

RETHINKING COLOURED SAND IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

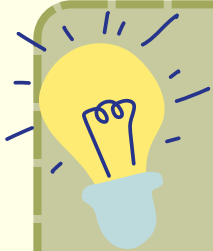
In light of the recent recall on contaminated coloured sand, we are using this moment to consider healthier, more sustainable approaches to sand play. Instead of relying on commercial dyed products, we can return to natural materials that support children's wellbeing, sensory exploration, and connection to the environment.



Concerns with artificial products

Many items commonly used in early childhood environments, including fake sand, artificial grass, synthetic plants and commercially dyed materials, carry unseen costs. These products can introduce harmful chemicals, microplastics, questionable manufacturing practices and long-term disposal impacts.

Although these materials may seem convenient, they can compromise both human and planetary health. When natural alternatives are available, we have an opportunity to choose more responsible, low-impact resources.



The sustainability principles in *EYLF v2.0*

remind us that sustainability is more than a checklist; it is about the choices we make every day. Let's explore these choices through the "lenses":

- **Environmental lens:** How does coloured or artificial sand affect our ecosystems, from production through to disposal?
- **Economic lens:** How do our purchasing decisions influence the market? Do we reinforce unsustainable practices by choosing artificial materials, or can we encourage more ethical, durable, and responsibly sourced options through our choices?
- **Social lens:** How do our materials shape children's wellbeing and learning? Could our choice of sand foster sensory exploration, safety, and early ethical thinking, or might it introduce health risks we haven't considered?



Natural materials offer richer learning

Earth-based, unprocessed materials provide safe, open-ended and sensory-rich play experiences. These include:

- Natural sand
- Soil, clay and mud
- Stones, gravel and pebbles
- Leaves, shells, seedpods and bark
- Water and other loose natural materials



These resources support storytelling, problem-solving, pattern-making and imaginative play. They also help children build a genuine connection with the world around them and support the development of environmental awareness from the earliest years.

Ethical and sustainable resourcing

When gathering natural materials, we can model thoughtful and respectful practices:

- Take only small amounts
- Avoid protected or culturally sensitive areas
- Use suppliers who source materials responsibly and transparently, ideally local or community-based
- Treat these ‘earthly delights’ with respect, recognising that natural materials are finite and not simply replaced once taken

These actions help children see themselves as active caretakers of the environment.



If colour is still desired

If educators wish to introduce colour into sand experiences, there are gentle, nature-aligned alternatives available without resorting to food-based dyes.

You might explore:

- Natural earth pigments, such as ochre, chalk or charcoal (ensuring appropriate cultural permission when accessing ochre)
- Coloured clays or soils sourced from the local environment, which naturally vary in tone

These materials offer subtle, earthy hues while remaining true to nature and respectful of cultural practices.

A shift towards genuine sustainability

By embracing natural alternatives, we provide children with sensory experiences that are healthy, meaningful, and connected to the world around them. This supports not just play, but also children’s growing understanding of care, responsibility, and respect for Country.