

Simple pleasures in the lives of under-fives.

What are your memories of simple pleasures when you were a child? One of my earliest memories is playing sweet shops with 'dolly mixtures' and weighing them out on 'real' balancing scales when I was ill with measles and confined to bed for three weeks.

Watching two young children busily building sandcastles with their grandma and digging for worms on a beach in South West France on a recent holiday, I thought how amazing it is, that no matter where you go, small children always seem to be happiest enjoying the simple pleasures in life. I wondered how many worms these children had found and whether they had discovered cockles or razor shells buried under the sand. I couldn't resist going to have a look, remembering the times when my children were small and we had had lots of fun in rock pools, searching for shrimps, prawns and baby crabs and collecting mussels and winkles from the rocks to be cooked for supper.

The tide was out and there was miles of sand as far as the eye could see. When I finally reached the grandma, she recounted how she used to bring her own children to this same beach and said what a joy it was to return with her grandchildren. Dressed up warmly as it was Autumn and with their wellies cast aside, preferring to feel the sand on their feet, they busied themselves happily digging and making more and more sandcastles. "Sand and water", said this grandma, "will keep them happily and busily occupied all day. We'll take back a collection of shells and stones and they will play with them for hours."

I am sure she was right. Although the world for little ones is continually changing and there is now an enormous range of exciting books, toys and electronic games for them, the fundamentals remain the same: little children enjoy many of the same simple pleasures as we did when we were young.

The children in my nursery school love playing with pebbles and shells. They will use them for all sorts of things such as counting, making patterns, sorting by colour, shape and size and using them for mark making, accessing the six areas of learning.

Young children are fascinated by nature and the world around them. You can have wonderful walks together along the beach or through the woods. One parent recently told me that she will never forget the pleasure of going for a walk with her four year old and having time to talk and listen to her, seeing the natural world through the eyes of her child.

We are very fortunate to have many farms locally where you can see lots of animals in their natural habitat. Look in this magazine to find out more and also check out the diary of events which will suggest all sorts of interesting venues for family outings. We always end our school year with an outing to a local zoo and it is a great highlight for parents and children alike. The children squeal with delight as they watch the penguins being fed and are fascinated as they watch the monkeys swinging from branch to branch.

A ride on a train is a treat too and we are very lucky to have steam railways close by. One child, whose parents booked his third birthday party on a train, said how wonderful it was to be able to join in and share the children's excitement. We recently took the children on a bus. That was fun too and something some of them had never done before. We are going to try to use this mode of transport more often as it is a brilliant way to access local amenities. I still enjoy sitting on the top of a London bus!

At home a ball or balloon provides endless hours of fun. A dressing-up box is always a hit too. Amazing outfits abound in the shops and on the internet, but hats, helmets, scarves and shawls, even old net curtains and lengths of material also allow the children to be very creative and build dens as they enact role-play games. With musical instruments mixed in as well, the children will soon be organising a concert and you can join in with their favourite Nursery Rhymes and action songs.

What about art and craft? Painting can be done outside if you'd rather not have paint in the kitchen. We often use just water with a paintbrush outside for painting on the patio and the children have fun writing their name and making shapes. Create a puppet out of a wooden spoon, a paper bag or felt, using buttons for nose and eyes or pieces of material. Cutting, tearing and sticking is always good too, but something that keeps the children happily engrossed for hours on end is playdough. Children love playing with it, rolling it out and making shapes. A parent said recently that she had no idea that you could make it yourself. So here, for anybody that doesn't already know how to make it, is the playdough recipe that we use. If you have another recipe that works well or even better please let me know.

Playdough is very versatile and you can colour it with food colouring and even add flavouring such as peppermint to make it 'smelly.' Just check that your children understand that it's not good to eat.

2 cups of plain flour
1 cup of salt
2 teaspoons of cream of tartar

2 tablespoons of cooking oil
2 cups of water and colouring/ flavouring

Mix all the ingredients in a saucepan over a medium heat and stir with a wooden spoon. This is hard work! When it comes away from the sides of the saucepan and makes a ball, take it off the heat and knead it until it is cool. Store the playdough in an airtight container in the fridge and it should last for several weeks.

Have fun!