

second  
edition

# *Making a* **Mud Kitchen**

Jan White and Liz Edwards



**OPENING  
UP THE  
OUTDOORS**

**CREATING  
RICH  
EXPERIENCES**



# *Making a* **Mud Kitchen**

**opening up the wonderful world  
of mud play**

**Jan White and Liz Edwards**



**OPENING  
UP THE  
OUTDOORS**





## Early Childhood Outdoors

Professor Jan White is co-founder and strategic director of Early Childhood Outdoors. She is author of the Core Values for Outdoor Play and editor of Outdoor Provision in the Early Years (Sage 2011).



## MUDDYFACES

Liz Edwards is founder and chief imaginer of Muddy Faces. She is author of Knife Use with Groups - a Forest School Leaders Guide and creator of the Outdoor Hub.

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### Acknowledgements

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### Disclaimer

The author and publisher cannot take any responsibility for the use of the ideas and guidance given in this publication. As with any aspect of early years provision, it is always necessary to carry out ongoing risk assessment and management according to the specific children, situation and conditions pertaining.

The information and ideas provided have been created to help increase the understanding and confidence of practitioners aiming to develop mud play and mud kitchens with groups. The author makes no claim that the information in this book is complete. Neither the author nor contributors can accept any legal responsibility for any harm, injury, damage, loss or prosecution resulting from any activities or guidance described.



**This book is dedicated to all the children who have shown us the deep pleasures of mud play, and to all those practitioners who push the boundaries to enable young children's access to the outdoors in an elemental and meaningful way.**

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Much has happened over the past decade in progressing the right of all young children to access play, and the learning that takes place through their play, in the outdoors. We now have a broad consensus across the UK and at all levels from Government to practitioners and parents, that outdoor play matters and that **‘outdoor learning’** is important – and increasingly, that this is as significant as indoor learning.

Along the way, many settings have been exploring their approach to outdoor play and learning, and several are pushing at the boundaries of what it really means to be in the outdoors, what kind of outdoor environment can be harnessed, such as woodlands, beaches and the street, and in what ways the outdoors can be used for the benefit of young children. Exciting times are ahead for the field of outdoor play and learning!

However, many early years settings still have to work with difficult access to the outdoors, uninspiring outdoor spaces, restricted funds for design, resources, training, outdoor clothing and so on, staff who are early on in their own journey of working well with the outdoor environment, and parents who are not yet fully on board with the setting’s intentions for learning outdoors. There is still much work to do! The outdoors has so much potential to offer to young children: **how can we unlock and open up this fabulous treasure trove?**

**Opening Up The Outdoors** builds on the remarkable success of Jan White and Liz Edwards’ previous Mud Play initiative. Sharing the vision and goal of *more children thriving outdoors, more often and for longer, benefiting from richer and more meaningful environments offering authentic, rewarding and satisfying experiences*, Opening Up The Outdoors takes a long term, three cornered approach tackling the **WHY, WHAT** and **HOW** of really good outdoor play.

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# The **history** of Making a Mud Kitchen

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In 2011, Professor Jan White and Liz Edwards launched a **Mud Play** initiative aiming to greatly increase the understanding, importance, value and range of experiences from mud play as continuous provision, and to support practitioners to achieve this (Making a Mud Kitchen 2011).

Prior to this date only a few settings in the UK provided mud play or had a mud kitchen. Our **Making a Mud Kitchen** booklet was launched online as a free online resource for **International Mud Day** in June 2012. Within a year it had been downloaded 20,000 times, and 17,000 free copies of the printed booklet (funded by Muddy Faces) were also distributed at outdoor focused conferences and training events across the UK.

The response was breathtaking and feedback so very positive. Proof of the success of the initiative is in the results: at the five year point, ‘mud kitchens’ had become fully mainstreamed, with a very high proportion of education settings of all types, in all UK countries, having a mud kitchen in their outdoor provision. To date, well in excess of 65,000 downloads of the booklet have been made worldwide and **Making a Mud Kitchen** has been translated into 9 other languages: Welsh, Hungarian, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Greek, German, Croatian and French (all available on the Mud section of the **Outdoor Hub**). It has also been printed in Portugal and Italy, where major early years magazines have distributed free printed copies to all their subscribers.

## **Mud play is now the norm not the exception.**

Mud Kitchens are wonderfully effective at **opening up the outdoors** by enabling child driven play and providing access to deep exploration of both the physical world and human life.

## **Just do it!** guidelines for creating a Mud Kitchen

**There is little more important in our physical world than earth and water and they are truly intriguing things, especially when they interact.**

Mixing soil, water and a range of other natural materials has a foundational role in early childhood which has deep importance and endless possibilities for well-being, development and learning. The breadth and depth of what these experiences offer young children is truly remarkable.



Mud kitchens provide something quite different to a soil digging patch, whilst also being much more easily managed. A mud kitchen includes elements of the much-loved domestic corner and cooking from indoor play, which are then hugely enriched through the special nature of being outside.



Mud kitchens work well all year round, and need to be seen as a core element of continuous provision outside. Mud kitchens do not need to be fancy and certainly do not need to cost much. There is nothing to beat the simplicity and character of creating your own unique kitchen from scrounged, begged and discovered items. And remember, the best mud kitchens are made in collaboration with the children who will be using them.



# Choose the place

The kitchen needs a handy and **ample supply of the basic materials of sand and/or mud**. Offering both provides contrast in colour, texture and mixing behaviour – and many more possibilities for imaginations.

Being situated near the sand area or mud patch may give the kitchen more context and meaning, but big pots of these basic materials will also be fine, preferably at floor level for ease of access.

Mud kitchens that have **walls, fences or other vertical surfaces** on one or two sides then have potential for hanging pots and utensils on them or for installing shelving, making it feel more kitchen-like and better to use. A corner also creates room-like enclosure that feels cosy and safe, which research suggests is good at generating dramatic play in young children.







A **water supply** is essential, but it does not need to be in the kitchen or even close-by, as children love to fill containers both large and small to transport across to the kitchen for use. Make sure however that there are several types of collecting containers for this activity and an ample (preferably running) water source, such as an outdoor tap, water butt or a large container of water.

**Gravel, pebbles and other natural materials** are also natural companions for concoction making. If these are not generally available in the outdoor space, then good-sized containers need to be kept topped up for good supplies (consider drainage of these if kept in the open air).



**Plant material** is also an important ingredient of a good mud kitchen. This can be anywhere – children just need permission to pick and gather – and some agreed boundary rules so that plants can keep supplying! Lots of robust, pickable plants spread around the whole outdoor space are ideal.



One last thought is to locate the kitchen near to **compatible activities**, such as good places for den play, as these complementary aspects of provision will enhance each other, enriching experience for the children.





# Make the Space

Kitchens can be all sizes, but the **size will influence the feel of the place** and, therefore, probably the kind of activity that takes place. Room for several children to work alongside or in collaboration seems important. Large, open-plan kitchens may well generate more boisterous themes and actions. A choice of both large and small nook-like kitchens would be ideal in a group setting.



**Enclosure** from fences and walls (as above) or by installing low level boundaries such as wicker fencing (so that children can see over but the space feels enclosed by them) can create a good mud kitchen feel.

A roof is not necessary as this would prevent the elements being part of the stimulus and range of experiences.









Some kitchens that are in the middle of an open sand/digging area work fine too, but perhaps have less sense of being a special place.

In creating some sense of enclosure, it's important not to separate the kitchen from the rest of the outdoor space. **It needs to be easy to get in and out** and to see in and out, and it needs to interact with whatever else is going on outdoors.

**Working surfaces** are a crucial element. These need to be at the right height for the children and to provide enough space to work at, with all the mess that creative kitchen work entails.

**Shelving and cupboards** add much to the feeling and functionality of the kitchen. It's really helpful if each pot and utensil stands out by itself (compared to the jumble of a box full of stuff), and is easy to get at.

**Hooks** on walls or the front edge of shelves (beware that hooks are not at eye-poking height).

**Baskets** to separate types of utensil can be useful.

Finally, consider where all the **old mixed material** is going to go after use!







# Fit it Out

- \* An old **cupboard** or two; a dresser is perfect!
- \* **Work top** with plenty of surface to work at.
- \* Something to be the **cooker** in pretend play (an old microwave can be very effective, having a very satisfying door to open and close, and buttons to push)
- \* **Shelving** above and behind the work surface, or a tall cupboard to one side.
- \* A good basic selection of **pots and pans, jugs and funnels, bakeware** etc. An interesting collection of common **kitchen utensils**, together with a few unusual and intriguing ones, such as an ice-cream scoop.
- \* Plenty of **bowls and containers**, again a range of the common ones and a few special ones such as jelly moulds or ice-cube trays.







- ✱ Supplies of natural materials in **small containers and/or jars** (lids that stay attached are ideal as they do not get lost).

- ✱ **Plants** for picking, mixing and grinding.

- ✱ **Enhancements** for suitable occasions, such as a selection of food colourings, essences, herbs and spices, chalk for grinding and mixing, and 'special' ingredients to add the final magical touches to potions and spells.



- ✱ A big **washing up bowl**, especially one sunk into the worktop, is very helpful as part of the play and for washing up afterwards.

Note, specific dressing up clothes are not needed!

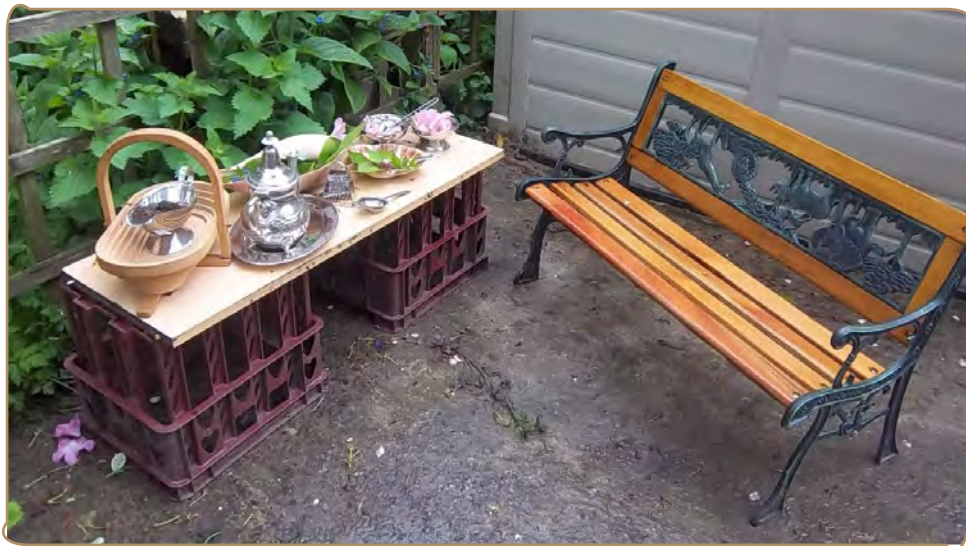






# Places to find what you need

The best mud kitchens, and those which have the most atmosphere and character, are made from found, gathered and donated items – especially when these come from the children's own families. It's important not to spend much money – what matters to children is that these things come from the real human world, to combine with the stuff of the real physical world.



Here are a few possibilities:

**Families** of children and staff – specific requests and lucky finds; items used in a range of represented cultures; the perfect little old cupboard might come from someone's garage  
**Charity and second-hand shops** – especially for interesting tableware, bakeware and utensils.

**Emporia and house clearance** sales – can yield some really interesting and unusual things.

**Furniture recycling** centres, such as REMAR – can yield some quirky and cheap cupboards and dressers.

**Specialist suppliers**, such as Muddy Faces – for a range of really interesting and unusual resources to set up and extend mud kitchens.







# Get busy in it!



The mud kitchen context and materials result in young children engaging in an **incredible variety of actions**, such as: filling, pouring, emptying, transferring, mixing, stirring, whisking, frothing, scooping, ladling, handling, moulding, patting, smoothing, mark-making, throwing, splatting, splashing, sharing out, serving, foraging, selecting, picking, collecting, gathering, garnishing, shredding, crushing, mashing, grinding, measuring, adding, brewing, boiling, sieving, filtering, separating, pipetting and decanting!

In the same way, the **range of potential experiences** is vast, including sorting, classifying, cooking, transforming, creating, enquiring, testing, repeating, experimenting, naming, labelling, decorating, embellishing, selling and using.

The perfect stimulus of experiencing and exploring the physical transformations (doing) taking place puts the brain into the perfect place for **creating mental transformations (imagination)** – and the mix easily becomes coffee with sugar, a birthday cake, soups and stews, ice cream in many flavours, lotions and ‘make-up’, magical drinks and potions, wizard’s spells and perfumes... This work is filled with **emotional, personal and social value**, and offers the context for learning a wonderful range of new and interesting **vocabulary and verbal language exchange and expression**.







# Being a good assistant

The main role adults need to take is of **facilitator and enabler** – making the kitchen available (best constructed by helping the children to create it to their own specifications), and supporting the play that then emerges from the children.

Good adult support consists of **observing** (noticing what is really taking place), striving to **understand** (recognising the significance of this for this child and this group of children) and then **responding** according to careful consideration as to what would help the child the most (which might be standing back out of the way!).

Supplying **useful language** for equipment, actions and descriptions can be very helpful provided it is done in context where it makes sense (and is not overdone!).

There is so much to mud kitchen play and its deeper meanings for children that the role of **researcher** would be highly valuable.

Other adults may not understand why this is all so valuable and important, and may have many objections, so supporting adults also need to **interpret** what is really happening and **advocate** for mud play in all children's lives.









# Delving into the meanings of mud play

Young children are endlessly interested in – and **biologically programmed to explore** – the stuff of the earth, how materials behave and what they do.

**Making connections** through discovering and investigating **cause and effect** is the stuff of brain development and scientific process. Curiosity, fascination and the pleasure of finding thing out are fundamentally important to the human state – being human.

An even more powerful level of experience for the explorer is that they are the one making things happen – **giving feelings of control and power**, and over time, building a child who has a strong inner sense of agency (which itself is key to well-being and mental health).

The processes of making ‘concoctions’ brings the worlds of science and art completely together through **possibility thinking**.

The growth of imagination and creativity happens through building on concrete cause-and-effect experience to posing and predicting ‘what if...?’

Good scientists do this all the time, as do artists and all other innovators.

Even better, the experience of making concoctions brings the child into the realms of **magic and fantasy** - reminding us of the ancient fascinations of **alchemy**.





# Keeping it safe and healthy

First and foremost, children must be kept **safe enough** whilst they have access to the important experiences that they need for full and healthy development. Our job is to manage an opportunity to make it safely available – not to remove it in the name of ‘health and safety’. The requirement is to be ‘as safe as necessary’ rather than ‘as safe as possible’ (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents).

The current official approach is one of **risk-benefit assessment** – better thought of as benefit-risk assessment: that is, consider why the experience matters and then manage to make it available. Much more can be found in the government endorsed document *Managing Risk in Play Provision*, available to download from the Play England website.

**Contact with soil is actually beneficial** as the bacteria in it help to build healthily functioning immune systems in young children - for further information see *Why Dirt is Good* by Mary Ruebush (Kaplan Trade 2009), and research also suggests that this contact produces serotonin in the body – which makes us feel happy! The medically-supported *Hygiene Hypothesis* suggests that contact with the beneficial germs that we have evolved with is vital, and that harm is done by over sanitising children as we currently do. Soil can however carry harmful pathogens, and care to ensure no contamination from cat and dog faeces is very important. A useful approach for mud kitchens is to supply soil from purchased **loam topsoil** rather than from gardens or uncovered plant borders (all garden centres sell this; don’t try compost as it does not behave sufficiently like soil for satisfactory mud play). Freshly excavated mole hills also supply lovely clean topsoil! Sand in sandpits is also best covered with a light mesh out of hours - for more on this, see *Playing and Learning Outdoors* by Jan White (Routledge 2014).

**Handwashing** is important after playing in this way, so routines and expectations must be agreed with the children, set up to work easily and adhered to, to embed hand-washing as habitual. The best first stage to this is to establish the routine that children wash up the pots they have used in a large bowl of warm, soapy water!







Children also need to **stay warm and comfortable** – and mud kitchen work is likely to be wet and messy. Waterproof dungarees with wellies offer the best protection for most of the year in the UK – the best hot weather attire would be old shorts and T-shirt! Somewhere to wash muddy suits down and hang to dry should be part of any well-operating outdoor provision.

The best risk management processes **involve the children** as a core control measure – always introduce new resources and experiences carefully, simply and slowly (one at a time, with plenty of time in between) with lots of emphasis on helping children access them safely and effectively. Less is always more with young children's experiences!

Ask the children to look for things they think could be harmful and get their agreement as to the best ways **they can manage these** (with your support when needed), such as pots on the ground being a tripping hazard.

Pots and utensils need to be kept in good condition and will need to be **washed and dried** reasonably often to avoid them rusting and becoming unpleasant to use. Keeping them drained and aerated is a very good idea, and occasionally wiping a light coat of cooking oil (with paper towels or cloths) prevents rust and mould. Storing resources in open-net sacks or wire baskets is also a solution.









## GATEWAYS to natural play – the HOW of playing and learning outdoors

**Making a Mud Kitchen** (2nd edition 2019) is one of a developing series of **GATEWAY** booklets produced through collaboration between Early Childhood Outdoors and Muddy Faces, to support the aims of the **Opening Up The Outdoors** initiative through the **HOW** strand.

The Shared Vision and Values for Outdoor Play and Learning in the Early Years is presented in the ‘master’ Gateway booklet, **Valuing the Outdoors**, available from Muddy Faces.

Each of the **GATEWAY** booklets has a clear ‘gateway’ in provision and experience outdoors that it seeks to open. Each booklet offers a simple, straightforward and easy to implement aspect of development and action, which actually opens up much more of the outdoors than at first meets the eye. Further booklets will address keystone provision such as playing with the rain, loose parts, woodwork and tools, den play and storytelling.

Opening each gate initiates a great way of harnessing the outdoors for enjoyable and worthwhile exploration and play – contributing to opening up the full richness of playing and learning outdoors, and capturing the best the outdoors can provide for supporting all children to thrive and grow. For ongoing information about Gateway booklets as they become available, visit the **Outdoor Hub** at [www.muddyfaces.co.uk](http://www.muddyfaces.co.uk)







Early Childhood  
**Outdoors**

## The National Centre for Outdoor Play, Learning and Wellbeing

Early Childhood Outdoors (ECO) is a social enterprise seeking to increase the amount and quality of outdoor experience for young children across the UK, through collaborative and enabling work with a wide range of development, teaching, research and design organisations providing support in this field, in order to maximise impact.

It aims to connect organisations and individuals, to build support capacity, and to deepen the pedagogy of being, playing and learning outdoors.

**[www.earlychildhoodoutdoors.org](http://www.earlychildhoodoutdoors.org)**



**MUDDYFACES**

## Forest School, Outdoor Play & Learning Resources

Muddy Faces sells Forest School, Outdoor Play & Learning Resources. Our resources have been developed by practitioners to support groups to be outdoors, connecting with nature and its elements.



Our **Outdoor Hub** is a free online resource providing lots of ideas, activities, events and information.

**[www.muddyfaces.co.uk](http://www.muddyfaces.co.uk)**

