Adventurous play possibilities

The best way to encourage adventurous play is to provide open-ended materials and a supportive attitude about messy, big-bodied, loud, active play. Things like water, stumps, buckets, wagons, rope, sheets, and more help children to create their own “just right” adventures.

If you would like to facilitate teacher-led, skills-based, adventurous experiences, here are some possibilities.

Crash Mat

Adult stands at the end of a cleared “running” space, holding a folded tumbling mat vertically (so it looks like a padded door). Invite children one at a time to run hard and “crash” into the mat. As the child hits the mat, the adult releases her grip and the mat and child fall with a satisfying, padded, loud smack on the floor.

Newspaper Crash

Superheroes like the Hulk smash straight through walls, and football teams run through banners to get psyched for games. Give children that sense of power! Two people hold a sheet of newspaper tight like a wall, and children take turns running straight through it. It may be scary for some children the first time or two, but soon they love the amazing feel. At the end of the game, turn the accumulated pile of torn up paper into newspaper balls to throw at each other. (Adults may need to set a limit about force or distance or body shots only.) Finally, bring out a recycling bin so everyone can play newspaper basketball until all paper is cleaned up.

Tunnel Wall

Invite children to put their hands on the floor a short distance from a wall, then facing the floor, walk their feet backwards up the wall until their bodies create a curved tunnel opening. Other children can create additional segments of the tunnel and peers can crawl through the length of bodies. Sometimes it is helpful to have spots marked on the floor and wall to indicate body positioning. One program puts upside down photos on the wall under the feet marks so children have something for their eyes to focus on while they are upside down.

Clock Game

Invite children to space themselves out. At the leader’s command, the child “clocks” all extend their arms above their heads, touching fingertips. On command, they tick their arms and legs numerically around the imaginary dial, getting faster and faster until they start to spin. They spin, arms wide at their sides, until they unwind on the ground and a helper lifts them back into position for another round.
Almost Gotcha

In this chase-and-miss game, the adult runs after the child (or peers can chase each other), tries to tag the child, but misses and falls down or rolls. OR if the chaser tags the other, participants can reverse roles and the chaser becomes the chased.

Bucking Bronco (great for infants)

Bounce the infant gently on an adult’s knees, and occasionally drop the child between knees a few inches. Sometimes this can be done to a rhyme like:

- Trot, trot to Boston,
- Trot, trot to Lynn,
- Watch out little baby or
- You might fall in!

Or sing a song like “This is the way the cowboy, firefighter…, turtle rides…” giving varied speeds of the lumbering, bouncing ride on the knees.

Roly-Poly Derby

Children sit on the ground and wrap their arms around their legs, forming a body ball. Next they try to roll toward a pre-set finish line. Allow occasional collisions along the way as long as there is laughter.

Wheelbarrow Races

Children work in pairs. One child gets on the ground in a push-up position, while the second child stands behind the first and grabs one ankle in each hand and lifts the first child’s legs. Then together they race toward a finish line. Time the pairs for “best time” or get a whole group for a group race. Challenge the lower persons to see how far they can go before their arms collapse. Another fun, very physically demanding race is a crabwalk race where children “run” a course in a crabwalk position. Both these races give the children lots of healthy proprioceptive stimulation. Add an element of challenge by asking the crab-walker to balance a rubber ball on his stomach during the race.

Water Sponge Soak

For great hot weather fun, allow children to soak foam balls in buckets of cool water and throw them at opponents. Create team boundaries with a wedge-shaped “V” line. Teammates stay behind the line and throw across to soak players on the other side. Less strong throwers stand at the narrow end of the “V” while experienced throwers challenge themselves to hit targets across the wider chasm at the top of the “V” boundary.

Pushing on Hands

This game is an opposite of tug of war. Pairs of children line up palms to palms. The challenge is to push each other across a line or mark. No hitting or abrupt shoving, just hard, consistent pressure. An adult can pair with a child who needs pressure and just provide resistance to a child who needs to push a heavy body backwards through a doorway. This is great proprioceptive stimulation and may be just what an unruly child needs to settle down and enjoy play again.

Turf Surfing

In warm weather, allow children to experiment “sledding” down steep grass hillsides in plastic snow sleds. Depending on the slope, sometimes the sleds will go on their own while at other times, they will need a push from a friend. In thicker grass, one friend may need to pull another friend on the sled.

Backwards Bob

Similar to Simon Says, the leader gives a command, like “Backwards Bob says stand up!” The players listen and respond by doing the opposite (for this command, they would sit down.) The children can decide: everyone can just play for fun, or they can sit out one turn if they make a mistake, or they rotate turns as the leader. This is a great game for school-agers or more mature preschoolers. One seasoned preschool teacher says that about half of his four-year-old class can do this consistently.
Drawing Down Under
Tape easel paper to the underside of a table. Allow children to lie on their backs on the floor under the table and extend their arms to draw with markers or crayons, using large arm sweeps and shoulder muscles. It can be really fun to draw palming a muffin tin-shaped homemade crayon or crayon rock. If their arms don’t reach the surface, create a “bed” of hollow blocks to raise them a bit.

Spin Art
There are commercial options for this activity, but creating a homemade version is more adventurous and can lead to experiments of scale. Children who are captivated by spinning will enjoy experimenting with spin art. Attach paper to the top surface of a lazy Susan. Allow children to drop a few drops of tempera paint on the surface, then spin the wheel and see how the paint moves and marks the paper.

What bigger wheel/spinner could you use? Cover the opening in a hula hoop with paper. Add some paint puddles. Allow the children to toss the hoop and create abstract designs. This adventure is best done outdoors where paint splats are inconsequential.

On a windy day, tape paper to an outdoor table or other flat surface, place puddles of diluted tempera paint on the paper, and allow the wind to create the art.

Autumn Leaf Fun
Enjoy the classic childhood activity of hiding in leaf piles and throwing leaves. Children will have fun running through piles (make sure the hiding and running are not done at the same time!). Gather a large pile of leaves on top of a playground parachute. Then allow a group of children to toss them in the air or create a leaf storm by rippling the fabric wildly. When autumn leaves change to snow, create the same fun with snow—run through piles, toss snow balls in the air or at targets, create a luge track and slide! And when snow storms turn to spring rains, put boots on and splash in the puddles. Who can make the biggest splash? Vigorously interact with nature during every season of the year.

Shrinking Puddles
Draw around the edge of puddles with sidewalk chalk. Check on them periodically and redraw the new perimeter as the water evaporates. Talk about where the water goes.

Rain Concert
In anticipation of a rain storm, invite the children to arrange a variety of containers and blocks near each other in the play yard—some metal, some plastic, some hollow, some solid, some upside down, others right-side up. When the rain starts, take the children to a protected area near the “orchestra” and listen to the sounds the rain makes as it hits the containers. Once the children have enjoyed the quiet rain music, invite them to be silly and pretend that THEY are the rain drops hitting the pans!

Herb-Scented Playdough
Make (or allow the children to make) a plain playdough. Use this recipe or your favorite version:

Combine
• 1 cup warm water
• 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
• ½ cup salt
• 1 tablespoon cream of tartar
  (helps to preserve the dough).

Knead 1 cup flour into the liquid mixture. (Add more flour if too sticky. Add more oil if too dry.) After the dough is formed and smooth, allow children to incorporate their own mixture of chopped fresh herbs. They can pick and snip herbs into small pieces and then knead them into the dough for an aromatic, textured version of playdough. This becomes an inspired material for the dramatic play area. Try rosemary, mint, oregano, dill, lavender, or chives.
Appliance Box Adventure

Put a large, empty appliance box on its side in the play yard and see what adventure transpires. Be prepared to help children cut and change the box according to their creative visions.

Go Fly a Kite

Kite flying lends itself to running and lots of big body movement and problem-solving. Flyers become entranced by the air or wind. Kites come in all shapes and sizes. If you need an easy one to use with preschoolers, try One straw kite.

Paint Adventures

Step away from the traditional painting supplies like brushes and sponges. Visit a hardware store or pet supply shop (or other shop) and ask yourself, “Could the children paint with this?” For example, fill the toe of a nylon (or trouser sock) with sand. Knot it. Invite children to dip the sand blob in paint and then drop it onto paper. (Protect the surroundings with smocks and plastic sheets.) Or experiment with painted patterns made by a tile adhesive scraper. Attach a sponge paint brush to a hard hat or to an elbow pad and allow children to paint with that adapted, crazy piece of equipment. (Bos)

Set the monkey bars or climber at a really low height so children can hang upside down and draw on the ground. (Green)

Humpty Dumpty

Hard cook several dozen eggs. (If you wish, allow the children to decorate them or dye them). Then invite interested children to construct walls using a variety of building materials on top of a drop cloth. When the walls are made, play “Humpty Dumpty.” Give the children hard boiled eggs. See if they can balance the eggs on the walls. Have fun rebuilding and trying eggs again and again. Children can also enjoy peeling the cracked eggs and exploring the hard-cooked interior. (Bos)

Get a Kick Out of It!

Invite children to kick an empty plastic milk jug across a grassy playground. Have a basket full of jugs so each person can kick their own. This noisy, high contact challenge gives children a sense of power. It’s a great “fix” for kids who love to kick and need that sensory input. Indoor alternative: Position children 3 – 5 feet from a wall and allow them to kick the jug against the wall.

References