

Two Thoughts on The Virtues of Mud

“ Unlike many other media, mud permits us to make mistakes. We can experiment repeatedly, knowing there is a limitless free supply. One of the most basic elements of the earth, mud allows us to develop an appreciation for the environment as we experience its diversity. ”

“The Mud Center: Recapturing Childhood,” by Becky J. Jensen and Julie A. Bullard, published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and distributed by Community Playthings.

“ To dig and delve in nice, clean dirt
Can do a mortal little hurt.”
-John Kendrick Bangs

A nice sentiment, don't you think? I found this in a small book of poems and phrases that sings the praises of gardening. But as educators we know that there is a lot more to the story here. The reality for most children is that they would rather be outside than inside and seem most content when they can dig into things, take things apart, or construct and create real stuff. We understand that the more a kid can roll something around in his or her hands, the more he or she takes in all that thing has to give. It's natural for children to be in this constant state of exploration —it's how they make sense of their world (and) it's how they learn. And the very best kind of learning is what happens between the hands and the brain. ”

Bev Bos's electronic newsletter at www.turnthepage.com

A Tu b'Shevat Mud Table

by FERN AMPER

It was *Tu b'Shevat* and we were doing the traditional planting of parsley to harvest for the *Pesach seder*. Nothing new here, right? Nevertheless, young children love running their fingers through soil, and love gardening, so they were happy.

When everyone who wished to participate finished planting, we took wet sponges and began cleaning up so we could use the table for a game. The more the children sponged, the wetter the table became. As they squeezed the sponges, the excess water began mixing with the soil on the table. My mind was still on cleaning the table, but the children were becoming distracted by the lovely wet mess that was appearing on the surface of the table. “Hey, mud!” screamed one of the children with delight. Almost immediately, they abandoned the sponges and began sliding their hands along the muddy surface of the table. The more they spread the mud, the smoother it became. Very soon the entire surface of the table was coated with a thin layer of slippery mud. As they glided their hands through the mud, they noticed that they were making swirling patterns, not unlike working with fingerpaint. They began creating deliberate designs and mud pictures. They worked individually in the space just in front of them, or teamed up to work on the surface of the whole table. Whenever they wanted to clear the work surface, they just smoothed over the area with their muddy hands and they could begin again. Over and over they made designs. They seemed to love the complete freedom of this process — the ultimate example of “process over product” art experience.

After a while, some children began experimenting, using different parts of their hands: palms, knuckles, fingers, and fingernails. Each one produced a different effect. More precise drawings were now emerging as children pressed with their pointer fingers. Then one of the girls began writing letters. Others then began writing their names, the names of family members, etc.

Interest in the mud table lasted all morning. Some children left the table, and new children joined. A core of the original group of children remained at the table the whole time. I stayed in the area to monitor the activity, but was not so close that I was hindering the exploration. I felt a familiar mix of excitement and trepidation, but I kept this to myself, as usual. I did reach for my digital camera, successfully taking a photo. It was not difficult to photograph the children without disturbing them, because they were deeply engrossed in the sensory stimulation and creative energy of the activity.

Clean-up was not the nightmare you would expect. As children left the table, deciding themselves that they were “done,” they went into the bathroom and cleaned their hands and arms easily with warm soapy water and a sponge, yet another delightful sensory experience. After the table had been open all morning, it was time to clean up and close the centers and head for daily *tefillah*. Believe it or not, I was able to clean the table relatively quickly with a large soapy sponge that I rinsed very frequently. The children were very happy to sponge the chairs clean. The floor and surrounding area were not really affected, since the children were working only with a thin, filmy layer of mud over the table. The muddy

shirts dried during the morning and the children were able to brush off the excess dirt, noting that it had again become soil. It was a living experiment in the effects of water evaporation.

For the rest of the day, I could sense the effects of this experience. The children were delighted with themselves. They had created something great from almost nothing. After all, it had emerged from attempting to clean up from the *Tu b'Shevat* parsley planting. But close contact with any natural element of God's earth (soil, mud, water, seeds, plants, clay, rocks, etc.) are instinctively appealing. The children also seemed pleased that the teachers considered it a legitimate activity, though we had obviously not planned it.

The very next morning, when the children arrived at school, one of the girls yelled, "Hey, let's make a mud table!!!!" ... And that is exactly what they did.

Over the course of a few days, the children began losing interest in making a mud table, and we went on to using the table for other things. However, every time we planted anything, the children ended the activity by making a mud table. They now could make and dismantle a mud table with almost no help from me, but a teacher always remained close by to ensure that this



Students at Congregation Bnai Yesburun Nursery School in Teaneck, NJ, experience the joys of mud.

remained a positive experience and did not disintegrate into a mess or a mud fight. As I look back at it, though, I don't think there ever was any real danger of this, since the legitimate use of the mud table provided more than enough excitement. Children misbehave when they are bored, overly controlled, or understimulated. Open-ended, appealing sensory experiences successfully engage the children for long periods of time, and do not lead to chaos.

Using a photo, I created a documentation board with a brief paragraph explaining the mud table, its origins, and its benefits. I hung a copy on the wall so the children could revisit the excitement of the mud table, and so parents and other visitors could enjoy the fun. I attached a copy to the Friday newsletter, as part of my ongoing effort to educate parents to the importance of child-centered, Judaically integrated education. 🌱

Seeing life through a Jewish lens: What Does Not Belong?

In an early childhood program where Jewish knowledge, Jewish culture, and Jewish values are integrated throughout, children's comments can be quite poignant.

Using a secular set of cards, the *Morah* held up a card and asked, "Which one doesn't belong?"

"The sandwich!" cried Efrat.

All were silent. The *Morah* asked her to explain, and she simply and confidently said (as though it were obvious) that the grape juice and the pretty dress are for *Shabbat*, but not sandwiches!

Just as Efrat knew which picture does not belong, she also knew exactly where she does belong!

A story from Congregation Bnai Yesburun Nursery School in Teaneck, NJ

