



Forest School Wild Play



Outdoor Fun with Earth, Air, Fire & Water



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Authors of the bestselling *Play the Forest School Way*
and *A Year of Forest School*



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CLAY PLAY


Clay has such a wonderful texture. When wet, it feels slightly sticky and dense. Its surface becomes shiny when rubbed, yet when pinched between fingers it feels smooth. It can be squeezed, stretched and moulded into many shapes. By making a 3D model of an object with clay, you get a chance to connect more deeply with it, what it looks like and what the real thing may feel like. If it doesn't work out, it's not a problem: just squidge it back down into a ball and start again. Then – like magic – clay becomes firm to the touch when it dries, and when it's fired in a kiln, it changes into pottery. It can be used to make many things, such as bowls, bricks, tiles and even musical instruments such as clay flutes.

This wonderful activity unleashes the imagination and clears away any doubts about getting our hands muddy. Making clay requires focus, the need to follow instructions and patience – all while learning about the properties of soil, connecting us more deeply to nature. Working with clay is one of our favourite Forest School activities, especially when it comes to sharing and admiring all the marvellous creations afterwards. What will you make?



TRY THIS!

If anyone is nervous about getting muddy hands, we have found it helps if adults get fully involved, so roll up your sleeves and dig in.



LOCATION Any natural area with mud

AGE GROUP 2 years +

LEARNING ABOUT ... ↘ Sensory experiences ↘ physics ↘ soil science
 ↘ creativity ↘ focus ↘ patience ↘ independence
 ↘ nature connections ↘ freedom ↘ tool use
 ↘ fine and gross motor skills ↘ communication

KIT

- Spade to share, or one spade each
- Water (*if digging for clay, enough to dampen the clay if it's a hot, dry day; if making clay, enough to cover half a bucketful of soil and a little extra for sieving and cleaning*)
- Tupperware or similar container
- Clothes that can get muddy



If making clay from soil (can *take at least a day*):

- Two buckets
- Large stick for mixing mud
- Fine-mesh sieve
- Empty clear glass/plastic container such as a 5l (1 gallon) water bottle or wide neck jar
- Old cotton t-shirt, pillow case or other tightly woven material large enough to cover your buckets
- String

OPTIONAL → Blanket or floor tarp to sit on, funnel, trowel if no spade is available

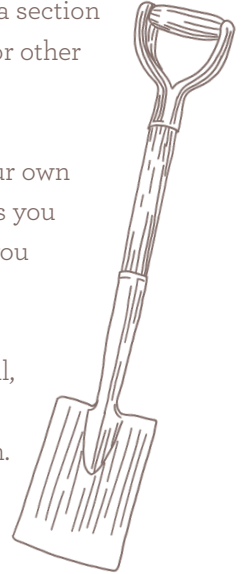




Get ready

Although gardeners would disagree, we are lucky that our Forest School sites in London sit on top of a lot of clay soil, which is made visible by water logging in wet weather and cracking in hot, dry weather. When the soil is wet, the suction created is so great it can pull your shoe clean off – we have seen many boots get stuck this way! If the soil in your local area is also clay rich, go out and find a suitable spot to set up your clay-digging station. Choose a section of bare earth or somewhere that is only covered in grass or other common species.

If your local area is not heavy with clay, you can make your own clay from soil. It is useful to have a water source nearby as you will need it for covering the soil and sieving it. Whether you are digging for clay or making it from soil, make sure you have the landowner's permission to dig, if necessary. To make sure you do not harm any creatures living in the soil, always check through it and remove them if necessary, then return them to the location where the soil came from.



Get set

Digging For Clay

Lift off the topsoil with a spade or similar tool. Push the spade into the ground to a depth of about 10cm (4in) using the ball of your foot. If the ground is covered in grass, cut a circle into the soil to the same depth and then use the spade to lift off your cut section. You will see that this topsoil is a darker, more crumbly soil which will have plant matter in it. Beneath this layer (you may have to dig slightly deeper), you will find clay, which is usually more orange in colour.

To check if you have found clay, dig out a small amount and touch it: it should feel sticky and smooth, not gritty. Roll this little lump into a ball and then into a sausage shape. If it doesn't crack, you have clay.

Making Clay From Soil

Hunt around for a sturdy stick to use later when mixing the mud. Use the spade to dig up enough soil to fill half a bucket. Once done, pour enough water over the soil to cover it (keeping some back for flushing the sieve clean). Now take the stick and mix the mud, making sure that any clumps are broken down. If you know the soil is free from sharp stones, you can always sink your hands in and squeeze out any lumps.

Next, place the fine-mesh sieve over the second bucket and strain the mud mixture through it. It's best to use a fine-meshed sieve as, while clay particles are very small, grains of sand are slightly larger and can make the clay gritty. Use the remaining water to flush as much soil as possible through the sieve. All the stones and plant material left in the sieve can be placed back in the ground from where they came. You can repeat the sieving stage if you feel it will clear out any remaining sand, etc.

Pour the mud mixture into the clear container. If filling a 5l (1 gallon) water bottle, use the funnel when pouring the mixture. There will be fine clay particles in the water; these need time to sink to the bottom of the container, leaving clear water sitting on top of the layer of sediment. This process can take an hour or two - you will see it happening.



Once the clay has separated out, carefully pour off the clear water. Then place your piece of material over a clean bucket and pour the mud mixture into the cloth. Once the mud mixture is lifted in the cloth, the remaining water will drain off underneath into the bucket. The bundle of mud can be squeezed gently to aid draining. When the liquid has been drained off, the clay will be left in the cloth.

Gather up the ends of the cloth and tie them together with string. (Be careful not to let the mixture fall into the bucket.) The bundle now needs to be hung out to dry.

Depending on the water content and the heat of the day, drying can take between three hours to a day. While you're waiting, it could

be fun to play
a few games,
tell stories or
have a picnic.

When your
bundle is finally dry,
take it down from
where it was being
hung so you can
use it while it still
feels moist.



Go!

Grab a chunk of clay and mould it into your chosen shape. You might want to make an animal that's found in your local area. At our Forest School sessions, we see many wonderful clay animals, including snakes, mice with big ears and hedgehogs with sticks for spines. Or you may want to make a bowl, or clay beads to string together (for this to work well, remember to make a hole in the middle of each bead using a stick). The choice is entirely up to the maker! Once complete, leave your creation to dry if you have enough time, or place it in a container to take home.

TRY THIS!
River banks are good places to find clay.

Endings

Now everyone has unleashed their inner potter, talk through all the amazing creations and why they chose these designs. Did everyone like the feel of clay; if yes, why? Did they know that clay has been used by humans since prehistoric times? Can they think of any other uses for it? Clay is really good at retaining fluids, so it is used as a natural barrier in places such as ponds, to keep water in, or around landfill rubbish sites to stop toxins seeping out. Clay tablets were the first known writing medium and were used long before the invention of paper. One of the earliest pieces of pottery to be found is a figure discovered in the Czech Republic that dates back to approximately 29,000 BC – astonishing! Just like us, our prehistoric ancestors also liked to make things with clay.





MUD TROLLS FOREST GAME

Deep in the wood dwells a band of noisy Mud Trolls, who love to live deep underground in burrows like badgers and paint themselves with sticky, cool, wet mud. They like to crash about the woods just for fun and, like most trolls, they have an insatiable appetite and will generally eat anything they can get their hands on. However, they are not the fastest or brightest in the land and pose no harm to humans – but they are very competitive and, like bears, can smell food from far, far away!



This high-energy game will chase distractions away as players must focus on their strategies to make it through the forest. It will bring the forest alive in a fun, new way, bonding groups to each other and to the natural space around them. Role play will unleash a new-found confidence and make for many amusing, lasting memories for both trolls and adventurers.



Get ready

Choose an area of woodland with a lot of cover that can provide many hiding places. Mark the boundary of this area with your flags, cones, ribbon or string.



LOCATION	Woodland
AGE GROUP	5 years +
LEARNING ABOUT ...	↓ Independence ↓ being active ↓ strategic thinking ↓ role play ↓ team building ↓ imagination ↓ nature connections ↓ confidence ↓ focus ↓ self-regulation
NUMBER OF PLAYERS	6 +
KIT	→ Small boundary flags, cones or brightly coloured ribbon or string → A sturdy stick → Water to make mud face paint and to wash after → Dried beans (like chickpeas/garbanzos), acorns or something of your choice that represents food

The size of the area will depend on how big your group is and how thick the woods or bushes are: a larger group or sparser area will need a bigger boundary. Remember to check the play area for any hazards such as broken glass, trip hazards and poisonous plants.

Get set

Choose who will play the Mud Trolls. Ideally they should include adults or older children who are willing to create a fun atmosphere, for example by providing close escapes for the players and acting the part. It's good to have a few Mud Trolls crashing about the area



for dramatic effect but the players should always outnumber the trolls, so a group of 13 could have five trolls and eight players.

When everyone understands the boundary and how to play, the trolls can head off and get dressed for the part. Find a sturdy stick and use it to dig a shallow hole in a patch of bare ground. Pour in the water and mix up some glorious mud. Then the Mud Trolls dip their fingers in it and paint on their troll faces with one or two swipes – or smear mud over their whole face if they want! They may even wish to put some sticks and vegetation in their hair.



Go!

The Mud Trolls can scatter through the forest. Meanwhile, the brave woodland explorers are given four beans as they assemble at the designated starting point. When the game starts, they call out, “Mud Trolls, here we come!” The Mud Trolls can then start to moan and groan and clamber about the woods.

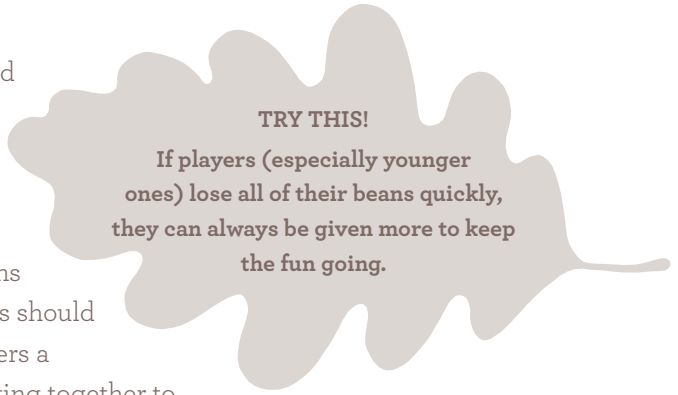


The players should aim to make their way through Mud Troll Forest safely to a chosen exit point. Each time a player is caught by a Mud Troll, they must duly hand over one bean to the troll, then return to the starting point. To avoid confusing the trolls, it’s best for caught players to walk outside the boundary to get back to the start.





How much fun is had will depend on the behaviour of the trolls. Instead of simply trying to collect as many beans as they can, the trolls should aim to give the players a hilarious time. Working together to catch the faster players while letting the more cautious through, or reaching out to catch a player, only to fall over at the last point with a loud cry always work well. Children love chasing and a good light-hearted scare. By keeping it cheerful and lively, not only will the children want to return to the forest soon but you'll also have lots of funny stories to tell.



Endings



You will need no prompting to talk about how everyone did in the game and what happened. Allow time for this as it's a great team-building opportunity. Ask what they liked about the game and if there was anything they would do differently. When things have calmed down, you could ask everyone if they know what a troll is. Trolls originally came from Nordic mythology and Scandinavian folklore and come in many different forms – some giant and strong yet dim-witted, some small like faeries – but all dwell in natural places. Today, trolls appear in many different stories; can they think of any? *Shrek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the tale “Three Billy Goats Gruff” and the *Moomins* are just a few. Whether they are friends or foes, trolls seem here to stay.