

Messy on Purpose:

The Power of Playful Learning for Children

Heather Thompson & Shawn Wolf

Kenosha Public Library

August 13, 2026

POV: You Work at KPL Kids @ Uptown Lofts



POV: You Work at the Southwest Library



POV: You Work at the Northside Library



How we make messes at the Kenosha Public Library

Mess for Success: Water Table



Mess for Success: Sand Table



Mess for Success: Unstaffed Arts & Crafts



Mess for Success: Art Room Supply Labels



Mess for Success: Unstaffed Arts & Crafts In Line of Sight



Mess for Success: Play Areas



Mess for Success: Play Area Toy Labels



Mess for Success: Play Area Toy Setup



Mess for Success: Other Play Areas



Mess for Success: Play Area Before



Mess for Success: Play Area After



Mess for Success: STEM Programs



Mess for Success: Art Programs



Mess for Success: Sensory Programs



**So, why would anyone even
want to do this?**

Why Messiness? Learning is Messy - Babies

Babies

- Physical Health and Development
- Motor Development
- Learning Through the Senses



Why Messiness? Learning is Messy - Toddlers

Toddlers and Preschoolers

- Trajectory
- Positioning
- Enclosing
- Transporting
- Transforming



Why Messiness? Play is Messy & Joyful

Joyful

- Turns on pleasure receptors in the brain
- Increased dopamine contributes to better memory, attention, creativity, perseverance, and more.



Why Messiness? Play is Messy & Meaningful

Meaningful

- Connects learning to children's lives by linking new experiences to familiar ones



Why Messiness? Play is Messy & Engaging

Actively Engaging

- Child led
- Helps children make sense of the world around them by allowing them to make discoveries and apply them to other areas of their lives



Why Messiness? Play is Messy & Iterative

Iterative

- Create
- Test
- Problem solve
- Expand
- Persist



Why Messiness? Play is Messy & Interactive

Socially Interactive

- Develop social skills
- Learn from peers
- Build empathy
- Practice communication skills
- Learn to collaborate
- Contributes to healthy relationships and better mental health



Why Messiness? Supporting Families

- Make the mess here, not at home!
- Access to a variety of toys and experiences at no additional cost
- Family programs: Help for you, quality time for them
- Teach valuable skills and reward wanted behavior



Why Messiness? Improving Your Statistic

Making our play areas consistently available made our statistics skyrocket.

- 2018: 9,355
- 2019: 12,642
- 2023: 18,779
- 2024: 17,630*
- 2025: 22,178

That's just for the play area activities at one branch over a 6-month period!



**So, how messy are
you gonna get?**

The Mess Continuum: Questions to Ask Yourself

- What is your personal mess tolerance? That of other staff?
- What spaces in your library are best for a mess?
- What do the kids in your community want and need?
- Where can you start without spending a lot of money or staff energy?



Questions?

Heather Thompson: hthompson@mykpl.info

Shawn Wolf: swolf@mykpl.info
