



Bridging Our Communities With Clay

Mary Ann Biermeier and Sabrina Ball

A mosaic tile project

Located in Scottsdale, Arizona, Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool offers an educational program that uses the arts as a tool for cognitive, language, and social learning. With funding from the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the preschool launched The Tallulah Project. This Pinnacle Church community project is designed to transform

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the exterior walkways of the school by creating a mural of mosaic tiles. The community believes that when we provide interesting and beautiful spaces for children to learn, we show them that they are important to us.

Tallulah is Choctaw for *running water*. The murals depict Arizona's landscapes and how they are shaped by water. A large mosaic tree greets families when they enter the school. Each leaf carries the name of a child, parent, grandparent, or even a family pet. Etched into the tree trunk are character traits, such as compassion, generosity, and kindness, that we seek to develop in the children and in their lives.

Tiles are made in the classrooms, the art studio, and at family clay workshops. A volunteer parent committee

provides assistance at the workshops, glazing and placing the tiles on the walls. Visitors to the preschool are often surprised that the tiles are made by children, parent volunteers, and teachers because of the high quality of the mosaic. The project has brought together families and classrooms, connecting the community as the people create something beautiful and long lasting.

What do children learn through clay?

Clay is an organic material that is naturally appealing to children and adults. Children love to touch, squeeze, pinch, mold, and create with clay. After being introduced through The Tallulah Project, clay became a learning center in the classrooms. What makes clay so

inviting? Is it the supple and malleable texture? The ease with which children can smash it down and start over? Yes—and so much more.

As children work with clay, they can learn and practice new skills.

- Social and language skills grow when children talk about what they are creating. They can gain conversational and storytelling skills. Clay can also be a way for children to express what is happening in their lives.



- Critical thinking skills are supported as children explore clay. They observe, experiment, and learn from error and repetition. Clay can encourage children's problem-solving skills when they try to create new designs or structures.
- Fine motor skills develop and expand. Squeezing, pinching, poking, and prodding builds muscles in preschoolers' hands and fingers.
- Science understanding increases from playing with clay. Children learn that clay is a natural material composed of soil and water. When they add water, the clay becomes soft and sticky. They learn that clay is pliable enough to connect arms to a clay figure or turn a coil into a circular pot.

Clay, wire, paints, pencils, pens, markers, and woodworking materials help teachers bring learning to life through hands-on activities. The teachers give the children time, often over many days, to explore and create using clay. Most preschoolers begin by



making basic shapes, such as balls and coils, and use them to build animals, people, or simple objects. With increased time and experience, children begin to focus on making their creations look realistic. They create more elaborate structures, such as houses, animals, people with arms and legs, and objects with enhanced details.

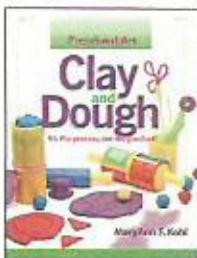
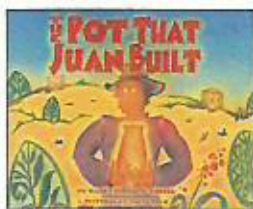


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To support children's explorations and language development, the teachers often use open-ended and descriptive comments about what they observe:

- *I see you used balls to make the caterpillar. How did you get the balls to stick together?*
- *You made a house! What details could you add?*
- *I see you carefully smoothed the joints. This will help your sculpture last for a long time.*

Clay play gives children opportunities to learn problem-solving skills. They learn to be respectful of tools and materials. Given the opportunity to continue their work, children often think more deeply about what they are creating and strive for quality and uniqueness. **TYC**



Books about clay

For children

The Pot That Juan Built, by Nancy Andrews-Goebel. Illus. by David Díaz. 2002. Lee & Low.

When Clay Sings, by Byrd Baylor. Illus. by Tom Bahti. 1987. Aladdin.

The Pottery Place, by Gail Gibbons. 1987. Harcourt.

The Mud Family, by Betsy James. Illus. by Paul Morin. 1998. Oxford University Press.

For teachers

I Am Clay: The Power of Natural Clay in Early Childhood Development. DVD. 2006. K-Play. Available from NAEYC.

30 Fun Ways to Learn With Clay and Squishy Stuff, by Lorraine Frankish. 2011. Gryphon House.

Preschool Art: Clay and Dough—It's the Process, Not the Product, by MaryAnn F. Kohl. 2001. Gryphon House.

Poking, Pinching, & Pretending: Documenting Toddlers' Explorations With Clay, by Dee Smith and Jeanne Goldhaber. 2004. Redleaf.

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