

Sensory Play and Crafts

What is sensory play?

Sensory play and making crafts are a popular and valuable component of childcare programs. Children use sensory items and crafts to enhance their sense of touch, sight, taste, smell, and hearing through hands-on play with different objects. Some items, such as potting soil, may be fine for use in a supervised activity, but are not suitable for group play where several children are handling the same object or material with less supervision.

Children may have specific sensitivities or allergies to certain products or product components. Some items may not be appropriate for direct skin contact and may cause skin reactions or chemical burns if mishandled (e.g., fertilizer in potting soil). Some products may provide an ideal breeding ground for harmful bacteria.

What are the risks?

Some sensory play and craft items are potentially hazardous, and can enter the body through different ways:

- **Inhalation** – The child breathes in the product in the form of vapor or dust (e.g., talcum powder)
- **Absorption** – The product enters the body via a break in the skin (such as a cut or scrape). Some products are able to be absorbed directly through the skin (e.g., formaldehyde from wood chips).
- **Ingestion** – The child ingests the product by placing hands in the mouth after handling the object (e.g., bird seed).

How do you choose safe products?

When deciding which sensory play or craft items to use in your facility or classroom, you should:

- Always read product labels and warnings.
- Avoid products that are labeled as potentially toxic and those that are not recommended for use by or near children.
- Avoid products that require special handling (e.g., if labels indicate that gloves or other protective equipment should be worn to avoid inhalation, absorption or ingestion).
- **Keep packaging on hand for reference.**

Contact Public Health if you are unsure which products or uses are acceptable.

Craft and Sensory Play Items to Avoid

Craft item	Rationale	Alternatives	When to replace
Playdough with fruit-flavoured gelatin or fruit-scented dye.	Children may be more likely to eat the playdough. They could get sick.	Unscented playdough	At least weekly (homemade playdough) and when visibly contaminated.
Styrofoam chips/shells	Could be a choking hazard.	None	n/a
Used egg cartons, toilet paper rolls, and meat trays	Cannot be cleaned and disinfected. Not intended for reuse. Can contain <i>Salmonella</i> and <i>E.coli</i> bacteria.	Use new, unused egg cartons and meat trays. Use paper towel rolls or gift wrap rolls.	n/a
Instant papier mâché	Can create inhalable dust and may contain lead or asbestos.	Make papier mâché using newspaper and white paste.	n/a
Powdered tempura paint	Can create inhalable dust and may contain toxic pigments.	Liquid tempura paints.	n/a
Pastels, chalk, or dry markers	May create inhalable dust.	Oil pastels, crayons, or dustless chalk.	n/a
Glues and adhesives (epoxy, instant glue, rubber-cement glue)	Emit toxic fumes that can be inhaled.	Use non-toxic, water-based products only.	n/a
Permanent felt-tip markers	May contain toxic solvents.	Use non-toxic, water-based markers only.	n/a
Sensory play item	Rationale	Alternatives	When to replace
Wood chips (not recommended)	Often made from plywood and particle board. May contain formaldehyde which is poisonous.	Sandpaper, cloth pom-poms, felt shapes.	At least weekly and when necessary (e.g., if product is visibly damaged or broken)*
Feathers, pine cones, leaves, sticks, seeds, seed pods (not recommended)	Children may have environmental allergies. Cannot be cleaned and disinfected.	Feathers and pine cones purchased from a craft supply store.	At least weekly and when necessary (e.g., if product is visibly damaged or broken)*
Potting soil (not recommended)	May contain fertilizer and other toxic chemicals.	Play sand.	Play sand – replace bi-weekly*
Bird seed, talcum powder, sawdust, and wood shavings (not recommended)	May create inhalable dust. May contain toxic materials.	Cleanable plastic aquarium rocks, play sand.	Clean and disinfect reusable sensory items weekly.

* Dispose of these items during periods of increased illness