

A parent's guide to... treasure baskets

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If your baby is in a nursery or goes to a childminder, you may one day find them sitting next to a low basket filled with household items and some odds and ends. You may also spot that the adults are not chatting to your child, but sitting and watching. If you were to enquire what was happening, you might well be told that treasure basket play is under way. So, what is treasure basket play and how might it help your baby?

A good starting point is to understand that for centuries, babies and young children were not given toys to play with. The best they could hope for were things that were lying on the floor or household objects that might have been passed to them. Toys are a recent invention, and while they undoubtedly have their uses, the roots of treasure basket play are to be found in these earlier times.

It was noted that when babies were given household and other objects made from natural materials, they concentrated for long periods and seemed interested in handling and exploring them. When objects were combined and offered to babies in a low basket, they suddenly had a rich play experience. Treasure

baskets, the concept pioneered by Elinor Goldschmied, found their way into nurseries. Today commercially-produced treasure baskets can be bought, but many practitioners build up their own collection of objects.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN A TREASURE BASKET

Treasure baskets may vary enormously from setting to setting. The only constant is that the objects themselves should be either natural objects or items made from natural materials, which seem to give babies more sensory feedback than plastic items and so are of more interest to them. There should also be sufficient items for babies to be able to explore a range of different shapes, sizes and textures.

Having plenty of objects also means that there are more opportunities for babies to make connections between the different objects. You might spot your baby dropping a metal scoop into a tin and grinning with delight at the ringing metallic sound.

Babies, just like adults, can become bored with the familiar, so it is good practice for some of the objects in the treasure basket to be taken out from time to time and replaced with others. This rotation gives

babies new opportunities to create some interesting combinations. They may drop a newly arrived lemon into a metal bowl, or bang together two tins.

Objects that you could find in a treasure basket might be:
 ✓ a leather purse ✓ firm fruit and vegetables, for example, an orange, lemon or aubergine
 ✓ spoons of different sizes and materials, such as metal, wooden and horn
 ✓ metal tins of different sizes, for example, biscuit and cake tins ✓ cardboard tubes ✓ scarves ✓
 ✓ rubber plug ✓ ball of wool or string ✓ natural sponge ✓ hand whisk ✓ chamois leather ✓ shells.

BENEFITS OF TREASURE BASKET PLAY

One of the most striking things about watching babies engaged in treasure basket play is their level of concentration. They often spend a long time mouthing and touching an object that appeals to them. It is also thought that because babies are 'in charge', they can gain feelings of independence and mastery. This will ultimately support children's self-esteem.

Treasure baskets have their roots in the days before all children had toys

In addition, the play will help babies in developing hand-eye co-ordination and also learning about shape, size and depth.

ROLE OF THE ADULTS

Most of the time, you would expect the adults caring for a child to talk and play with them. But this is not quite the case with treasure basket play. The idea is for the adult to step back so that the baby takes the lead. This approach means that the baby's thoughts and play are



CASE STUDY

'Mia is seven months old. I found out about treasure basket play at a drop-in session at my local children's centre. At first, I have to admit that I was quite sceptical about whether my daughter would be interested in playing with the bits in the basket, and I sat on the floor next to her. Immediately, her hand shot out to pull out a shiny lid of a small biscuit tin. She waved it around before bringing it close to her face. Then it caught the light and she started to look more closely at it. It acted as a mirror and she was fascinated.'

'After a few minutes, she dropped it on the floor, and reached into the basket and took out a wooden nailbrush.'

The end of it went straight into her mouth. Normally, I would have whipped it out of her mouth, but I had been told that everything was safe and clean. Watching her was fascinating. I was surprised at how much she was able to do for herself and how focused she was.

'It was such a success that I was an immediate convert. Now I put out a selection of natural objects at home. I thought I would have to buy things, but once I started looking in my kitchen drawers and around the house, I was surprised by just how many suitable objects I had. It's an amazingly cheap way of keeping babies happy and learning at the same time.'

uninterrupted by the adult. Most nursery practitioners sit close by while the baby plays and usually observe what the baby is interested in doing with the objects.

This, in turn, helps the practitioner to plan other activities and to think about what new objects to put in the treasure basket for another time.

SAFETY

Many parents are so used to seeing toys as the only safe way for babies to play that it can come as a shock when they see their child mouthing a shell. While this is a normal reaction, it is equally natural for babies to mouth in order to explore and learn.

Objects put in a treasure basket are chosen with this in mind and so are sufficiently large not to pose a choking hazard. Items are also cleaned after use to prevent cross-contamination.

AT HOME

There are no rules that prevent you as a parent adopting this type of play at home. While you may not wish or be able to buy a low basket and lots of items, it will still be beneficial for your baby to play with natural materials and objects. So:

- Put out a mixture of containers – that is, wooden bowls alongside smaller objects such as scoops, spoons, wooden pegs.
- Check that objects are clean and cannot be broken or swallowed.
- Stay with your child. ■