EYFS@RMS – Progression of Skills for Play Dough

This progression supports children's development from early sensory exploration through to more controlled manipulation, imaginative modelling and purposeful design. It links particularly to Physical Development, Expressive Arts and Design, Communication and Language, and Mathematics within the EYFS.



1. Explorers – sensory play

Babies / younger toddlers, as appropriate

- Explore the texture, feel and resistance of dough.
- Pat, poke, squeeze and press using whole hands and fingers.
- Begin to grasp, release and transfer dough between hands.
- Notice changes when dough is squashed, stretched or broken.
- Explore simple tools with close adult supervision.
- Communicate reactions through sounds, gestures, facial expressions and emerging words.



2. Developing manipulators

Typically 2–3 years

- Squeeze, squash, pat, pull and tear dough with increasing confidence.
- Begin to roll dough between hands or on a surface.
- Make simple balls, snakes and flat shapes.
- Use fingers and palms with improving control.
- Explore simple cutters, rollers and safe modelling tools.
- Use words to describe actions, textures, size and shape.



3. Purposeful creators

Typically 3–4 years

- Roll, pinch, flatten, twist, squeeze and mould dough with greater control.
- Create recognisable forms using balls, coils and flat pieces.
- Join pieces together and experiment with attaching details.

- Use tools with increasing precision and coordination.
- Make simple representations of people, animals, food and familiar objects.
- Compare quantities, sizes, shapes and lengths.
- Explain what they are making and engage in imaginative play.



4. Confident designers

Typically 4–5 years

- Manipulate dough with increasing strength, control and precision.
- Roll consistent shapes and vary pressure to achieve an intended result.
- Combine techniques to create more detailed, recognisable models.
- Join, layer, shape and refine pieces to add features.
- Select and use tools purposefully and safely.
- Plan, talk about and adapt a model as it develops.

- Use mathematical language to describe shape, size, position, pattern and quantity.
- Persist with challenges and explain choices or changes.

Progression of key skills

Skill	**Emerging**	**Developing**	**Secure / extending**
Squeezing and pressing	Explores with whole hands	Controls pressure using fingers and palms	Varies pressure intentionally
Rolling	Pats or moves dough across a surface	Rolls balls and long shapes	Creates consistent shapes and lengths
Pinching	Pokes and presses with fingers	Pinches off small pieces	Adds small details with precision
Flattening	Squashes dough with hands	Flattens using palms or a roller	Controls thickness and shape
Joining	Places pieces together	Presses pieces together to attach them	Joins securely and refines the join
Tool use	Explores tools with adult support	Uses cutters, rollers and tools purposefully	Selects tools independently for a purpose
Imaginative modelling	Explores what dough can do	Makes simple forms and familiar objects	Plans, develops and adapts detailed models

Language and maths	Responds to sensory words	Describes actions, shapes and sizes	Explains processes and compares, counts and measures

Adult role and provision

- Model: Demonstrate rolling, squeezing, pinching, flattening and joining, narrating each action.
- Introduce vocabulary: soft, hard, squash, squeeze, roll, pinch, twist, flatten, long, short, thick, thin, round, curved.
- Offer challenge: Add natural materials, loose parts, shape cutters, rollers, safe modelling tools and picture prompts.
- Extend thinking: Ask "How could you make it stand up?", "How can you join those pieces?" or "What could you change?"
- Observe and respond: Adjust the dough's resistance, tools and level of support to suit individual children, including children with SEND.
- Support independence: Encourage children to select resources, solve problems, tidy away and talk about their creations.

Links to EYFS areas of learning

- Physical Development: hand strength, finger isolation, bilateral coordination and fine-motor control.
- Expressive Arts and Design: exploring materials, creating models, representing ideas and developing imagination.
- Communication and Language: listening, describing, explaining and learning new vocabulary.
- Mathematics: shape, size, length, pattern, comparison and counting.

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development: persistence, confidence, independence and sharing resources.

Assessment reminder: These age bands are indicative, not fixed expectations. Children may demonstrate skills across several stages, and progression should be based on individual development, interests and next steps rather than age alone. Ensure dough and small loose parts are suitable for the children using them and supervise closely, particularly where mouthing or choking risks are present.