



Using Clay

Outdoors

A guide for Early Years Practitioners

By Clare and Ann Thompson



Using Clay

Outdoors

A natural material like no other!

Clay is a wonderfully versatile natural material which holds so much potential for play, exploration and discovery! Here you will find some of the ways we can use air drying clay with young children to add another dimension to their experience when interacting with natural materials outdoors.



Before you begin... you may find the following resources useful

- Air drying clay (various natural colours).
- Tools: Rolling pins (or cut logs), metal cutters, mini brick moulds, hammers
- Bag(s) for collecting natural materials
- Small amounts of coloured powder paint, gravel, sand or "brusho"
- PVA glue, ribbon or twine
- A variety of natural loose parts
- Picturebooks for inspiration: 'The Visitors', 'Transient Rhymes and Jingles' and 'From the Shadows' by Clare Thompson are featured in this guide. These are available from **[naturallycreative.net](https://www.naturallycreative.net)**



Safety Reminder:

This is a guide only, please risk assess all materials and equipment for the needs of the children you are working with.

Step 1: Venture outside...

Go with children on a nature walk of your choice, it could be a journey to a local park or green space, a beach, a woodland or exploring the grounds of your setting. The journey is as important as the destination; it's amazing how many beautiful natural resources, textures, viewpoints and details there will be to notice and talk about with children. Due to changing seasons and weather conditions, the loose parts, colours and textures available will be different every time you step outside the door, so doing the same route repeatedly will bring new discoveries and chances for children to notice changes each time. Children can carry a bag to collect natural loose parts for use in their creative play. We also packed some air drying clay and a rolling pin for exploring textures.



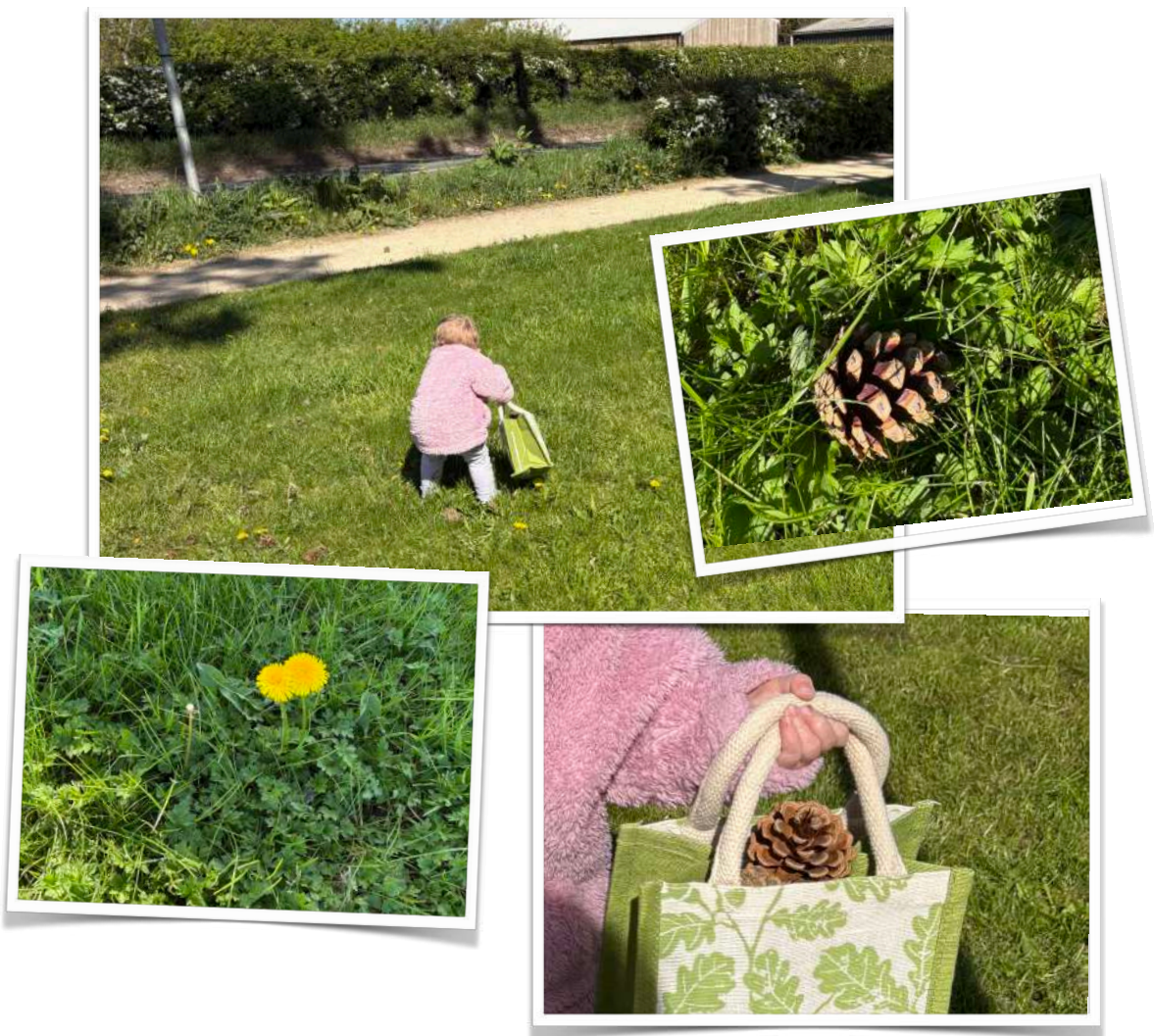
Step 2: Capture textures...

When walking outdoors children will likely notice and comment on details and changes that capture their attention. They may like to touch different surfaces such as brick walls, railings, tree bark, or grass and talk about how they feel. Clay can be a great way for children to explore and capture the textures of surfaces outdoors. We went on a texture hunt as part of our walk, using a rolling pin to capture patterns and surface textures and talk about what we found. The textures in the clay can either be kept and dried out or photographed and the clay reused.



Step 3: Find and collect...

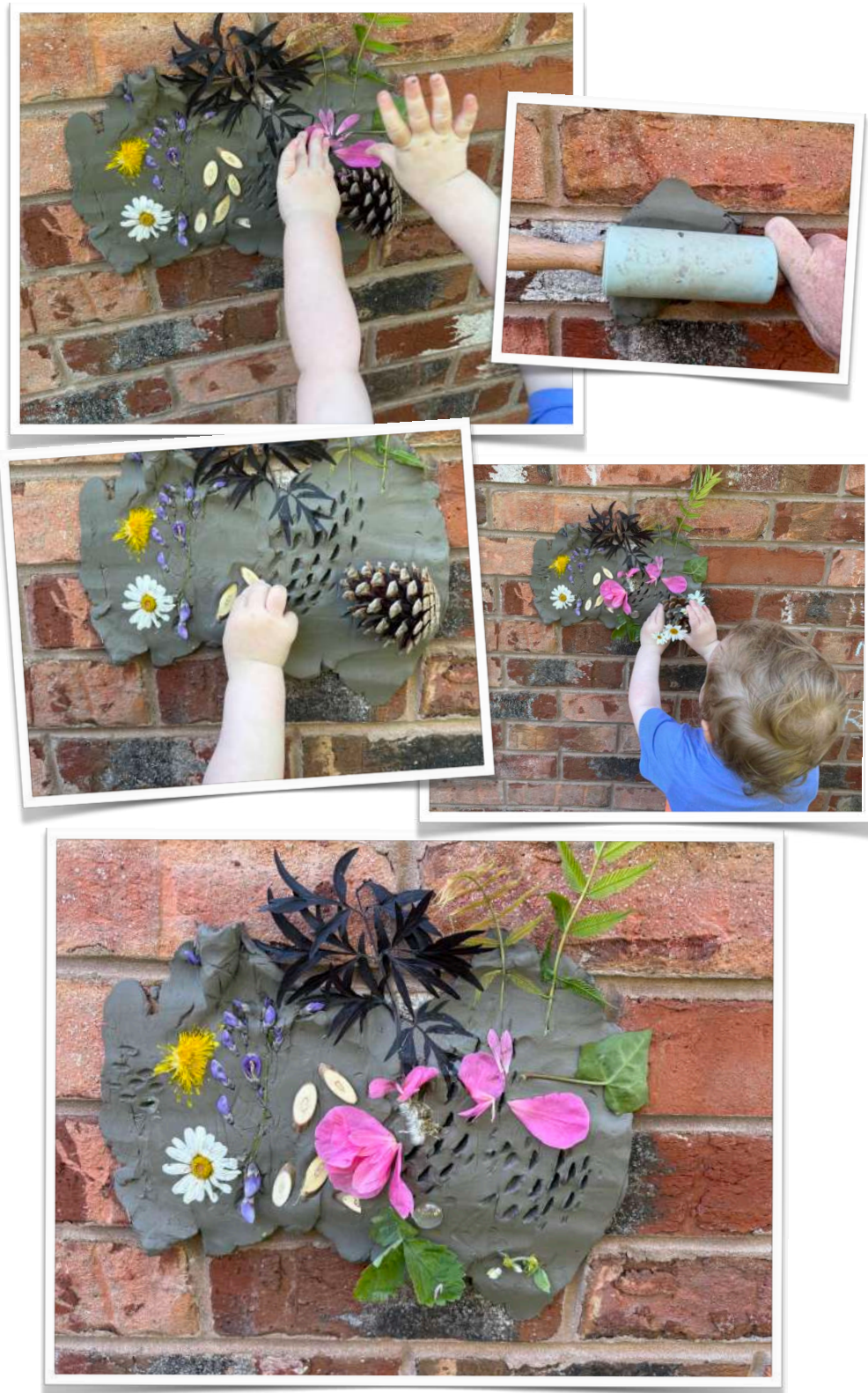
Sticks, pine cones, acorns, flowers, leaves, grass, stones, blossom, bark... the list goes on! The natural resources available on your walk will differ depending on the environment and season you are in. Search for natural loose parts that children find interesting. Look and talk about differences in texture, shape, pattern, colour, shade and quantity. The great thing about creating on location is that we don't have to take anything away if doing so may harm the environment. Artwork can be photographed and then deconstructed and the natural materials left behind. We can also "borrow" loose parts and return them on our next walk.



Step 4: Create vertical art...

Roll clay onto a vertical surface such as a wall or tree and create vertical artwork by adding natural materials to it. We used the idea of "tree faces" as a starting point, creating faces and characters in different ways and later took an open ended approach, allowing for experimentation using loose parts to add colour and texture.





Art pieces were changed and added to throughout play as more loose parts were found in the garden.



Step 5: Make impressions with natural materials...

By pressing natural materials into flattened clay children can create unique patterns, shapes and impressions. We started by rolling pine cones and pressing their bases into the clay to create intricate marks. We then tried rolling leaves and flowers into the clay using a rolling pin before removing them to reveal impressions. This experimental process can be repeated over and over with different materials.





Step 6: Roll out the colour...

Experiment with small amounts of gravel, sand, powder paint or powdered pigments and see how colours and textures combine when rolled into the clay. We tried this with different coloured clay, creating unique surfaces. We also used cutters to create beautiful hanging decorations.





Try varying colours to reflect seasonal changes!

Step 7: Add pressed and dried flowers and leaves...

Try using leaves, stems and petals that have been dried out or pressed to create designs on the surface of the clay. We combined these with a variety of other dried natural materials including bark, seeds and dried honesty.





Step 8: Combine ideas to create artwork...

Invite children to use a mixture of the techniques mentioned above to create their own artwork using rolled out clay as a surface. We often preserve pieces of art by allowing the clay to dry and then adding a layer of PVA glue over the surface.



Using old picture frames as a border!



Taking inspiration from 'The Visitors'
picturebook



Step 9: Create 3D sculptures...

By offering a wide variety of natural loose parts alongside clay, we can sculpt and manipulate the resources in infinite ways! Clay can be used to join materials together or as a base for holding up objects. Try creating characters and models for small world play or experiment with abstract ideas!



Open-ended play with clay and Natural Materials



Step 10: Use dried clay as a loose part...

Clay can be cut, moulded or sculpted into various shapes, dried out and then used in play. We created miniature bricks, arches and tunnel shapes for small scale construction and transient art. These are great when combined with a variety of natural materials and loose parts. Air dried clay pieces are featured in many of Clare's illustrations for 'Transient Rhymes and Jingles and 'From the Shadows'.



Building miniature walls and bridges!



Using dried clay in transient art and loose parts play: Above illustration from picturebook, 'From the Shadows'.



TTS Clay work Shopping List:

- [Clay Range](#)
- [Powder Paint & Brusho](#)
- [PVA Glue](#)
- [Natural Materials](#)
- [TTS Wooden Writing Boards](#)
- [TTS Wooden Leaf Mark Making Boards With Stand](#)
- [Natural Collage Resources Pack](#)
- [Dried Flowers Natural Collage Pack](#)
- [TTS Vintage Card Picture Frames](#)



Thank you for reading!

This guide was created for TTS by Clare Thompson and Ann Thompson from Naturally Creative Early Years. If you would like to find out more about their work you can visit their website

[naturallycreative.net](https://www.naturallycreative.net)

