

3 Ideas for Sensory Play

Young children develop best through directly engaging with their world, moving and exploring with their senses and taking in information from their environment. While we generally think of ourselves as having five senses, we actually have seven: vision, hearing, taste, smell, tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive.

When we are born, our senses are present, but not yet fully organised and developed. During the first six to eight years of life, our brains learn how to filter a continuous bombardment of sensory information, determining which pieces pose a threat or serve another larger purpose.

1. Provide frequent opportunities for movement, ideally whole-body, unstructured play multiple times a day.

- Allow children to climb, spin, and swing at home, provide a climbing rope, tree swing, or tire swing.
- Use mini trampolines, spinning toys, balance boards, or hopper balls encourage bouncing and balancing.
- A hanging bar or indoor swing (such as a cuddle swing, rocker, or swing chair) can help children both expend energy and settle down, especially on days when you have to be inside.
- A child-sized wheelbarrow with a shovel inspires “heavy” work. Two-litre bottles (filled with water) or an old set of encyclopaedias, books, or magazines are easily accessible items that children could move or carry. (Be sure to structure the activity appropriately for your child’s size and weight.)
- A sensory table could be made with one or two dishpans filled with materials that you can change each day – e.g., sand, dried beans, pasta, rice, shaving cream, water, beads of varied sizes, popcorn, shredded paper, packing peanuts.
- A variety of fine-motor and art materials, such as clay or dough in multiple textures, painting and drawing (vertically on a wall or easel as well as flat on a table), and practical life activities (stringing beads, pouring between two containers, transferring using tweezers or a spoon) should be provided and periodically rotated.

2. Change your child’s physical environment

- Change your room layout: Is there space for children to be noisier or quieter?
- Provide a variety of activities: Do children have choices of activities, whether in level of stimulation, physical engagement (e.g., gross or fine motor, standing or sitting).
- Are toys and materials clearly organised and accessible by children without adult assistance? Can children help maintain their own well-ordered environment?
- Do children have chairs, stools, and/or floor seating available, some specifically designed for their size, and in a variety of textures, heights, and levels of firmness?
- Is there a quiet, individual space where the child can choose to go to “reset”, perhaps with a rocking chair, headphones (with or without music), fish bowl, and hand-size fidgets (e.g., squeeze balls of varying textures and firmness levels)?

3. Promote independence and responsibility

- Can my child provide for their own needs, such as access to water, healthy snacks, and bathroom facilities, without adult assistance?
- Does my child have a quiet place to go to be alone, whether to enjoy solitary activities, just sit and daydream, or to reset if needed? Does she have access to this place whenever she desires or needs it?
- Does my child get uninterrupted time to himself to explore activities that he chooses?
- Is my child's living and sleeping space structured so that she can access and maintain it herself, from choosing clothes to wear to making her own bed each day?
- When my child has a challenge, does he have the opportunity to solve it himself?



These do not mean that our children need unlimited freedom and unsupervised or uncontrolled lives. Children have limited judgement, and we, as the adults, are responsible to care for them and ensure their safety. However, we are able, with careful, conscious forethought, to help set up prepared environments, which support children's developmental needs. Ultimately, this will help them move toward an independent adulthood and prepare them for future challenges.