We have a mud pit in our backyard. Not just a little puddle or a small pile of dirt, but a real hole full of mud that provides a place for kids to get dirty and muddy, sometimes from head to toe. Our mud pit is just one part of our adventure playground, a natural playspace that offers kids a unique opportunity to reconnect with nature. Our playground includes other elements as well; trees, a sand pit, a hill, a tunnel, gardens, boulders and driftwood - but it is often the mud pit that attracts the most attention.
There is a simple reason why mud was included as part of our adventure playground – we believe that it is okay to get dirty. And not just okay, but important, and natural and instinctive. Digging, squishing exploring and yes, even eating dirt are extensions of how kids interact with the world under their (preferably) bare feet. And an increasing amount of scientific researchers would seem to agree with our philosophy.
In studies of what is called the hygiene hypothesis, researchers are concluding that organisms like the millions of bacteria, viruses and especially worms that enter the body along with “dirt” spur the development of a healthy immune system. Several continuing studies suggest that dirt may help to redirect an immune system that has gone awry and resulted in autoimmune disorders, allergies and asthma. Exposure to a natural soil bacterium, which people likely ingest or breathe in when they spend time in nature, could increase learning behaviour, claim researchers.
Studies have shown dirt to be good for your brain. Apparently, there are types of bacteria that are naturally found in soil which activate the neurons that produce serotonin – a key chemical in many bodily functions, as well as a natural anti-depressant.

*In other words, dirt can actually help make you feel happy!*
For children who don’t spend enough time outside, the University of Western Australia claims to have found the answer, and is conducting a study. Children are being given a "dirt pill" containing a mixture of different strains of probiotic bacteria and antioxidants to replicate the missing childhood exposure and help them develop the immunity they missed by not eating dirt.
Dirt pills? Not in my world. Healthy children and germs and dirt have had a long and happy relationship since the beginning of time. It’s okay to get dirty. Do parents sometimes have issues when picking up dirty, muddy kids from daycare? Occasionally, but quite rarely at our centre. Probably because most of our families understand our philosophy, and realize that their kids come to explore and play. I had a parent tell me once that she would much rather pick up a kid who is muddy and happy, than a kid who is clean and unhappy. And kids who have muddy, squishy, buggy and soggy adventures are almost always happy kids.
“Today was my last mud day. I'll probably never get to do this again. I love getting dirty; it's the getting clean part I don’t like. Today was really fun. I love the feel of mud, it’s relaxing. To get us clean Mr. Bussey would attach a hose to a garden stand thing-a-majig. Instead of blasting us in freezing cold water, this year we had the option of breathing! When we were clean we would lay on the burning hot tires in our playground, then we chilled out and had lunch. Good times.”

by Zane, age 12
written during his last summer
at Discovery