- Water
- A large piece of heavyweight paper (we used 36" wide paper, cut to the length of our small galley-style kitchen)
- .7 mil / Light duty plastic drop cloths (or reusable plastic tarps)
- Painters tape or masking tape
- A variety of objects to paint with (e.g. paintbrushes, toothbrushes, spiky balls, eye droppers, etc)
- Baby wipes

Process:

1. Cover as much of the floor, walls, and other furniture as possible with plastic drop cloths or tarps, leaving no gaps. You can hang them up using painters tape or masking tape. The object here is to protect surfaces from flying paint.
2. Pour one paint color into each container. Add a little water and stir until you have a thinner paint consistency (not watery, but not thick).
3. Set rules and expectations with the participants. For us, this was taking turns and only allowing one child at a time to be the splatterer. We demonstrated where they could stand and how to use tools to create splatters without getting splatters on themselves or the ceiling.
4. Then, you paint! They can dunk balls into the paint and roll them down the length of the paper, drip paint from an eye dropper, flick paint from a brush, etc.
5. Use baby wipes for hands, shoes that may walk through paint, and painting tools that need a quick wipedown.
6. Let dry and hang up somewhere in the library.

Notes & Options:

- We always note in a messy program's description that participants should wear something they don't mind getting dirty or stained. You can offer aprons (never a bad investment!), but it won't prevent all clothes from getting stained.
- Offer individual paintings instead of a mural. This will be much harder to control as a mess, but the setup would be similar.
- If it's nice outside, take the program outdoors!

Umbrella Drip Paintings

It's a Pinterest classic for a reason! This activity was incorporated into one of our Family Reading Club programs. Because we did extensive preparations in advance, this was doable within 30 minutes. If you let participants do the preparations, it should fill an hour.

Supplies:

- Liquid watercolor paints
- Ice cube trays
- Eye droppers
- Cups of water
- Long rectangle with a rounded top traced onto construction paper (1 per participant)
- Duct tape
- Umbrella image traced onto construction paper (1 per participant)
- 12x18 sheets of white construction paper
- Painters tape or masking tape
- Glue sticks
- .7 mil / Light duty plastic drop cloths or long lengths of disposable plastic tablecloths
- Baby wipes
- Paper towels



Process:

1. If you want this activity to take ~30 minutes, you will need to do some prep. First, draw a long rectangle with a rounded top onto card stock. This will be the space

where the umbrella sits, as well as all the space underneath the umbrella. Cut out the shape and trace it onto another paper. Cut out one per participant. Cover each shape in duct tape to prevent paint from soaking through it. Trim as needed.

2. The card stock shapes will then need to be masking taped onto the sheets of 12x18 construction paper. Trim the masking tape pieces to be just a little bit bigger than the area you're taping down, but still in the same shape as what you're taping down. So, the curve of the rectangle will need to have a curved piece of masking tape just barely over the edge of the shape to hold it down. Make sure all of the tape seams are sealed well, because they are what will keep the area underneath the umbrella clear.
3. Create individual stations for each participant by hanging up a dropcloth or disposable plastic tablecloth on the wall with painters tape or masking tape. The tablecloth should be hung higher than the average participant's height, and should flow down onto the floor with enough space for the participant to stand on it and paint. The prepared pieces of construction paper will also be hung up with painters tape or masking tape at each station.
4. Pour small amounts of liquid watercolors into the wells of ice cube trays for each participant. Add a little water to each well to help thin the paint.
5. Set rules and expectations with the participants. For us, this was telling them how we will distribute paint, demonstrating how to drip the paint down the canvas, and what to do if they step in paint (but also to avoid doing so).
6. Paint! Participants will use eyedroppers to take paint from an ice cube tray well, press the tip to the top of their paper, and squeeze the eyedropper so that paint flows down the painting. Participants can rinse their eyedroppers in cups of water between colors.
7. When the paintings are done, remove painting from the wall and tap any loose drops off of the bottom onto the plastic cloths. Lay paintings flat to dry.
8. Have participants check the bottoms of their shoes before walking off their plastic cloth. If they have paint on their shoes, use baby wipes and a paper towel to clean them off first.



9. When the paintings have dried enough to longer run, very gently remove the taped card stock from the painting.
10. Add glue to the back of a construction paper umbrella and put it over the top of the blank rounded rectangle on the painting.
11. Soak up all the liquid watercolors from the plastic cloths with paper towels, then wipe down with baby wipes. Let dry before removing and reusing.

Notes & Options:

- Making this a family program where adults are expected to help guide their children is extremely helpful for mess control.
- We highly recommend being the one who doles out paint to participants. People always put more paint on their trays than they need. Controlling the amount everyone gets prevents mess *and* waste.
- We always note in a messy program's description that participants should wear something they don't mind getting dirty or stained. You can offer aprons (never a bad investment!), but it won't prevent all clothes from getting stained.

Snow Dough

Whip up not 1, not 2, but 3 different batches of Snow Dough in a fun class that sits at the intersection of STEM and sensory play.

Supplies:

- 3 cups baking soda per participant
- 1 cup cornstarch per participant
- ¼ cup white hair conditioner per participant
- ¼ cup baby oil per participant
- 1 cup shaving cream per participant
- 1 tablespoon silver glitter per participant
- 3 bowls per participant
- 1 plastic spoon per participant
- 1 small whisk per participant



- ¼, ½, and 1-cup measuring cups for each participant
- Tablespoons for each participant
- Disposable plastic tablecloths
- Baby wipes
- Paper towels
- 3 Ziploc sandwich or quart bags per participant
- Optional, but preferable: Plastic craft trays

Process:

1. Cover tables with disposable plastic tablecloths or dropcloths. If possible, cover the floor underneath the tables, too. Have a vacuum cleaner and cleaning wipes on standby.
2. Pre-sort all of the equipment each participant will need at every seat.
3. Set rules and expectations with the participants. For us, this meant telling them that we were going to go step by step together to make each dough, and that for some of the ingredients (like baby oil), they would need to be patient while we made our way around the room to pour it for them. You should also tell them how/where to clean their hands, or you'll end up with handprints all over!
4. Demonstrate how to properly measure dry ingredients.
5. Follow the directions below to make each snow dough! Talk to them about the similarities and differences between the different doughs. How do they feel? Smell? Is one colder than the others? Why do you think that is? Does one remind you more of real snow? Which one is best for building a little snowman?
6. Participants can store each batch of dough in a Ziploc bag to take home.
7. Take a deep breath. The "snow" that's probably sprinkled all over the floor will come up very, very easily with a vacuum cleaner. Anything that got on your tables or chairs will come right off with cleaning fluid and a rag (or disinfecting wipes).

Snow Dough Recipe #1:

From: <https://www.simplermost.com/how-make-2-ingredient-fake-snow/>

-1.5 cups baking soda

-¼ cup white hair conditioner

Mix baking soda and conditioner in a bowl, using your hands. If it's too sticky, add a little more baking soda. If it's too dry, add a little more conditioner.

Snow Dough Recipe #2:

From: <https://theimaginationtree.com/snow-dough-recipe-for-winter-sensory/>

- 1 cup cornstarch
- ¼ cup baby oil
- 1 tablespoon silver glitter

Mix cornstarch, baby oil, and glitter together in a bowl with a spoon until just combined. Then, work the oil into the cornstarch with your fingers until you have a smooth dough.

Snow Dough Recipe #3:

From: <http://freshlymessy.com/how-to-make-sensory-snow-in-winter-thats-cold/>

- 1.5 cups baking soda
- 1 cup shaving cream

Whisk baking soda and shaving cream together in a bowl. If you think it feels too dry, add a little more shaving cream.

Notes & Options:

- You can buy sets of measuring cups and measuring spoons at the dollar store! That way, everyone has their own set and it won't break the bank.
- Letting the kids pour and measure cornstarch and baking soda can be super messy, but learning to properly use measuring tools is a critical skill.
- That being said, it's not worth the child's clothing or the library's carpeting to let them spill baby oil—so, pour that one for them.
- Glitter is not necessary, really. It's just pretty. Pour that for them, too.
- As with all messy programs, this one is great for families. We love caregivers standing by to help their child learn (and also to rein in the mess)!
- Having a tub of baby wipes and a roll of paper towels at each table will be to your benefit. If those aren't available, snow dough-covered hands will probably be wiped on whatever is closest.

Wee Explore

This STEM-focused program for ages 0-3 offers a variety of hands-on activities, suggested questions for parents to ask their children, and an opportunity for parents of young children to socialize (with free coffee!). This program is heavily inspired by the Brooklyn Public Library's STEM Playdate Recipes, found here:

<http://readplaygrow.pbworks.com>.

Because this program consists of multiple stations of your choosing, they're not all going to be messy. We will just highlight a few messy options here.

Sensory Pool Supplies:

- Kiddie pool
- Enough shredded paper to fill the pool
- Large plastic balls, trucks, etc

Sensory Pool Process:

1. Make a handout to place next to the pool that tells caregivers what to do and how to engage their child. For example: Put the baby in the pool and pretend it's raining paper. Talk about how the paper feels ("the paper feels so light!") and where it is ("uh oh, the paper is falling on your head!").
2. Plan ahead to get enough shredded paper to fill an entire pool! It's more than you'd think.
3. Fill the pool with paper and toys.



Foam Towers Supplies:

- Foam cubes (or other small, lightweight building blocks)
- Shaving cream
- Bucket
- Plastic rulers or measuring tape
- .7 mil / Light duty plastic drop cloths (or reusable plastic tarps)
- Sensory table or similar
- Baby wipes or paper towels



Foam Towers Process:

1. Make a handout to place next to the table that tells caregivers what to do and how to engage their child. For example: If needed, show them how shaving cream sticks the blocks together like bricks and mortar. Encourage them to build a castle, tower, etc. Measure their structure's height and talk about it ("Wow! Your tower is 20 inches tall! Can you make an even bigger tower?").
2. Cover the floor with a plastic drop cloth, tablecloth, or tarp. Place the sensory table on top of it.

3. Place foam blocks in the sensory table. Put shaving cream in a bucket and place on top of the sensory table. You can also create an “invitation to play” by sticking a few blocks together with shaving cream to make the beginnings of a foam tower.
4. If your activity room does not have a handwashing station, it’s important to have baby wipes and/or paper towels nearby this table. As you can see from the picture, everyone will be covered in shaving cream and will need a way to wipe down before shaving cream gets all over the room!

It’s Raining Beans! Supplies:

- A variety of dried beans (preferably different colors and sizes)
- Funnels
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Egg cartons, ice cube trays, or paint palettes
- PVC pipes, Pipe Builders, TubeLox, or similar
- Bright or light colored tablecloth, larger than the sensory table
- Sensory table or similar



It’s Raining Beans! Process:

1. Make a handout to place next to the table that tells caregivers what to do and how to engage their child. For example: Try pouring a cup full of beans through a funnel into a tube. Talk to your child about what happens (“When you poured the beans into the tube, they fell down. How did it sound when they fell down? Was it loud or quiet?”).
2. Place a tablecloth on the ground and the sensory table on top of it.
3. Pour beans into the table. If you have connecting tubes, you can build a structure as shown in the photo, or just simply have some tubes available among the funnels, cups, and egg cartons. Create an invitation to play by putting some beans into the cups and egg cartons, or maybe placing a funnel on top of one of the tubes.

Notes & Options:

- A light or brightly colored tablecloth is helpful for easily spotting errant beans!
- Have a vacuum cleaner handy for bean cleanup when the program is done.