

Sand, Sand, Sand

by Rusty Keeler



PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSTY KEELER

Ever wonder why so many images of ‘paradise’ show palm trees, ocean waves, and a sandy beach? It’s the endless mud pie, sand castle, and sand sculpture possibilities, of course! Infinite fun and creativity. Just what you want in paradise, right? And just what you want for your children when they go outside everyday — to have rich materials and loose parts for constructive collaborations and discoveries of nature.

We want children to have the freedom to create their own worlds, structure their own play, and change their environments according to their ideas and inspirations. We do this by saying “yes” and offering spaces and materials that invite spontaneous creativity. Loose parts in



Yes, Rusty Keeler designs and builds natural playscapes all over the place. But lately he’s been busy playing with his fun toddling toddler Julian James. YEAH! Check out his website (www.earthplay.net) for more ideas, articles, and good natural play stuff.

your playscape do this and sand, yes, humble sand, is the ultimate loose part. Children can mold, sift, sculpt, dig, and pile. Through the pouring and sifting of sand they see cosmic properties of the planet. They touch the universe in a grain of sand and the sand creations they make reflect their imagination and spirit.

Including Sand in Your Outdoor Space

There are lots of ways to include sand play in the outdoors. Every center and school is unique with its different needs, constraints, and capabilities. Some centers have lots of space for gigantic, complex sand areas with water, rocks, and grassy plantings. Other places must do sand play in smaller, simpler ways. The beauty is that sand in any amount is interesting and fun for children.

Sand is elemental. Like fire or water, a small bit is still part of the whole. A handful of sand holds promise the same way a sand table does and the same way a beach does. It’s all related. It all offers children a connection to the planet. The beauty for you is that providing these opportunities for children can be simple, safe, and easy to do.

But isn’t sand messy? Well, we all know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder

and children’s view of beauty is different than adults’. We in the adventure play world often look at a wild kid setting filled with craziness and scattered play stuff and say, “It ain’t pretty, but it’s beautiful.” It’s beautiful to see children engaged, happy, and creative in the flow of life. Mess happens. It’s up to us as adults to say “yes” and provide opportunities for this kind of creative play and see the beauty in it (or look the other way!).

There are many great ways to provide sand for children. Sandboxes are a good start, but I encourage you to break out of the sand box and create large sand play areas so that the play is more like the play on an expansive beach than in a confined sandbox. To do this, some people:

- dig pits with proper drainage and ring the pit with smooth boulders.
- make upright log perimeters around their sand area.
- build giant sand boxes with shade structures over top.
- designate their entire space as a sand play area. Paradise!

I’ve been enjoying working with sand in simpler ways over the years: forget the elaborate containment, just dump a mountain of sand in place and let ‘em at it.

Keeping Cats Away

Now, I can tell that you may have another topic on your mind: cat poop. While I hold my fist in the air and say “children are more important than cat poop,” and “if we don’t have sand for fear of cat poop, the cat poop will have won!”, it’s still a health issue and something we have to consider when we provide sand. Check with your state and local health and safety guidelines to see what the actual language is. Different places have different policies. Many regulations state that sand needs to be covered. But check closely because some regulations say that only sandboxes of a certain small dimension need to be covered. Groups I work with usually fall into two categories: coverers and uncoverers. Some people work hard to keep their sand completely covered each night. Other groups work hard to scan the sand area every morning for cat poop and debris (as part of the typical daily playground visual safety inspection). They simply scoop out and dispose of any surprises they find. All groups change their sand from time to time and it is always a good idea to have children wash their hands when they come in from the outdoors.

Covering Sand

- Have a cover that is lightweight and easy for teachers to lift.
- Select a fabric or mesh netting rather than a tarp that can get weighed down with water and dirt.
- Choose covers that let in water, air, and sunlight for the best overall health and cleanliness of the sand.

Other Ways to Keep Cats Out of Sand and Gardens

(as told to me by various child care providers and a quick search on wiki-HOW)

- Plant potent-smelling plants around your sand area that cats hate such as Coleus Canina (often called the ‘scaredy cat plant’), lavender, pennyroyal, geranium, and lemon thyme.
- Scatter dried herbs or plant-based oils around your sand area.
- Place citrus peels around the perimeter of your sand spot — or take it to the next level and make a mix of orange peels, coffee grounds, and cayenne pepper and sprinkle that around.
- Purchase an ultrasonic device that emits a sound when it detects motion that cats hate.
- Buy a motion-activated air blaster.
- Install a motion-activated sprinkler (my personal favorite concept because it’s hilarious!); hook a hose up to this device and when it detects motion, it squirts water.
- Plant catnip in areas well away from the sand to attract cats to other areas

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of your yard; mint and honeysuckle can work, too.

- Pour vinegar around the perimeter of your sand area and the perimeter of your yard.

Like everything, providing sand takes careful thought and planning, but the rewards for children are worth it. Nice try scaring us, cat poop, but we won’t be deterred. Bring back paradise! Bring back sand play!

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