

Ilse-Marie Herrmann

“There!” Anton calls out excitedly and looks at his companion Anna. She nods encouragingly, and with his right index finger he pokes into the soft, white clay. Anton is fifteen months old and sits in front of a wooden box filled with eight kilograms of clay—a box also known as the *Tonfeld®* (Clay Field).

At first, Anton pokes holes into the clay with his right hand and delights in the traces he leaves behind. Making holes feels amusing to him. What one hand can do, the other wants to do as well. He begins poking into the clay with his left index finger, and finally uses both index fingers at the same time. These parallel grasping actions bring him into balance, and a radiant smile spreads across his face.

After a while, he looks at Anna and wordlessly signals, “I’m finished.” The process of shaping with clay is complete for him.

Drilling as a Form of Contact

Drilling is a form of making contact with a material in which the pressure of the hands plays a central role. Children seek this contact in order to experience themselves and to explore boundaries and resistance. The impulse to drill arises from an inner developmental plan that children follow. Anton’s actions are highly meaningful, as they allow him to enter into sensing and acting. Even the very first impulse children place into the clay changes its form. Even the slightest contact leaves a sensation within them and a trace in the clay that sparks their curiosity. Questions arise such as: *How does this feel? What did I cause? How did this trace come into being? Am I really the one who triggered this change in the clay? Can I create the same thing—or something new—by repeating this touch or movement? What will emerge then?*

In such an intense engagement with the material, the clay becomes alive. It appears to children as a counterpart with which they build a relationship. Through sensing and feeling actions, they create tangible forms, symbols, and inner images that reflect their emotions. They experience their own sense of agency. The constantly changing feelings and forms awaken ever new impulses, drawing children into a state of flow in which they work their emotions, thoughts, and impulses into the clay.

Working with clay strengthens perception, self-worth, self-understanding, and supports personality development.

Grasping Actions in Clay and Their Effects

With guidance, children can engage with clay from as early as nine months of age. Over the course of their development, the following grasping actions can be observed:

- **Sensory and motor movement traces:** Children leave marks in the clay through smearing with their hands, reflecting their sensory experiences.
- **Pinching off:** Pinching off pieces of clay allows children to experience different textures and resistances.
- **Drilling holes:** By drilling holes, they explore depth and the malleability of the material.
- **Layering:** Placing pieces of clay on top of one another fosters an understanding of space and structure.
- **Arranging in rows:** Children develop a sense of order and sequence by arranging clay in rows.
- **Shaping “something” (something-qualities):** In this phase, the child forms a hole into “something” or creates “something” that cannot yet be named, giving the material a new form.
- **Bare qualities:** The “something-quality” transforms into “bare quality.” In this phase, the child senses themselves within the material. The clay becomes tangible, graspable, malleable, and shapeable. These experiences support not only sensory perception but also the child’s self-confidence.

Clay in Personality Development

For the development of our personality, the haptic sense—also referred to as the grasping or self-sense—is of central importance. This sense is composed of three foundational senses: the sense of touch (skin sense), the sense of balance, and proprioception (deep sensitivity). Clay offers a unique opportunity to foster the grasping sense through all developmentally appropriate grasping actions. All senses are further developed through working with clay.

The haptic sense is essential for understanding ourselves and our existence in the world. Our development takes place through our hands.

The three foundational senses of the haptic sense are:

- **Sense of touch (skin sense):** This sense is crucial after birth for building relationships with ourselves and the external world. Through mindful and reliable skin contact from adults, infants—and later children—develop an initial image of the world. These experiences foster self-perception, empathy, basic trust, and a sense of security, thereby contributing to emotional competence. The sense of touch plays a vital role in relationships.
- **Sense of balance:** The sense of balance provides a feeling of equilibrium and emotional stability. It is essential for orientation and decision-making in relation to ourselves, our relationships, and our environment. Balance influences both inner and outer movement and supports self-organization.
- **Proprioception (deep sensitivity):** This develops through the pressure experienced by our physical system—muscles, ligaments, and tissues. Experiences of deep sensitivity motivate us to act. Through active engagement, we appropriate the world and experience ourselves as effective and competent. This enables the child to gain autonomy and agency.

In working with clay, we experience ourselves through touch, balance, and proprioception. We follow our individual needs, interests, and impulses, which are taken up by the clay. The material is ideally suited for personal developmental processes and offers the opportunity to express—through the hands and the entire body—what moves us. We enter into a silent dialogue with ourselves and may also find words for what truly matters to us.

Which Clay Do We Provide for Children?

In working with clay, sensing is central, as it forms the foundation for the development of emotions and cognition. For this reason, I recommend using white, un-grogged clay when working creatively with children.

Unlike colored clay, this clay leaves only light traces that can easily be removed from clothing and surfaces. Residues can be removed by tapping, brushing, sweeping, or with water.

Un-grogged clay is characterized by its extremely smooth and soft texture, reminiscent of the sensitivity of human skin. This quality not only enhances the haptic experience but also supports children's emotional and creative development.

How Do We Offer Clay to Children? – The Clay Cycle

To introduce children to working with clay, I first place a large block of clay on the table and observe how they respond to this clear form. For variation, I also place several small clay cubes or balls next to it. The malleable clay offers many possibilities: children can divide it into pieces, drill into it, roll it, hit it, or shape it creatively.

To introduce different consistencies of clay, I provide small bowls of water. This allows children to actively explore the clay cycle. Dry clay can be used as a drawing tool. Children can grate, rub, crush, or grind it to produce fine clay powder. When mixed with water, this powder transforms into a smooth “clay cream.”

With this clay cream or slurry, children can joyfully engage in messy play. A large mirror as a surface allows them to create clay cream images or paint their own bodies. Wet clay can also be spread onto a plaster slab, which draws the water out of the clay. After a few hours, fresh, kneadable clay is once again available to the children.

Shaping with Clay – A Language Without Words From the Hands to the Self. How Our Hands Influence the Development of Our Children

Conclusion

In summary, working with clay in early childhood education is not only a creative activity but also plays a fundamental role in children's holistic development. By fostering creativity, motor and sensory skills, emotional expression, and social interaction, clay work makes a significant contribution to personality development and learning.

About the Author

Ilse-Marie Herrmann is an expert in healing with clay and trains therapists, educators, and artists who are eager to engage in their own clay processes and to guide healing clay processes in their groups with enthusiasm.



Literature:

Deuser, Heinz (2018). *Arbeit am Tonfeld. Der haptische Weg zu uns selbst*. Psychosozial-Verlag; www.tonfeld.de

Ilse-Marie Herrmann studied social pedagogy and agricultural sciences and works as a therapist in *Arbeit am Tonfeld®* (training with Prof. Heinz Deuser), Initiatic Bodywork in transpersonal therapy, and systemic-spiritual constellation work. She is the founder and director of the **PädArT Educational Academy**.

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