

e a r t h

In a new series of articles, **Melissa Addey** encourages families to interact with the elements of our world: earth, fire, water and air

To understand the importance of earth, here is a simple game that you can play anywhere, which draws attention to how the earth provides for us. Choose any item. A wooden table? It came from a tree, which grew from the earth. A plastic telephone? It was made from oil reserves, buried deep in the earth. Challenge each other to find something that has not ultimately come from the earth. I think you'll struggle!

Many mythologies say that people were made from earth. The Lakota say that people were made from earth of different colours. Adam in the Bible was created from dust. Chinese mythology refers to clay being used. Make little clay figurines together to create your own new people. A good story to read is the myth of Persephone: how the earth's cycle was stopped and the impact it had on the world.

You can make your own earth. Set up a simple compost heap in your garden or use a more contained wormery for a smaller space – it is quite magical to watch scraps of smelly old food or green waste rot down before they turn into a dark earth that smells... of fresh soil.

Explore your local soil with some digging: is it soft and sandy, full of rocks, or heavy clay? Have a 'sensory picnic': what does earth smell like? Try tasting a bit – any babies and toddlers will enjoy this part immensely! What does it look like? How does it feel in your hands? Does it crumble? If you put some in a box and shake it, what does it sound like? Add some water... Here come the mud pies! Paint designs on your face with thinned-out mud. The Hopi tribe made multi-storey houses from adobe – clay and straw bricks. Try making a little mud house.

If you're stuck indoors, there are other ways to interact with earth. Use old magazines to make a collage

from photos of all the kinds of earth there are in the world – deserts, red earths, rocks, rich black earths, boggy marshes, thick clays, white chalks. Read up on earthquakes and landslides to see the power that the earth can wield. Grow herbs on the windowsills or make a plant-person for the table: paint a face on a small pot, fill with earth and top with grass, cress or chive seeds to grow yourself a 'hairy' person. Make an indoor archaeological dig with a tray full of earth plus some fun additions to 'discover': shells, fossils, painted rocks... or even (chocolate) gold coins.

Look out for opportunities to touch the earth. Babies and toddlers love to make mud pies, as well as sandcastles on the beach. Older children may want to make little clay beads – remember to poke holes through the beads with a stick so you can thread them later. Try clay face masks for beautiful skin. Find pebbles and rocks of all shapes and sizes and turn them into works of art for your garden and home by painting designs on them with acrylic paints and pens – from faces and tiny houses to plant labels, Zen quotations and mehndi designs. Take every opportunity to grow things, because planting a tiny seed and seeing a plant come up is a near-miraculous process to observe. Herbs and flowers, vegetables and even living willow playhouses are all great projects. If you want to be guerrilla gardeners, you can make seed bombs: little round balls of earth embedded with seeds, which you can lob (gently!) in places that could do with cheering up – people have transformed barren ground near bus stops into tiny gardens for passers-by to pick herbs from. We scattered poppy seeds and other meadow flowers in our local park to add colour and biodiversity.

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Perhaps you have older children or teens who will scoff at these childish pastimes. Challenge them. Take them pot-holing and rock-climbing. Explore caves together as a family – even tiny tots love exploring their hidden magic, and for once their size is an asset! If you are lucky enough, perhaps on holiday, to visit caves known to have housed prehistoric people, like those in the Dordogne region of France, it can be extraordinary to see cave art and imagine the people who lived there. Find a local pottery and learn >