

Are Your Roots in the Mud?

by Sara Garner, Mary Elizabeth Ambery and Sharon J. Dees



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numerous roles educating young children, families and child development practitioners in regional and national settings. She is a frequent presenter at professional conferences in the areas of leadership, pre-K curriculum, and nature literacy. In 2015, she participated in a study tour of the nature kindergarten in Scotland, hosted by Claire Warden. Her research interests include the impact of poverty on preschools, the process of observation and re-connecting children and families to nature.

The roots of International Mud Day are anything but muddy. Gillian McAuliffe, pedagogista and founder of Bold Park Community School in Perth, Australia, planted a seed that sprouts every year on June 29 into global, wonder-filled celebrations of playing in the mud.

The seemingly universal fondness for Mud Day, though, reaches beyond the outward joys of muddy feet, friendships and photos. All the rich delights of what-ifs and wows can be translated into learning. So, what do you want to know? What do your children want to know? When and how will you celebrate International Mud Day?

The idea of International Mud Day was inspired by a thoughtful conversation between two people who may have never met had they not attended the World Forum for Early Childhood Care and Education in Belfast, Ireland, and joined the Nature Action Collaborative for Children. NACC was formed to connect a variety of professionals, from landscape designers to early childhood specialists, from all over the world, with one primary belief—all children have the right to be connected to the natural world.

One year later, in 2010, one of those individuals, Bishnu Bhatta from Nepal,

presented their idea at Lied Lodge & Conference Center in Nebraska City, Nebraska, where Sara Garner was attending her first NACC conference with the director of our university lab school.

Mud in Missouri—Sara's Inspiration

During the NAAC keynote session, Bishnu shared photos of a very large mud pit filled with lots of muddy children. He explained how he overcame the barrier of cleanliness expectations in his country, the lack of “disposable” clothing, limited cleaning supplies and poor soil, and encouraged his community to play in the mud. He shared the successes of their first magnificent Mud Day and encouraged children from all over the world to come together on one day, with one common theme: MUD. From that moment, I was already planning our first mud day for June 29th of the following year. What better way to be part of something worldwide, bringing all cultures together without barriers?

I began to research. Mud glistened in health and wellness, shimmered in learning opportunities and bubbled with family bonding. Mud was everywhere.



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Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators. She has an interest in play research and advocates for play-based learning in the classroom.

I found that the benefits of mud are far reaching; mud is even considered to have healing properties. Mud naturally contains trace elements of minerals that can draw toxins from the body and microscopic bacteria that increases serotonin. Wet mud increases the immune's system's ability to fight disease. Mud can be therapeutic for the skin, muscles, joints, and mind as it detoxifies and works as an anti-inflammatory agent. Also, mud is soothing, and the "feel good" release allows an increase in cognitive capacity. Playing in mud fosters creative thinking.

Muddy Frameworks

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky stated, "In play, the child is always behaving

beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in play he is, as it were, a head above himself. Play contains, in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his usual level." Play presents a perfect opportunity to make informal observations and assessments of children's skills and abilities.

As teachers, how do we know what we are seeing? Standards help to define developmental pathways and observational markers. Although there are many published standards of practice, the authors chose to use Head Start indicators because they are founded in research, widely used, and easy to recognize. Originally published in 1975

with the latest revision in 2016, these standards have been formed by decades of educational history and practice. However, each reader should apply standards (state, Creative Curriculum, High Scope, and so on) that make sense for interpreting the play and learning of the children in their setting. Assessments that include photographs, visual displays, and a teacher's narrative create powerful documentation of a child's development and learning.

Below is a picture from our Mud Day. In our own descriptive words, we labeled what we saw. Then, we identified Head Start Frameworks Indicators to help define our observations.



The "I see ..." statements reflect the authors' spontaneous interpretations of this child's focus, use of tools, and mud exploration. Each Head Start Frameworks Indicator affirms a developmental or learning competency. What achievements should we expect and how can we support this child's progress?

The child pictured is 23 months and already reflecting behavior of 36-month-old indicators. For example, “I see attention” is matched to a 36-month-old Head Start indicator—“Maintains focus and attention on a simple task or activity for short periods of time.” Yet, he demonstrated accomplishments of the 60-month-old indicator—“Maintains focus on activities for extended periods of time,” as he stayed in the mud pit for nearly 45 minutes. Clearly, a child may display behavior that precedes or follows age-level indicators. If the adult’s role is to enable the child to scaffold learning, to progress from one indicator level to the next, then the question to ask is, “What’s next?”

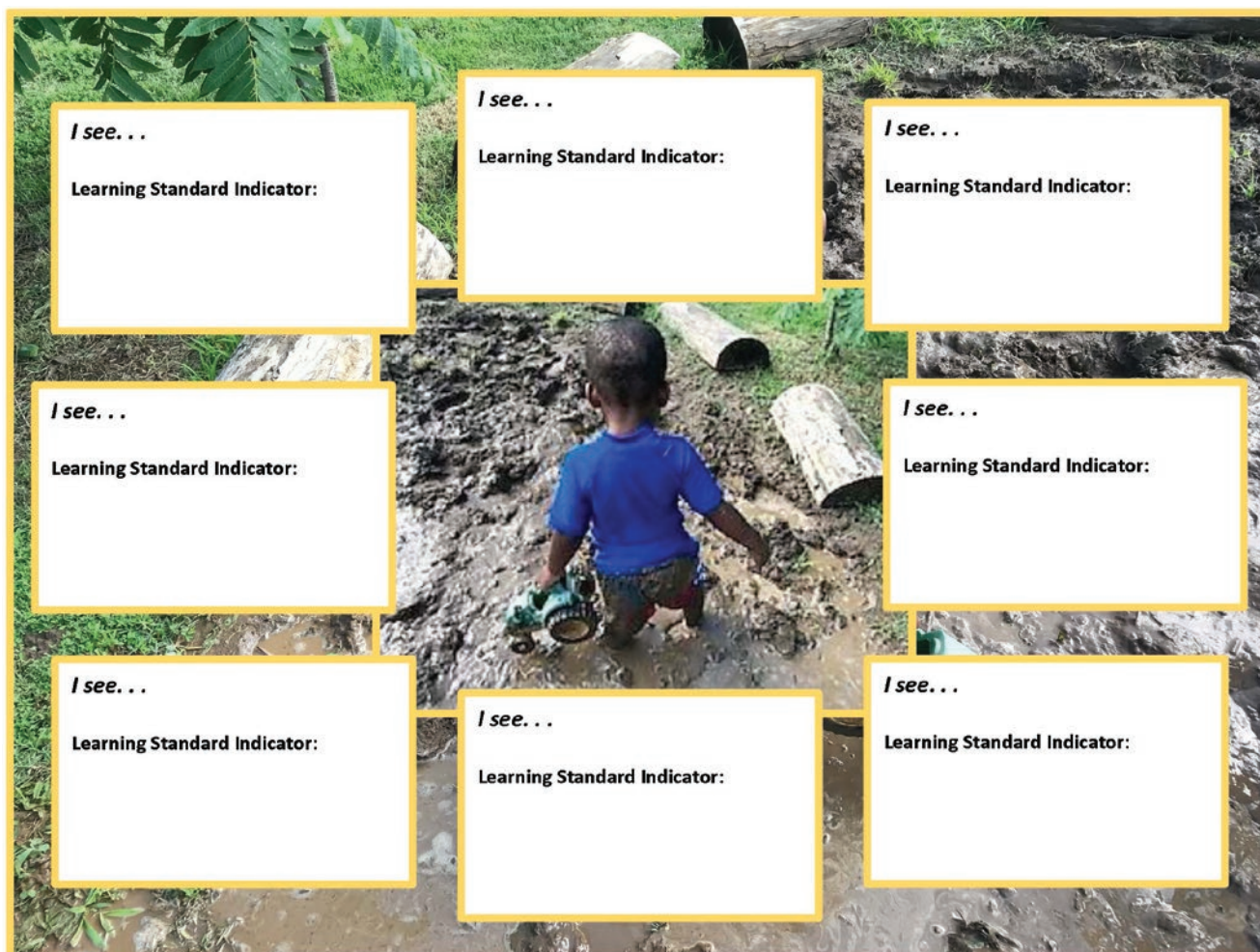
Making Connections

Below is a different picture from our Mud Day with partially blank assessment blocks. What do you see? In your own descriptive words, finish each “I see ...” statement. Next, what is this child learning about and learning to do? Which learning standards will capture the essence of this child’s development? Identify either Head Start Frameworks Indicators or other standards to help define this child’s status.

Let’s Get Muddy

Careful planning depends on important considerations before digging in. Timing is something to consider. Geographically

speaking, it is summer time on June 29. The time of day should be near the beginning or end of the children’s day, but remember that mud gets very hot as the day progresses. The invitation list is equally important. Decide if this is a center/school event or a community event or a family-centered gathering. There can be an overriding cultural preference for cleanliness, so buy-in from your families and staff is critical. Implement as you can. Maybe your location starts indoors with small tubs of mud on tables or goes full blown outdoor mud pit, if you have the water source. Advertise the event and get ready to get muddy!



What do you see happening in this picture? Compare ideas with a colleague. Are your perceptions different? Then, complete the “I see ...” statements with your own words and match them with standards from your own experience. What else would you want to know about this child to enable the next achievements?

Digging into Preparation

Because Piaget believed “Children require long, uninterrupted periods of play and exploration,” we should invest the time to prepare engaging environments for them.

One Week before Mud Day:

- Children prepare for Mud Day by making clean mud (grated ivory soap, single ply toilet paper squares, enough warm water to make a mush).
- Children plan Mud Day supper menu.
- Prepare outdoor area to include sensory table, art area, etc.

Two Days before Mud Day:

- Make dirt cake with children (cookies, butter, cream cheese, cool whip, chocolate pudding and milk).
- Prepare the mud pit (clean soil, shovel, trickle water; go out every couple of hours and squish).

Day of Mud Day:

- Set out sprinkler(s) on a tarp.
- Make a water hose available for washing.
- Have mud at the art easel.
- The mud pit and sand pit need trucks, kitchen utensils, buckets and scoops.
- Put mud in a deep rubber container, big enough for children to fit into.
- Put clean mud in the sensory table.
- Set out trikes, wood and blocks for children who are intimidated by the mud.
- Have towels and clean clothes for children.
- Designate a cook for food prep and serving children and families.

Caked with Mud

What we learned is that some families will love to participate, while others are hesitant at first. Few parents will want wet, muddy children in their vehicles. Offering Mud Day from 9-11 a.m. worked best for us. This way, all children could participate and there were no conflicts with nap time or early pick-ups. Families were invited to stay and watch or participate. We encouraged the children to end their play in the sprinkler. Then, we showered them with the water hose and used towels to dry them. We then took them indoors to change into clean clothes and feed them lunch. The children napped well!

We even took our infants outdoors for the Mud Day experience. Very young infants can put their hands and feet in a small bowl of mud. Infants that can sit up are put closer to a log with mud or positioned next to the sand pit. If they put mud in their mouth, they usually stop; there is nothing harmful about eating a small amount.

If you choose to host the event after regular care hours, food is a welcome addition. We provided a BBQ and allowed families and children to change in our indoor restrooms. (Note: This left a lot of clean up for our staff.)

Children must use their physical skills to balance in the mud and manipulate the weight of the muddy clothes. Children use differing language terms such as “slick,” “water nozzle,” “slippery.” Children use their cognitive skills in problem-solving their muddy navigation. Moving in the mud is progressively difficult with increased mud depth and with shoes coming off their feet. Socially, children share space with friends, work together, take turns with the water and share equipment and play props. We believe a great milestone is when children emotionally overcome a fear. It may be the fear of mud, of falling, or even the sensory feeling of the unknown.

From this, families save stories, and they still share these stories with Sara nearly a decade after her program began celebrating Mud Day. That is when we know Mud Day was the best day invented.

Jump in!

Celebrating Mud Day on any day of the year is play-based education in action. It is an adventure. The natural mud environment encourages children to try out a bonanza of squish or splat explorations and challenges. Mud Day opens children to pushing limits, scaffolding skills and sharpening awareness of the world around them.

Likewise, it opens educators to unique opportunities to assess children’s play and development, as well as connecting observations to learning standards. Think and be challenged by Jean Piaget’s words, “How can we, with our adult minds, know what will be interesting? If you follow the child you can find out something new.”

Mud Day 2019 is coming! Embrace the fears you may have about mud and its reputation—best “root” forward, go with children, go bravely into the mud!

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