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The power of pottery

As The Great British Pottery Throw Down reaches a climax, judge Kate Malone tells Victoria Young why children need clay on their hands and in their lives



(L-R) Victoria Young, her son Max and potter Kate Malone Photo: Clara Molden

By Victoria Young

The great thing about pottery, explains Kate Malone, one of the UK's leading ceramicists and a judge on the [Great British Pottery Throw Down](#) on BBC Two, is that it involves both science and art, making it the perfect activity for children. "It encompasses earth, fire, air and water, and involves imagination, making things, plus it's so gorgeously messy and the transformations are magical," says Malone at her tardis-like North London studio where she's agreed to give my five year old son, Max, a pottery lesson. "In a world where kids should have a sense of magic, pottery is such a great part of their life."

Malone starts the lesson by putting a lump of clay in front of Max. She tells him to just start pinching it gently and to just see what emerges – a pyramid, as it turns out. So then they make some mummies, and bandages to wrap around them. When the

pyramid morphs into an igloo, they make the mummy transform into a penguin; some eggs for the penguin to stand on, and a nest. As they work, Malone narrates the story of their make-believe characters, at the same time as explaining the difference in clay-types and why pottery must be hollow or it will explode in the kiln. It's utterly absorbing - and so entertaining that an hour flies by. But it's not just fun and entertainment that pottery will give to your child's life, she is quick to point out. "When children create something with their hands it gives them such a sense of achievement and confidence. Knowing why and how materials work is an essential foundation for children which feeds the rest of the common sense section of life - but I fear we are losing touch with it".



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alone is a judge on new BBC television pottery competition programme The Great Pottery Throw Down Photo: Clara Molden

The reason we are losing touch with it is simple: pottery is no longer taught in most schools – because it's considered a fire risk. "I wouldn't be a potter now if it hadn't learned it at school," says Malone, who went to a comprehensive on the outskirts of Bristol. "I wasn't a high achiever. Then one day I saw some jars on a shelf and in the kiln and that was it. I started having pottery lessons and very quickly thought, I'd like to do this as a job."

That seed, planted at school and nurtured by her art teacher who encouraged her to do a foundation course, went on to see Malone working full time as a ceramicist. And, although she tells her apprentices to expect to struggle for about eight years

before they make a living, she is phenomenally successful. Her decorative works, which tend to be flamboyant, colourful expressions of nature, sell for between £2000 and £50,000 and are in 40 museums internationally. Malone is also committed to creating public art - major ceramic pieces in hospitals, schools and libraries, and she's spent her career building an extensive catalogue of glazes. But her big mission in life is really inspiring people to find a way to get their children to learn pottery.

It was this desire to spread the word that led her to say yes to being part of the Great British Pottery Throwdown – even though she knows she might lose her anonymity as a result. “But that’s outweighed by the benefits of getting the message of the pleasures of clay out there on what is the biggest megaphone,” she says. Her ambition for the show, she says, is that it helps pottery become as big as baking.

The pottery-appreciation path for us, as a nation, has already been paved hugely by the likes of ceramics manufacturer [Emma Bridgewater](#) and artist [Grayson Perry](#). Both the [British Ceramics Biennial](#) in Stoke-on-Trent earlier this year, and the opening of the £34 million [World of Wedgwood](#) are evidence that we hold ceramics and crockery very dear. And given that cafes and workshops where children can paint pre-made pottery are already a big hit with families all over the UK, getting kids to make the actual pottery doesn't seem like such a huge step.



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ax's hands are seen with ceramicist Kate Malone's Photo: Clara Molden The point, says Malone, is not to be deterred by the fact that your child is unlikely to learn pottery at school. If you can't find a class near you, just get some clay and mess

around it at home without worrying about firing it. Better yet, find a local potter and give them a ring. "Ask them if they will give you a class, or start one for a group of you. Chances are they will be enthusiastic enough about pottery that they will start a class because they'll want to spread the word too".

The Great British Pottery Throw Down is on BBC 2 on Tuesdays at 9pm

WANT TO GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY?

- The Craft Potters Association has a list of national classes at craftpottersassoc.co.uk
- Check the education pages of local government websites for links to local classes
- For more courses and information about pottery go to studiopottery.co.uk and ceramicreview.com
- Kate is participating in 'Hey Clay!', a national celebration of clay to coincide with the first Great British Pottery Throw Down. From December 4-6, studios, workshops, museums, galleries and colleges around the UK will be hosting free events where you can try your hand at pottery as part of the BBC's Get Creative campaign. Kate's open studio is on Sunday 6th December from 1pm – 5pm. Participants (one at a time; minimum age six) can book a 30 minute slot online and will be able to experiment with different kinds of clay. For more go to craftscouncil.org.uk