

News Release

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Playful Learning on a Budget

For pre school settings, childminders and daycare providers it is essential to be able to manage budgets effectively. Catherine Clark, Early Years New Product Development Director from TTS explains how using one particular cost-effective resource over and over again is a great way to save money and, with a little imagination, the number of play and learning opportunities it presents is limitless.

“One of the most useful, enduring resources in any setting is the Activity Tray (also known as a builder’s tray). It comes in a range of colours and is great value (TTS from £15.95). It can be used on the floor, on tables, indoors and outdoors. It also has the option of being placed on metal legs to make an adjustable table surface plus a wooden base for outdoor water play and gardening. You can even buy a plastic cover to keep the components safe.

These simple, safe trays create a focussed area for all manner of materials. They are also a blank canvas for open ended learning opportunities; children can self-select and transform the space into all kinds of exciting learning environments.

Try filling the tray with wet and dry sand. Different textures are suitable for mark making whilst wet sand is great for landscaping mountains and rivers. It can also make a super mini construction site area. Different coloured sands with a little glitter added can create interesting scenes – black glitter sand makes an exciting lunar landscape, whereas green sand creates verdant jungle swamps.

Filling the tray with all kinds of messy materials is useful for developing sensory as well as fine motor skills. Add cornflour to make fantastic, stretchy, slimy gloop. This is really effective for patterning and early number/letter formation. Whisk soap flakes into the tray for squelchy, fluffy peaks.

It is also productive to give children access to a range of spoons, spatulas, rolling pins, sieves, ladles and whisks so that they can experience first-hand how materials react. Different types of brushes from paint to toothbrushes make super, scratchy and swirly patterns. Magic snow and ice are safely contained within the tray boundaries. Try freezing rubber gloves full of water to create ice hands. Snowy landscapes for winter and setting the scene for Santa’s workshop make appealing seasonal options. This is even more fun when adding food colouring and aromas.

There are obviously endless types of materials that would be used from rice, pasta, dried out tea bags, non toxic wallpaper paste, gravel, spaghetti etc. The tray works well for dough activities as there’s enough space to make big shapes or long wiggly worms.

The tray can be filled with water to make under-the-sea landscapes. Add rocks, plants, plastic fish and then sprinkle in sequins for buried treasure. Design boats and test them on

the water to see how much cargo they hold before sinking. There doesn't have to be a 'theme' with an Activity Tray it can be used simply for emptying and filling plastic containers, pots and pans, sieves and buckets!

The Activity Trays are useful for building minibeast areas. Collect leaves, bark, stones and grass and do some investigating with a magnifying glass as to what is crawling around. Add an old log to see how many speckled frogs there are! Why not add some soil and grow areas of mini forests with cress or mustard. Use as a mini planter for an aromatic herb area. By filling the tray with autumn leaves the children can hunt for buried items and experience the rich colours as well as the crackle and crunch.

The trays can be left outside so all tasks such as threading, building blocks and small world play can safely contained within the area.

The Activity Trays are really useful for literacy and numeracy activities as they can be used to hide letters and numbers in many different ways such as in gloop, water and sand. Create a treasure hunt that relates to a particular sound, asking the children to find objects with the corresponding phoneme. Use shells, buttons and other counters for sorting, ordering and sequencing. Place different lengths of string, dough and ribbon into sizes. Use the weighing scales in the tray so that children can scoop different amounts. Have different sized packaging and containers in order to ascertain which is the heaviest or highest.

Use the trays outside for creating mini, pretend fish and duck ponds (and why not sing accompanying rhymes at the same time!) Use with guttering and bamboo channels in order to create exciting water pathways. Children love pouring, emptying and filling containers with water. The channels also make great car and ball runs.

TTS offers an award winning range of small world mats which are based around different locations. Place these wipe clean mats in the base of the tray and then transform using wet and dry 3D materials. On the farm add fences, buildings & animals. For a really authentic feel add soil (or tea from an old teabag), a yoghurt pot as a water trough, some grass and stones to make a realistic mini agricultural scene. With the play mats children like to have different textures and materials to use that represent the scenes much more authentically for example when giving the animals a drink it is much better to have real water. The children's senses and their language will be more enriched by having a diverse range of resources at their disposal.

The Activity Trays also make lovely areas for experiments. Finding the tray with a layer of crisply formed ice after a frosty night gives opportunities to explore patterns, science activities as well as a mini ice rink for small world figures.

Ensure that the children can access independently a rich range of materials. Let them select how the landscapes are designed. If there are boxes and other 'junk' materials, skyscrapers may appear within the trays or dens for animals maybe created. Sponges and buckets may lead the trays into being used for car washes! I have seen children making nests for birds, constructing towns, navigating road systems, sprinkling flour for the North Pole and collecting stones for a dinosaur swamp. By letting the children add the contents into the tray they are leading the learning and consequently much more involved and empowered.

Remote control items such as Bee-Bot and other ICT resources can be used with the Activity tray to experiment with cause and effect

Basically the Activity Tray is a simple, inexpensive, practical resource which lends itself to all manner of learning opportunities. It can be used indoors and out and is robust, yet easy to clean. Once you have one you will wonder how you ever managed without one!

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TTS