



Marvelous mud

by Rusty Keeler

So there I was, minding my own business at the Open Spaces Preschool in Whangarei, New Zealand this past November. I had just come back from spending a glorious three hours with eight preschoolers and two teachers in the “Wild Woods”— a nearby 4-acre plot of ancient forest and meadow where kids get to explore, play, and connect with the natural world, Forest-School style. I was excited from the adventure and had used up just about all the batteries in my camera, when back in the school’s playscape I noticed some interesting happenings.

Their play area, like the school itself, is a great combination of natural materials, plants, sculpture, kid-built structures, and animals (chickens!) One feature I had noticed the day before was a small plot of dirt surrounded by smooth boulders next to the sand play area. Lately I have been adding “dirt digging” areas next to “sand digging” spaces to spice up the fun in my own designs, so I was



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pleased to see their cute little dirt space. How nice. This time, however, when I walked over to the dirt area something very interesting was happening: a teacher and a four-year-old girl had a hose spilling a trickle of water into the dirt. “Delightful,” I thought. “Making a bit of mud.” I watched the fun for a little while then went back to the school to charge my camera and eat a snack.

After enjoying apple wedges and crackers and helping some boys make giant paper airplanes I noticed some commotion coming from the sand/dirt area. I grabbed my camera and trotted over to find . . . the most amazing natural preschool play I had ever seen.

Oh . . . my . . . gosh! I couldn’t believe my eyes and I couldn’t help but smile and laugh. Here were six preschoolers stripped down to tee shirts and underpants slipping, slopping, and sliding in the dirt spot which had now become the most lovely, silky-smooth deep-brown mud ever. That’s right: MUD! Glorious, delicious, delirious mud. Complete with children jumping in it, pouring it, dipping their hands in it, laying in it, and most of all laughing in it. Thank goodness my camera had a little bit of juice in it! With an amused caregiver standing by, these children were freely having the time of

their lives. I honestly have never seen a playscape “feature” so loved and enjoyed in such a full body, full-spirited way.

I suddenly saw playscapes and their features in a new light. We always look to add play elements: A willow hut here, a trike track there, a chicken coop, a hill slide, a sunflower house. But this was totally different. Something more. Something somehow deeper. And more fun! I couldn’t help but giggle and click pictures. This was children literally playing with the earth. Connecting in the most rich, tactile way I can imagine. Can you imagine?

When the kids were ready to move on to something else I followed along to see what would happen next. “How will the school deal with THIS mess?” I wondered. And sure enough, they handled it with simplicity, common sense, and love . . . and a sense of humor — they hosed the kids down. Of course! When the squeals of delight subsided and everybody was hosed to an acceptable level of cleanliness, each child was wrapped tightly up in a cozy, soft towel to dry. And when the children were dry and had clean clothes, shoes and socks back on, they headed over to the snack table for some yummy treats. Life doesn’t get much better than that, does it?

So what is their secret over there in the land of magical natural beauty? Is that something that only New Zealanders are allowed to do? Only for preschools in the southern hemisphere?! Nonsense! As you can imagine there is mud all over the planet and there are children who would love to get muddy all over the planet. All it takes is some creativity, trust, and a spirit of play. The folks at Open Spaces Preschool have lots of extra clothes on hand plus a parent body that knows and honors the benefits of free play — even messy play. I talked with one dad who says he always knows when his daughter has had a lot of fun at school: there is dirt behind her ears!

So how can you try this at your center? What would it take? As far as playscape design goes it's certainly simple. Perhaps you are already blessed with rich soil in your yard that you could expose with some turf or pavement removal. Or maybe you need to get a load of soft fluffy topsoil delivered to make a "mud mound." (Always be sure to pick through the soil and remove any sharp stones or unwanted debris, of course.) You'll also want a water source of some kind to: a) make the mud, and b) clean up muddy kids. It's really just about designating a space, and allowing it to happen. It's about giving yourself and your children permission to do it. To go for it! To do what children have always naturally done. The parents of your children trust you and believe in you. If you see the benefits of mud play, help them see the benefits too. And ask for some extra clothes for those special dirty days!

Studies have recently revealed the positive qualities of earth, soil, and mud. Science says that being barefoot is good for you. Mud has microscopic bacteria that soothes you, relaxes you, and calms you down. So that's why it feels so good to kick off your shoes and socks! Now why not take a deep breath and give it a go? Talk it over with your staff, parents, and children. Gather some extra clothes. Designate an area for mud play. You could have a summertime "Mud Week" like they do in Winnipeg at the Discovery Children's Centre. Or you could schedule your special "mud day" to coincide with the soon-to-be-world-famous "International Mud Day" started in 2009 by spirited folks in Nepal and Australia. You gotta love it. You gotta go for it. Don't you?

World Forum International Mud Day
June 29, 2011 — *do it!*

