

SAND

Sand is a basic, natural, open-ended material that offers limitless play and learning opportunities that children can explore through their senses. Additionally, it helps children connect with nature through discussion about where it can be found in the natural environment.

Damp sand should be available as Core Provision in the main tray. As a sensory play resource, children can explore different textures and consistencies, using their imagination to mould and shape sand into an endless variety of creations.

Naturally, children want to create small world scenarios in the sand. Resources such as animals, trucks, diggers and natural materials encourage narrative play.

Dry sand can be offered as an additional experience. It flows like liquid, offering opportunities for pouring, scooping and sifting. In shallow trays, it can support mark-making and can help children relax and regulate emotions through calming, sensory-rich exploration.



A large outdoor sand tray provides opportunities for a fuller sensory experience. Children can take shoes and socks off to feel the sand between their fingers and toes.

Additionally, it supports development of gross-motor, co-ordination and co-operation skills. The larger scale outdoor sandpit enables other resources to be offered that would be unsuitable for smaller trays, such as large diggers, trucks, winches and pulleys.



CURRICULAR & DEVELOPMENTAL

Health & Wellbeing

Sand play supports fine-motor development and hand-eye coordination as children dig, mark-make, manipulate utensils and clean-up spillages.

Gross-motor skills are strengthened when playing with damp sand, as children fill-up buckets with a spade or scoop sand using a digger. Lifting heavier/larger containers encourages exploration of gross-motor capacity.

Children develop a sense of respect and ownership over the sand area, taking responsibility for cleaning-up.

Literacy

Sand affords children opportunities to mark-make, explore patterns and connect lines, supporting pre-writing skills.

Playing with sand facilitates discussion of real-life and fantasy experiences, including trips to the beach or imagined scenarios.

As children explain what they are doing, discuss materials they are using and describe the properties of sand, they develop new language and vocabulary: wet, cold, damp, soft.

Maths & Numeracy

Sand supports exploration of mathematical concepts surrounding weight and capacity, encouraging the use of mathematical language such as *"heavy/light"* and *"full/empty."*

When moulding sand, children recognise the shapes they make. Making patterns using fingers, tools and resources supports early understanding and identification of pattern.

Children explore number and size, counting the scoops it takes to fill a bucket, or describing creations using language such as *"small, smaller and smallest."*



Other

Children have opportunities to problem solve when they build and create, learning to find solutions when creations collapse, such as adding more water or building stronger foundations. This supports cause and effect thinking and the exploration of scientific concepts.

Sand offers possibilities to explore/identify features of the beach environment: insects, animals, rocks, shells and the shoreline.

Exploring sand's properties supports understanding of how it is formed from rocks, minerals and shells. Children can experiment with how its consistency changes when water is added.



ROLE OF THE ADULT

Sand supports exploration of STEAM concepts, including: estimation, capacity and displacement. Practitioners should recognise the learning potential of sand play and how to provide challenge for children.

Top-up sand levels regularly, ensuring there is plentiful supply, enabling children to explore fully. Sand swept from the floor should be discarded, not returned to the tray.

Sand, both indoors and outdoors, should be covered at the end of each session to prevent development of harmful bacteria.

ROOM STRUCTURE & LAYOUT



Trays should be located on easy-clean flooring, preferably near complementing provision areas like water and art.

Deep rectangular or square box trays allow for unlimited, open-ended exploration. Additionally, a shallow tray with dry sand for mark-making should be accessible.

RESOURCE IDEAS



- Sand trays, both deep and shallow
- Play sand, not builder's sand
- Child-sized dustpan and brushes for cleaning-up
- Containers of various shapes/sizes/materials: metal, wooden, high-quality plastic
- Spoons, spades, rakes, measuring cups, and measuring spoons
- Jugs, buckets, sieves, combs
- Natural loose parts: shells, feathers, sticks, stones
- Imaginative play resources: people, vehicles, animals and dinosaurs
- Mark-making resources, open-ended resources, relevant books and visuals

REFLECTION POINTS

- Do children have the opportunity to play with damp and dry sand both indoors and outdoors?
- Are the resources provided dictating play, or do they support children to be creative? Whilst shells, logs and open-ended resources support children to be imaginative, plastic moulds are limiting. For example, a mould of the letter 'R' can only represent that letter.
- Is there shared understanding around how to support children to use the area respectfully? How can staff achieve the balance of not limiting the number of children using the space at any one time, whilst remaining mindful of individual children's needs?

