

Outlets for Tension

Strong feelings are a normal part of human living, but the way in which feelings may be expressed and the way tensions may be released must be learned by children within their own culture. Children should be directed towards outlets when tensions seem ready to overwhelm them. Major outlet avenues are water/mess, rhythmic and vigorous movement, words and dramatic play.

Water and Mess

This is highly suitable for younger children and those with poor self control. Water and messy play is soothing because of the fluid movement of the medium, and because it can be used roughly without being destroyed. Fastidious children may reject messy play, but accept water (or its winter alternatives of pouring bulk unsprayed grain in a water tray).

Water Tray

Moving hands, or arms if necessary, in a deep tray of water, can offer tension release. For some children a depth of more than 25cm seems for this purpose, as strong colour in the water can affect the moods of some children.

Water Painting

Water painting with big flat brushes and clear water suits all ages and types as it is very easy and safe, has rhythmic free flow and uses large arm muscles.

Finger Painting

Finger Painting with thick cornflour or paste or alternative such as whipped warm soap flakes, offer release if the child feels uninhibited about the 'mess' involved. Spoons or spatulas can be used by a hesitant child.

Sand and Mud

Moulding and moving sand, earth and mud with the hands, particularly when permission to get really dirty is possible, gives many children great emotional satisfaction and release of tension. Although some children enjoy using arm strength on children's long shovels, boards, pipes and heavy toy vehicles, it is suggested that those children with tension problem be restricted access to these for the safety of others, unless strict adult supervision is available

Clay

Clay without tools is an excellent release form as it combines very firm use of muscles with a creative or manipulative medium. For the fastidious child, other forms of free unstructured art, such as large easel painting, big crayon drawing, free collage with large materials, may be more readily accepted, and offer moderate release.

Movement

Vigorous movement particularly suits strong active children who have had little need to control their activity prior to preschool entry, but smooth rhythmic movements have a more soothing quality, suiting most children.

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Swings

The smooth floating movement of a swing has an almost hypnotic effect on some children, and promotes a more tranquil mood. It is important that Preschool has more than one swing, as more than one child may need this outlet at one time, and swing pairs permit social interaction.

Bouncing

Bouncing equipment offers a similar release, combined with a strong use of muscles, e.g. Bouncing on a giant inflated inner tube or on a large, thick mattress or jogging on a mini sports trampoline.

Suspended Balls

Hitting suspended balls or bouncing balls have a similar effect for some children. Free kicking a large ball offers the same strong release as a punching bag, but directs children away from a habitual use of fists to release anger.

Hammering

Hammering wood is tension releasing, but requires close supervision if a child is very tense. Younger children who find this too difficult may be able to use toddler hammer-and-peg sets. This, however, requires more control than an angry child may curb.

Unstructured Movement

The freedom of vigorous running, jumping, rolling down slopes, twirling around, and other unstructured movement in grassed playground areas with open space is very releasing. If grass is short and soft, free of prickles, children have the freedom of being without shoes, which increases the effect. For the child who is a little inhibited, having props such as a kite, coloured streamers, a ball on elastic, or some dress-up clothes can help. Free vigorous movement can, however, over-excite some children, particularly if it is windy weather. (Note that a marked increase in speed and noise level or an increase in influence on other children i.e, Spreading excitement are indicators which warn of over stimulation).

Movement to Music

Structured and free dance movement activities to music, which allow vigorous rhythmic or smooth flowing movements, offer tension release. The release is often helped by contrasting movements so that tension/ relaxation is achieved (e.g. full muscle tension followed by body flopping). For the child who is inhibited, structured activities or the use of props such as skirts, hats, or scarves, can be a help in letting themselves “flow” with the music without fear of others watching. It is important to ensure that free dance activities do not utilise props and music suited only to the more feminine children. Capes, animal fabrics, horse’s reins etc and music with strong impact (e.g. “In the Hall of the Mountain King” from “Peer Gynt”) may encourage wider participation.

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Music

For the very tense child, lying down quietly listening to soothing music or sitting swaying to flowing music is therapeutic. These may be useful when children have become overstimulated by vigorous movement or loud noise, and require a complete change of pace to relax. Quiet smooth music, or soothing songs are suitable (e.g. “Music for Rest and Relaxation”, “Spin Spider Spin”), and are helpful at preschool rest time. Playing percussion instruments can be releasing for some children because of the vigorous arm action and strong rhythms, but very loud percussion can be overstimulating for many children.

Use of Verbal Language

While children are increasingly able to use words as outlets as they mature and develop skill in language, nonverbal forms of tension release are always of immense value in preschools because many children revert to less mature behaviour under stress, and because many lack the language ability to express feelings in words. Music and stories can act as a transition between nonverbal and verbal forms of tension release.

Songs

Using both music and words (also involving actions and rhythmic repetitions for younger children with less language ability), songs give release through words, rhythm and movement. Songs for tension release can include: “Clap Clap your Hands” (vigorous arm and body actions) “Little Red Wagon” (strong rhythm and repetitive words) “Pigeon House” (smooth flowing softness) “When Someone Smiles at Me” (words expressing feelings). Songs with vigorous actions, if sung very loudly, can be over-exciting for some children, so these songs should be alternated with quiet songs. Spontaneous singing while playing can be used in conjunction with individual activity.

Stories

Some children’s stories reflect the real feelings of children (e.g. jealousy of a new baby, anger at a friend, fear in the night). They name these feelings, demonstrate acceptance and show constructive ways to resolve situations, avoiding both unrealistic sweetness and inappropriate harshness. Some examples are:

“The Dentist”, “The Doctor” (Rockwell) “Thomas Goes to the Doctor”, “Emma’s Baby Brother” (Worde) “The Friend”, “The Blanket” (Burningham) “Are You My Mother?” (Eastman) “Bedtime for Frances” (Hoban) “Dogger” (Hughes) “Where the Wild Things Are” (Sendak) “Big Sister and Little Sister” (Zotlow). Some stories present a description of feelings (e.g. “Feelings” by Dunn), or present difficult life situations (e.g. “Lifetimes” on death, “Don’t Forget Tom” on retardation “Clare and Emma” on deafness, and “I’m Adopted” by Ingpen).

Naming Feelings

Adult naming of feelings for children during play situations, followed by help in resolving conflicts, gives both encouragement and an adult example of using words to cope with feelings.

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Dramatic Play

With time and freedom from unnecessary interference, children will play out what is important to them, revealing feelings and interpretations of situations, reliving and clarifying experiences and reducing anxiety by draining off strong feelings. Dramatic play provides an avenue for experimenting with ideas about episodes; situations and relationships, so that many things are learned. With an allowance of time for sustained play in which a theme can be worked through, and careful forward planning by the teacher (e.g. materials, space, individual children), only casual, unobtrusive supervision is needed. Direction of dramatic play is not required, but problems can be avoided and materials added as required.

Both indoor and outdoor dramatic play require a focus area (e.g. home corner or block area indoors, a large construction or enclosed/ covered area outdoors) where children can feel free to develop their dramas and where materials suggesting forms of dramatic play can be situated. Both areas require some of these materials, but those suggesting active or noisy play may be better situated outdoors. Placing home play materials near block corner, or in an outdoor area, may evoke changed forms of play and providing dramatic play materials to construction of various sorts may greatly extend that play.

Props

Props are the materials that suggest roles or situations to play out, or help children move more easily into dramatic expression. Home play materials, general adult clothing, multipurpose materials like boxes and cloth should always be available. However, if play becomes stale and fails to develop (e.g. if dramatic play centres around unnecessarily aggressive play beyond a point where it could be used as a helpful outlet) or if special role interests arise, special prop boxes can be introduced.

Home Play Materials

These can include: dolls, child-sized home furnishings such as beds, stove, cupboards; child-sized equipment including plastic crockery, discarded kitchen utensils such as potato mashers and wooden spoons, cooking pots and pans, short-handled brooms; empty plastic containers and food packets. The realistic quality of this play is increased by having equipment such as beds, large and strong enough for the child to play roles himself instead of relying solely on dolls. Group play can be encouraged by having pairs of pieces of equipment such as beds, chairs, prams and telephones. A close check should be kept on these materials and damaged items discarded promptly.

Adult Clothing

This can include both male and female clothing of child-wearing size, with easy fasteners or of pull-on type to allow for independent dressing up. Hats and pieces of cloth are useful. For reasons of safety, ties should be pre-knotted securely, so tightening is not possible; skirts and trousers need shortening, and shoes should be of a low-heeled type.

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Multipurpose Materials

These can include boxes, rope, Hessian, cloth pieces, barrels, lengths of hose, cardboard cartons and basic wheeled vehicles such as pull-along carts and other things that can be used in many different ways to facilitate dramatic play according to the imagination of the children.

Special Role Materials

These can include special prop boxes containing specialised items to foster a specific type of role play. These should be real things from the adult world where possible, and it is the little items that help make the difference. Some roles for which prop boxes could be compiled include: nurse/doctor, miner, sailor, farmer, astronaut, office worker, plumber, mechanic, electrician, hairdresser, post office worker, painter, police officer, grocer, fire fighter and other community occupations. Since there are separate boxes for various roles, they can be made easily identifiable to the children by appropriate pictures of occupations and perhaps a label could also be added. Small cardboard cartons with hand grips (e.g. apple cartons), painted or wallpaper-covered, are light and durable enough as containers.

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