

Sensory Play

A guide for parents, teachers, and other caregivers

Sensory play involves activities that allow children to explore and experience the world through their senses.

These include touch, sight, sound, taste, smell, movement, and balance, as well as the awareness of their body's position and movement.

For autistic children, sensory play can offer enjoyable opportunities to explore their environment, discover new interests, and participate in shared activities.

Some children enjoy jumping, swinging, or spinning. Others may prefer watching bubbles, exploring different textures, listening to familiar sounds, or arranging objects in particular ways.

What one child finds enjoyable, or comforting may be uncomfortable or overwhelming for another.

The starting point is not the activity we want the child to try. It is the sensory experience the child is already interested in exploring.

Why Is Sensory Play Important?

Sensory play can support different aspects of a child's development and everyday participation.

Depending on the child's individual needs and interests, it may provide opportunities to:

- Explore different textures, sounds, movements, and visual experiences at a comfortable pace.
- Discover enjoyable activities that may help with self-regulation.
- Develop body awareness, coordination, and motor skills.
- Practise making choices, expressing preferences, and communicating with others.
- Share enjoyable experiences with family members, teachers, and peers.
- Build familiarity with new materials and activities through gradual, supported exploration.

Sensory play does not need to have a specific teaching objective to be valuable.

Sometimes, the opportunity to enjoy an activity independently or share a pleasant experience with another person is meaningful in itself.

Begin by Observing the Child

Before introducing new sensory activities, spend time observing what the child already enjoys.

Does the child seek movement by jumping, rocking, or running? Do they enjoy watching objects spin, exploring particular textures, or listening to familiar sounds?

Are there sensory experiences they consistently avoid?

Notice how they respond when an activity begins, continues, or stops.

A child may reach towards an object, smile, vocalize, or repeat an action to indicate interest. They may move away, turn their head, become distressed, or stop participating when an experience becomes uncomfortable.

These responses can help guide your choices.

However, do not assume that a particular movement or expression always has the same meaning. Consider the child's individual communication patterns and the circumstances surrounding their response.

Offer a small number of activities and allow the child to explore without pressure.

There is no need to introduce every sensory experience or encourage the child to tolerate something they find distressing.

Sensory Play Ideas

The following activities provide different opportunities for sensory exploration. Choose those that match the child's interests, abilities, and comfort level.



1. Touch and Texture

Explore different materials through touching, squeezing, pressing, rolling, or scooping.

Activities to try: Playdough, clay, kinetic sand, water play, textured fabrics, or a sensory box containing large, familiar objects.

Allow the child to use a spoon, scoop, or other tool if they prefer not to touch the materials directly.

Safety: Avoid water beads and small loose materials for children who may put objects in their mouths. Choose age-appropriate, non-toxic materials and supervise water play.



2. Movement and Balance

Movement activities provide opportunities to explore balance, body position, and changes in movement.

Activities to try: Gentle rocking, walking along a marked path, stepping over cushions, crawling through a play tunnel, or playing with a large therapy ball.

Some children may also enjoy swinging or jumping on a suitable trampoline with appropriate supervision.

Safety: Use stable, age-appropriate equipment. Avoid rapid or prolonged spinning, and stop if the child becomes dizzy, distressed, or uncomfortable.



3. Sound

Sound-based activities allow children to explore rhythm, volume, and different auditory experiences.

Activities to try: Gentle musical instruments, familiar songs, tapping objects together, listening to nature sounds, or creating simple rhythms.

Let the child control when the sound begins and ends whenever possible.

For children with sound sensitivities, quieter activities or observing a musical instrument without playing it may be more comfortable.

Safety: Keep sound levels comfortable. Do not use loud music or repeated unexpected sounds to encourage a child to tolerate noise.

4. Sight and Visual Exploration



Visual activities can provide opportunities to explore colour, movement, patterns, and visual attention.

Activities to try: Watching bubbles float, sorting colourful blocks, exploring picture books, following the movement of a rolling ball, or watching a securely sealed sensory bottle.

Some children enjoy observing moving objects repeatedly. Others may prefer still images, familiar patterns, or arranging objects in a particular order.

Safety: Avoid flashing lights or intense visual effects that cause discomfort. Ensure sensory bottles are securely sealed and cannot be opened.

5. Smell



Familiar, mild scents can offer opportunities to explore different smells.

Activities to try: Smelling fresh fruit, herbs, flowers, or familiar foods during everyday routines.

Allow the child to approach or move away from the scent according to their preference.

Safety: Avoid concentrated essential oils, strong fragrances, and unfamiliar substances that may cause irritation or allergic reactions.



6. Taste and Food Textures

Food exploration can provide opportunities to experience different tastes, temperatures, and textures.

Activities to try: Exploring familiar foods with different textures, such as smooth yogurt, soft fruit, or crunchy crackers.

The child may begin by looking at, touching, or smelling a food without tasting it.

Respect their preferences and allow them to decide whether they wish to try something.

Safety: Consider food allergies, choking risks, and individual swallowing or feeding difficulties. Avoid pressuring a child to taste unfamiliar foods.



7. Body Awareness and Resistance Activities

Activities involving pushing, pulling, carrying, or pressing against objects can provide information about body position and movement.

Activities to try: Pushing a lightweight laundry basket, carrying soft toys, squeezing playdough, crawling through a tunnel, or gently pushing against a wall.

Some children enjoy firm touch or pressure, while others find it uncomfortable.

Safety: Never impose hugs, restraint, or deep pressure. Weighted blankets and other weighted equipment should not be used routinely as sensory-play tools without appropriate individualized safety guidance.

How to Make Sensory Play Meaningful

The way we introduce and participate in sensory play can be just as important as the materials we choose.

Follow the child's lead

Begin with activities the child already enjoys. Allow them to choose what to explore, how to use the materials, and when to stop.

Join without taking over

Sit nearby and observe. If the child appears comfortable with your participation, join their activity rather than immediately directing them towards a different one.

Introduce new experiences gradually

Offer one unfamiliar material or variation at a time. Allow the child to observe before participating and avoid insisting on direct contact.

Provide opportunities for communication

Offer simple choices and respond to gestures, vocalizations, eye gaze, pictures, or other ways the child indicates what they want.

Recognize when a break is needed

Notice signs of discomfort, fatigue, or overstimulation. Make it easy for the child to pause, move away, or return to a familiar activity.

Keep the experience safe and enjoyable

Choose materials suited to the child's developmental abilities and individual safety needs. Supervise activities involving water, movement equipment, food, or small objects.

From Sensory Play to Shared Learning

Sensory play can also create natural opportunities for communication and interaction.

Imagine a child who enjoys watching bubbles.

Rather than immediately asking the child to identify colours, count bubbles, or imitate words, begin by allowing them to enjoy the experience.

Observe how they respond when the bubbles appear and what they do when the activity pauses.

Do they look towards the bubble container, reach for it, make a sound, or move closer to you?

These responses may provide an opportunity for a simple, meaningful exchange.

You might acknowledge their interest, say "more bubbles," and begin blowing again.

Over time, the child may discover additional ways to request the activity, share their enjoyment, or invite you to participate.

A similar approach can be used with movement activities, favourite sounds, or familiar sensory materials.

The important point is that communication and learning grow naturally from an activity that already has meaning for the child.

We do not need to interrupt an enjoyable experience to turn every moment into a teaching exercise.

Final Thoughts

Sensory play does not need to be complicated, expensive, or carefully structured.

A familiar household object, a favourite movement activity, or a few minutes of shared exploration may provide a meaningful opportunity for enjoyment, connection, and learning.

What matters is understanding the child's individual sensory preferences and creating opportunities that respect their comfort, interests, and choices.

Some children will enjoy exploring new sensory experiences. Others may prefer familiar activities or need more time before approaching something different.

Both responses deserve respect.

When we observe carefully, follow the child's lead, and adapt our participation to their needs, sensory play can become much more than an activity.

It becomes an opportunity to understand how the child experiences the world—and to connect with them through that experience.