The kids are home for the holidays and it doesn’t take long for the phrase “I’m bored” to rear its ugly head. Though computer games, electronic media and video games are usual fare, kids can learn skills and keep themselves busy for hours with simple items available from your kitchen.

When my kids were younger, I often made finger paint, play dough and paint. These items were very inexpensive, so it didn’t matter if the dough was left out to dry or colors were mixed. So take your little artists to the kitchen to make the dough or paint, then let them create with it.

Children need opportunities to develop creativity. Play dough and paint provide opportunities for imaginative play. The manipulation of the product helps develop fine motor skills as well as the imagination. A lump of clay becomes a cupcake, a statue, an animal, a car or an airplane.

One of the advantages of making these items is that they are completely nontoxic. They are made from the same products we use to make our food, so if some of it ends up in the kids’ mouths, that’s not a problem.

Play clay can be made by mixing 1 cup flour, ½ cup salt, and 1 teaspoon cream of tartar in a saucepan. Add 1 tablespoon oil, 3 to 5 drops of food coloring and 1 cup of water to the dry ingredients. Cook for about 3 minutes until mixture pulls away from the pan and it forms a ball. Pour it out on the counter and knead until smooth. The clay can be stored in an airtight container (or plastic bag) for many days. For about 60 cents you can make one recipe that is a little larger than 1 cup.

Give the little ones cookie cutters and a table knife to cut the dough. Add rice, leaves, pebbles and glass marbles for texture. Use a rolling pin or a can to roll it out. Try running
it through your garlic press to create strings of dough. Lots of extra items extends the imagination and play possibilities.

Finger paint can be made by combining 1 teaspoons salt and 2 cups flour in a saucepan. Add 3 cups of hot water and bring it to a boil, boiling until it is glossy. Beat until smooth and add coloring. If it is too thick, add additional water to the desired consistency. This recipe can make a multitude of colors at a cost of 50 cents.

Don’t overlook the obvious in your efforts to entertain the kids. My sister taught preschool for many years and teachers often used chocolate pudding for finger paint. If little fingers ended up in the mouth, there was nothing there to harm them. It was all edible.

Large pieces of paper can sometimes be expensive. So drop by the News-Miner for one of its end rolls from printing the newspaper. The rolls are free and there is a limit of two end rolls per day. Drop by the office and they’ll be glad to help you out. Give the kids red and green finger paint and crayons, and let them make the wrapping paper for the gifts under the Christmas tree.

Slime is another fun product that kids can enjoy. Put ½ cup of white glue in a small bowl and add ½ cup of water and a few drops of food coloring. In a second bowl, dissolve 1 teaspoon of borax in a cup of water. Slowly stir the glue mixture into the borax mixture and knead until dry. For long-term storage, put it in a zippered plastic bag and store in the refrigerator.

These recipes and many more are available in a Cooperative Extension publication called “Paint, Paste, Play Dough, Puppets, and Paper Mache” at http://bit.ly/pcd82 or drop by our Extension office at 724 27th Ave. to pick it up.

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