

# HOME & CLASSROOM

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*Sensory*



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# INHERITING SELF-CONTROL

Why self-regulation is not just *taught*, it's *caught*.

Barbara Mitchell, LMHC, Social Emotional Development Educator

Young children elicit unusual ways of interacting from adults; we use cooing, rocking, and vocal pitches that we would never use with adults. The instinct to hug tight, make a face at, use a silly sing-song voice with, or feel the dense weight of a baby is a universal pull. We see the instinct across ages; young children carrying around their baby dolls, and even the most reticent member in a nursing home lighting up and responding with jovial agility at a child's invitation to play. Even anthropologists note that conquest civilizations such as the Romans and Greeks cosseted their young children, creating environments and structuring their care in such a way that demonstrated an awareness of the unique needs of children.<sup>1</sup>

We intuitively know what researchers and behaviorists have identified; children's internal world and psychological experiences need to be bridged and developed through their interactions with those who have more experience.

This requires the adult to honor the child's uniqueness and perspective while providing the guidance and structure that helps them make sense of their sensations, thoughts, and feelings. It is a big task for the adult to tune into the child, and connect the child's experience to their own (empathy); and then to assist the child in understanding and then helping children cope (scaffolding).

These nurturing interactions pass on from generation to generation, but what happens when these interactions do not come as easily as depicted or are not as obvious to us as we expected them to be? Often, adults are as equally drawn to interacting with children as they are fearful of ensuring that they are interacting in the right way. Adults may be uncomfortable

with the questions and needs that children bring into our awareness. How then do we help our child cope with their thoughts and feelings in a way that builds their emotion-regulation skills when we sometimes struggle too – even when we have an adult's lifetime worth of experience?

Historical understanding of human behavior, founded on the shoulders of giants such as John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Donald Winnicott, and Abraham Maslow, has paved the way for more recent iterations of Attachment and Object Relations Theory by researchers and clinicians that can illuminate some of these nearly imperceptible signals to help us understand what makes a quality interaction with an infant or young child. This can give us a baseline

understanding of how to follow our instincts when interacting with children in an authentic and genuine way that honors both ourselves and the child.

A glance into the comprehensive bodies of research summarized in *Theraplay* by Phyllis B. Booth and Ann M. Jernberg<sup>2</sup> reveal that these soothing interactions are remarkably tied together by a single overarching commonality: the role of sensory engagement in the development of self-regulation. Not only sensory engagement, but right-brain, limbic system engagement through responsive connectedness between child and caregiver through what practitioners term co-regulation.

These seemingly superfluous interactions are actually primarily responsible for the development of the important life skill that contributes to self-control, delayed gratification, impulse control,

***“...children's internal world and psychological experiences need to be bridged and developed through their interactions with those who have more experience.”***

and the ability to communicate effectively during high-intensity emotions. Silly sing-song voices, and moments of synchronicity of emotion that seem like the afterthought of caring for a child

after safety and health, are in fact just as vital to survival and have repercussions of their own as development progresses.

As caregivers co-regulate their young children (a caregiver humming to a fussing baby while holding him tight and swaying back and forth) they create an experience for the child to “borrow” from or reference in the future.

Repeated experience after experience becomes ingrained deeply into the child's implicit memory or what we might call muscle memory. The same way a basketball player hones their free throw shot after shot for years until they can do it without thinking - first with a coach, and then on their own once they know what they're doing-children need a co-regulator to coach them

through their emotional experiences minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, until the child develops the ability to do it on their own. But unlike a coach who guides and corrects, the caregiver must first do for the child, the caregiver must act as the container for the too-big, too-new emotions, and once they have contained it, guide and bring the child through the emotion helping them find equilibrium once again.

Each interaction of co-regulation adds to the child's resume of experience with their emotions and small experience after small experience adds to their right-brain "muscle memory" for them to draw from when caregiver is not around. We often tell kids not to cry, or to calm their bodies without ever giving them an experience to reference first. We have to be the providers of this experience for them before they can internalize how to sooth themselves.

What does this mean for how we interact with children?

*Daniel Siegel breaks down these co-regulation experiences according to the following components in his book **Parenting From the Inside Out**.<sup>3</sup>*

*Attunement – Aligning your own internal state with those of your children. Often accomplished by the contingent sharing and coordination of non-verbal signals.*

*Balance – The regulation that the physical presence and the attuned communication of the parent provide to the immature and growing brain of the child.*

*Coherence – the outcome of successful parent-mediated balance in which the brain becomes adaptive, stable, and flexible to adjust to changing environmental demands.*

We can begin to implement these concepts with two simple applications.

- 1) Spend more time observing your child. This will help you to practice attunement and by learning their non-verbal signals. It also helps us to avoid assuming we know what our child is communicating and instead helps us to practice curiosity about who our child is. With practiced and repeated observing, your ability to identify minute changes in non-verbal signals will lead to balancing.
- 2) Practice thinking of yourself and your child as a unit, Donald Winnicott is often quoted in regard to attachment; "there is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone" meaning the child's experience of the world is indistinguishable from how they experience themselves through the eyes of their primary caregiver. As is true of all human interactions children respond to the primary caregiver in a relational dance and take many of their cues from the adult. This is true for the adult in the relationship as well, we are often unknowingly responding to our *feelings* about how our child is feeling. Bringing this awareness of the give and take between yourself and your child is vital for creating synchrony that fosters self-regulation and coherence.

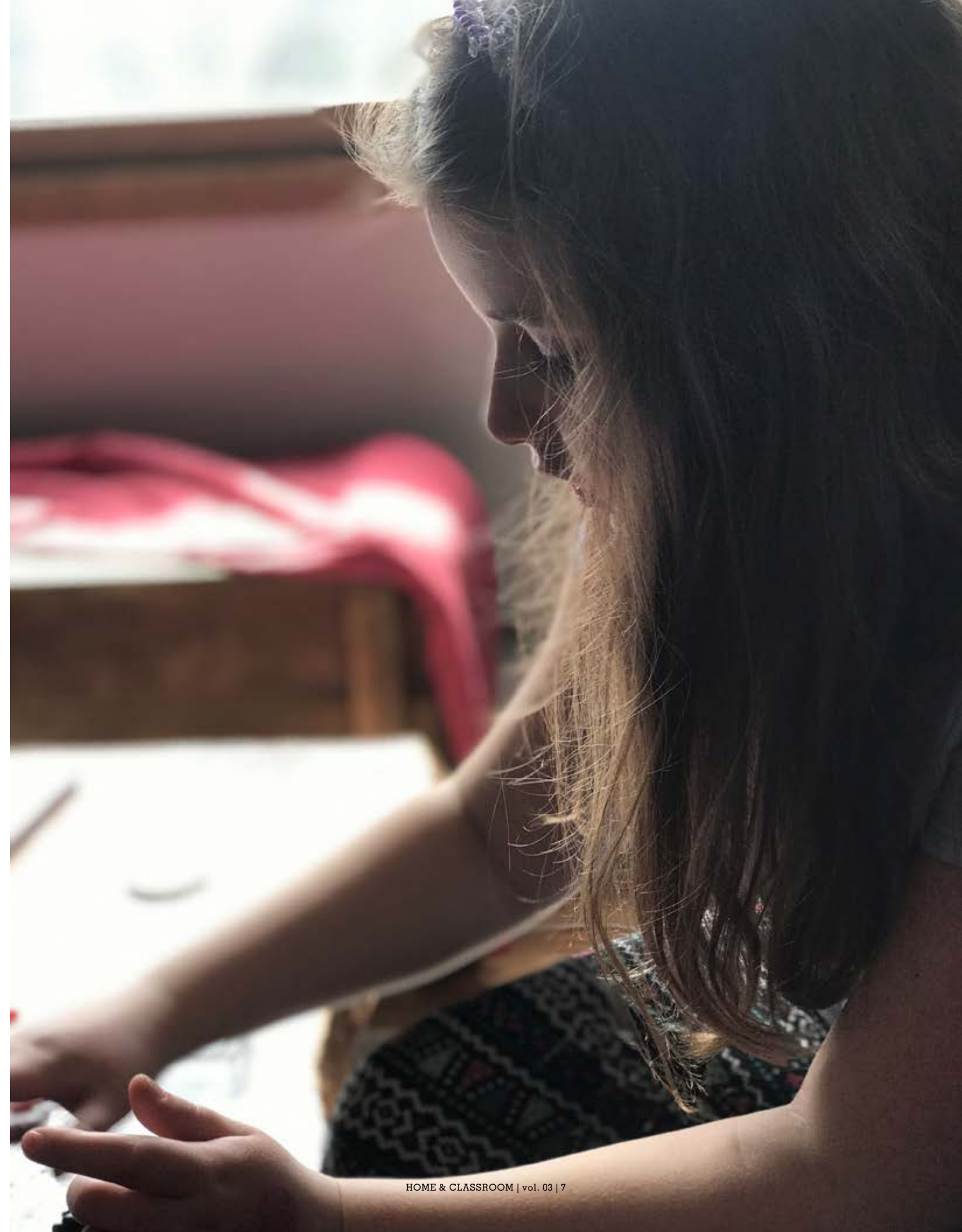
As you begin to bring these new concepts into your interactions with children remember that it will take time to grow these new skills, and it will take practice and patience as you learn new ways of interacting. Just as with any skill, this is a dynamic process that requires persistence, and effort. If it feels challenging, awkward, and time consuming, you are feeling the indicators that you are doing something right!

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Rawson, B. (2009). *Children and childhood in Roman Italy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Booth, P. B., & Jernberg, A. M. (2010). *Theraplay: helping parents and children build better relationships through attachment-based play*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>3</sup> Siegel, D. J., & Hartzell, M. (2017). *Parenting from the inside out: how a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive*. New York: Perigee Books.



# It's Too Delicious

by Abbe Kovacik

Temperament describes the way in which we approach and respond to the world. Understanding temperament can help us to nurture a child's development. Children who have an "active temperament" may be highly sensitive and very aware of their environment. They may be uncomfortable with the texture of their clothing, the sounds in a classroom, or the firmness of their chair. Less sensitive children, or those with a "flexible temperament" may be more tolerant of environmental sensations but may also be slow to respond to stimulus.

Much like the [Princess and the Pea](#); for some children even the slightest sensory input can be uncomfortable. My youngest son, Adin, really hated socks with rigid seams. Always looking for the teachable moment; I turned his deep aversion of "scratchy socks" into a research study. We purchased a variety of socks, examined their seams, created a grid to record our observations, rated their comfort, and read books on how socks are made. Always a fan of humor, he giggled hilariously at a reading of ["There Are Rocks in My Socks," Said the Ox to the Fox](#) by Patricia Thomas.

It is clear to me that Adin, feisty in nature, approaches the world in a different manner than I do. He hears all parts of a musical composition. I hear the melody. He sees all of the varied hues of a sunset. I see the horizon. He can detect the specific aroma of a flower. I see a garden. His sensitivity to stimuli triggers his brain to respond both intellectually and emotionally. Through his eyes, and ears, and touch- the world is both beautiful and overwhelming. At age 7, upon taking a bite of chocolate cake, he explained, "That is so delicious; silky, sweet chocolate... bitter chocolate, and....nutty." I asked if he would like a slice. He said; "No." Holding his hands up in a stopping motion..."it is too delicious to have more!"

If you are interested in creating experiences to support a child's ability to receive, interpret, and effectively use information provided by all the senses see the Montessori inspired activities listed below.

## SMELLING BOTTLES

Easy to make smelling bottles will delight children. To make your own sensory bottles, put cotton balls into empty plastic spice bottles. Place a few drops of vanilla, lemon, or peppermint extract on each cotton ball. Put picture and word labels on the bottles. Make two of the same bottles so that children can match the bottles. It's best to start with only two or three pairs of bottles.



Photo credit: <https://livingmontessorinow.com/activity-of-the-week-diy-montessori-smelling-bottles/>

Visit [www.mamashappyhive.com/diy-montessori-inspired-scent-jars/](http://www.mamashappyhive.com/diy-montessori-inspired-scent-jars/) for some DIY tips.

## SOUND BOTTLES

Collect 10-12 small plastic bottles. Drinkable yogurt bottles work well; some with red tops and some with blue. Fill the bottles with rice, black eyed peas, dry pasta, salt etc. Make two of the same bottles for matching. Hot glue shut. Organize the bottles from softest to loudest sounds. Present them on a tray.

# OVERCOMING PROCESSING CHALLENGES

by Carrie Mitchell

My daughter has phenomenal hearing. If the garbage truck drives by, she notices. If someone is talking in another room, she listens. You can tell from the look on her face that she is checking who is in the room and what is going on. She is doing this with her ears because her eyes can't. My daughter has a visual impairment that prevents her from being able to see things that are more than 3 feet from her, and details of any object. She has cortical visual impairment, meaning her eyes function typically, but her brain does not interpret the information from the eyes the way a typically developing child's does. This is how her vision has been since she was born. As people with no experience with visually impaired children, for me and my husband, this meant figuring out how to help our daughter the best we could.

Imagine trying to look directly at an object and identify it, or reach and grab it, while viewing it through a kaleidoscope. Or trying to make eye contact with a person viewed the same way. This is how adults with cortical visual impairment have described what it is like. We had to learn, early on, that many regular baby toys would not be appropriate and that our approach to her vision would have to be totally intentional and unique.

Through online resources, therapists, and trial and error, we learned what worked best for our daughter. We discovered that reducing the effort of her other senses increased her ability to use her vision. A noisy room or an uncomfortable sitting position made looking at her toys much more difficult than a comfortable seat in a quiet room. Turning lights low and using backlighting for toys, or light-up toys helped. Figuring out which colors engaged her best worked. Presenting objects to her with a flat, single-colored background helped. Reflective and 3-dimensional items are more easily viewed than flat. Familiarity became important. Objects and people who she had seen many times were more easily viewed than novel.

Considering her senses is a constant practice for us; and should be for all people, especially for those with any sensory sensitivities or processing challenges. Over time, it becomes second nature to make modifications. My own hearing has improved simply because I spend all day with a visually impaired person. For the parent, therapist or teacher of any child, but especially those with developmental differences, it is most important to observe and understand that unique child's behaviors and needs. Only once observed and understood deeply, can a child begin to access their world for learning.



# EVERYONE NEEDS SOMETHING

by Colleen Sterling

There is an abundance of research that supports the practice of integrating children with special needs into the least-restrictive environment. This practice, called inclusion, creates opportunities for children with disabilities to learn in “typical” classroom settings. Children differ from one another in temperament, strengths, interests, and learning styles. Children who do not qualify for special education services may still need modifications or adaptations of materials to be successful.

Modifications are changes to learning objectives to meet each child’s individual learning needs. Accommodations help children learn the same material in different ways. Using a visual schedule for a child to assist with transitions is an accommodation that allows the child to follow the same daily routine successfully.

Assistive technology is any item, piece of equipment, or product that helps children participate in everyday activities in order to grow and learn. There are a variety of types of assistive technology that are used with children both in early childhood classrooms and at home. Assistive technology progresses from simple modifications to the use of high technology. Here are some examples in each area:

**SIMPLE MODIFICATIONS** include materials like pencil grips, fidget toys, noise cancelling headphones, plates with suction cups, weighted blankets, visual supports, individual schedules, behavior charts, or social stories.

**LOW TECHNOLOGY** are items that have batteries, are easy to use, and purchased from toy stores. For example: vibrating stuffed animals, timers, or toys with lights.

**MEDIUM TECHNOLOGY** has a learning curve; such as switches that activate a toy, communication devices that need to be programmed by an adult, walkers, and wheel chairs.

**HIGH TECHNOLOGY** include more advanced communication devices like hearing aids.

The majority of simple modifications and many low technology materials can be used for children with and without a disability. All medium and high technology, along with some simple and low technology assistive materials may need a specialist referral to acquire the product and to provide training on how to use it properly. Items and strategies in the simple modifications category are not necessarily simple to implement. Caregivers often need support and guidance when first using simple modifications like following a sensory diet or implementing visual schedules.

The use of some assistive technology draws attention to the person using it, so it is important for adults to build a community amongst children and themselves, accepting each person as they are. Everyone needs something different to meet their own unique needs.

## HOW TO BUILD A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY WHERE EVERYONE IS RESPECTED & INCLUDED

- Remove any physical barriers within your classroom that could prevent a child from participating and moving around independently. Every child should be able to physically access every part of your classroom.
- Include children with disabilities among their peers during group activities. For example a child in a wheel chair should be part of circle time not off to the side.
- Explain a child’s disability to other children in the classroom and highlight what they can do. For example, they can laugh, play and learn with everyone. Allow them to ask questions.
- Let all children practice using a child’s assistance technology or tool when appropriate. For example, it would be appropriate for children to use pencil grips, fidget toys, but not appropriate to share a child’s hearing aid or glasses. In some cases it is appropriate, but they should ask the child first and understand they need it because it is their tool. Sometimes trying the item can lower the stigma.
- Read books about inclusion and differences in your classroom.
- Model for your classroom that a child with a disability or need of an assistive device is accepted. This also includes children that may have challenging behaviors and difficulties with self-regulation.
- Use visual schedules and cues with the whole class.
- Teach all children how to take sensory breaks. Create a private space in your home or classroom where a child can be alone to self-regulate. Your calm down area can include picture books, stress balls, fidget toys, sensory putty, bubble wrap, liquid timers, and earmuffs/head phones.

## RESOURCES

TRAIID Program helps people learn about, obtain, and be able to use assistive technology service and devices: <https://www.justicecenter.ny.gov/traid-program>. Information line: 800-624-4143

Teacher tools on visual cues. <http://headstartinclusion.org/teacher-tools#visual>  
NABA: Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany <https://naba-vision.org/>

The Friday Knights Program at The College of Saint Rose. A structured and supportive recreational environment for children and adolescents ages 5-18 who need opportunities for social interaction beyond what is available through school settings or community recreation programs. Check out their website for more information and their application <https://www.strose.edu/academics/schools/school-of-education/campus-based-professional-groups/friday-knights-program/>



# every day SENSORY PLAY

take time to smell the roses

**M**aterials and experiences that stimulate an infant's sense of touch, smell, taste, movement, balance, internal sense of safety, sight and hearing are often called Sensory Play. Judging by the hundreds of Pinterest postings and YouTube videos about creating sensory play experiences, it's a topic that has captivated many people who work with and love young children.

Many parents and caregivers have been having fun creating dazzling sensory experiences for their children such as sensory bottles filled with olive oil, colored water and sparkling materials that flow between those with a lava lamp-like hypnotism. Others have created sensory walls, hanging a variety of textures within picture frames for children to explore textures like bristly, furry, feathery, knitted, silky, lacey, and wooly. These are wonderful sensory play ideas.

For many of us though, the DIY, crafty projects may seem a bit overwhelming or the time for creating them may never come. No worries, the beauty of sensory experiences is that they surround us each and every moment of each and every day! As caregivers we may just need to slow, down, observe the sensory input around us and intentionally share it with children.

Children are natural born scientists who gather information using their senses throughout the day. "Taking time to smell the roses" brings a richness of understanding along with enjoyment and appreciation to everyday experiences. Opportunities present themselves in our routine caregiving moments as well. Providing materials and the opportunities to explore is a wonderful way to enhance and support sensory play for infants and toddlers.

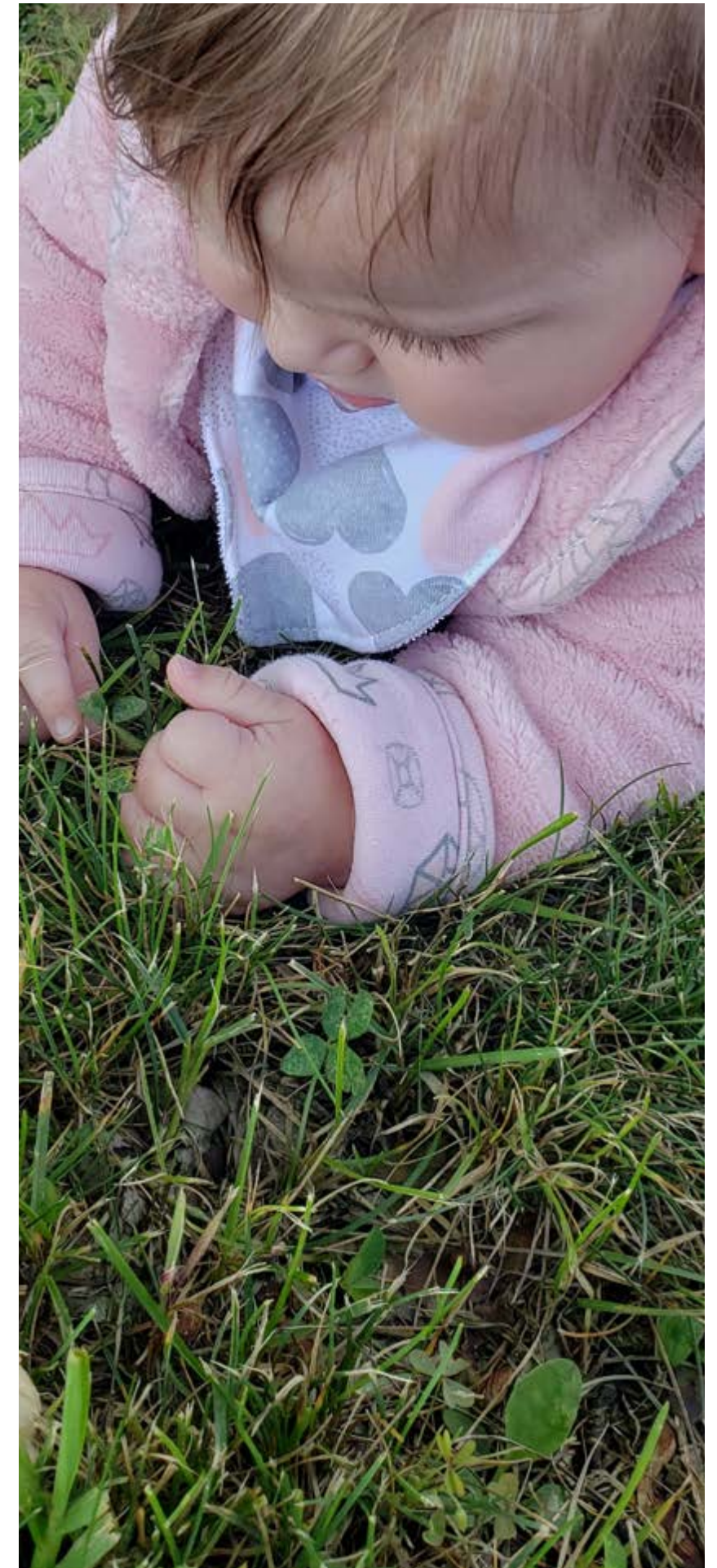
**/REST/** Cozy spaces in your care environment allow a child to soothe themselves and explore soft textures like high pile bath mats, super soft fleece baby blankets, silky pillows and furry stuffed animals or puppets. This stimulates the sense of touch and internal sense of safety.

**/LAP-SIT STORIES/** When children climb into your lap to share a story, your voice and the repetitive words you use to tell and re-tell the story stimulates the sense of hearing. The descriptive words give language to the experiences they've had and help to connect them to known words and concepts. The physical closeness and touch paired with this special moment stimulates the touch, hearing, sight and internal sense of safety.

**/FREE EXPLORATION/** Presenting everyday household items like plastic colanders, metal mixing bowls, shower loafas, silicone pot holders and Tupperware, for children to choose to play with, allows for children to explore the properties through banging, mouthing, dropping, grabbing, and sliding. Noticing and giving language to the things that your child is noticing like shadows, light reflections or a bird flying by also adds sensory input. These stimulate the senses connected to body movement, hearing, sight, and touch.

**/DIAPERING/** Your respectful touch, pace, and soothing language during diaper changes adds sensory understanding to the diaper changing process, the fabrics being felt as clothes and taken off and replaced and to a child's internal sense of safety. Simply talking to the child you are changing about what you are doing together is sensory input.

**/PRESENTED MATERIALS/** Many of our daily routines and activities present opportunities to share sensory experiences with children just by allowing them to "help you out" and participate fully in the experience. Older infants love the chance to wipe down tables with wet cloths. Younger infants may gain from just exploring the feel of a wet cloth. Giving children the chance to play with putting on and taking off shoes that are larger than theirs might be a



fun way to play with shoe laces. Younger infants may explore by pulling ribbons tied on each end through a shoe box top. Along with these materials the language you share will stimulate the sense of touch, movement and sight.

**/OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES/** Nature has so much to offer our young scientists. I love to watch toddlers navigate the weight and smoothness of rocks. Filling buckets with rocks and leaves and transporting them is a favorite on many playgrounds. Have you ever witnessed an infant's first exposure to grass? Laying on their tummy, hands in the grass, breeze blowing by, dog barking in the background, smell of a recent lawn mowing, prickly yet soft feel of the grass, grasping and releasing the blades of grass by the fistful and sharing all this with a trusted caregiver is stimulating all senses!

Whether infants are shaking DIY shaky eggs filled with buttons, sand and jingle bells or whether they are shaking the wind chimes in your back yard or a metal bowl full of blocks, they will be gaining information about these materials, it's properties, what they can expect from it, what they can do with it and where it fits into all of the previously gained information they have. Sensory experiences are all around us. Parents and caregivers are also still gaining from sensory experiences. Take a deep breath, a long look, get your hands dirty, taste something new and delightful, listen for an interesting sound or call an old friend, and reach up high, all the way to the sun, for a big stretch..... take it all in! Why not? Your children already are!



# MAMA

## mindful moment

with Kim Polstein

### COUNTDOWN TO CALM

Consider this; in 5 simple steps you can calm the chaos of life around you. There is evidence to support engaging your senses can reduce the effects of anxiety on your body. Anxiety is something that most us has experienced, whether it's something we deal with daily, or just on rare occasions. In times when we are feeling anxious or scared, our brain is signaling a stress response. This releases a hormone called Cortisol and activates our "fight, flight, freeze" system. When we are able to find awareness of this response, meaning, we can identify that we are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, we are more likely to regain control over our own body's survival mechanism.

Calming the survival instinct can be done by focusing on slow inhales and long exhales as well as by using mental grounding. Grounding is the conscious focused awareness to what is happening around you physically, either in the body or the environment. It's a way to help your brain to see "we are safe" rather than allow your brain to continue thinking "danger, danger, danger!"

This simple 5 step exercise can help you reconnect with your body, refocusing your brain to what is happening "here and now" rather than being swept up in the racing thoughts anxiety can often bring.

- 5...Acknowledge 5 things you can see.**
- 4...Acknowledge 4 things you can touch.**
- 3...Acknowledge 3 things you can hear.**
- 2...Acknowledge 2 things you can smell.**
- 1...Acknowledge one thing you can taste.**

Check out our Countdown to Calm tip card for practicing this technique with children of all ages.

Try this practice once a day and see where it takes you! Feel free to share your experiences with us on our Facebook page or by emailing [homeandclassroom@brightsideup.org](mailto:homeandclassroom@brightsideup.org).





by Lauren Cohen, The Wonder Room

We spend millions of dollars a year on stress reduction products and experiences to help us relax, recharge, become more productive and better aligned with our peers and loved ones. Massages, candlelit restaurants, beach vacations, yoga retreats, coloring books and knitting all have one thing in common: they are sensory experiences. We know we need to engage our senses, and children are no different. When we find ways to offer sensory experiences to children, we invite them into the same restorative world we create for ourselves. We must scale these practices to the size, abilities, interests and experiences of the child.

At The Wonder Room we have seen countless benefits when we present these activities as a regular part of our daily environment. The children play outside every day and the leaves, snow, sand, mud, bubbles and rocks are a playground for the senses. Inside, our large sensory bin is always filled with things to touch: pompoms, oats, pasta, lentils, and other bits and bobs for scooping, pouring, sorting, tonging, filling, dumping, and investigating. There is no shortage of sensory experiences in the classroom space including exploring art materials, handling manipulatives and extensive small world play set ups with a mix of natural and purchased materials. Together these are an essential part of our program and are an invaluable part of a preschooler's experience.

For me though, the "front table" is the most treasured sensory experience we offer. The materials on our large square front table change daily, but we typically use one of two enormous trays (purchased from a hardware store and meant to be placed under a washing machine or hot water heater). In those trays can be any combination of materials (rocks, pebbles, gems, play dough, small blocks, leaves, sticks, pumpkins, gourds, apples, shredded paper, bottle lids, snow, water, ice chunks, ice cubes, small plastic animals, acorns, pine cones, cars, tractors, oats, shaving cream, baking soda, food coloring, bubbles) and tools (cups of all sizes, pipettes, spoons, funnels, tongs, rolling pins, small beakers, scoops, measuring cups and spoons, sponges). The aspects of the front table



experience I love most are actually tangential to the sensory experience itself. The experience that awaits them here each day is unparalleled in its ability not only to expose them to the benefits of understanding sound, smell, taste, touch and sight, but to meet the same needs we seek in our own attempts at relaxation, balance and connection.

#### **CONVERSATION/NEW IDEAS**

Classmates come and go from the front table as they wish. Sometimes they are playing in another area of the school and they hear the excitement of a discovery made at the front table and they wander over and join in. Friends welcome new members, update them about the current play situations and explain their plans. Sometimes, deeply engrossed in their own play, a child will start a monologue about something remembered from home, or from a book, movie or show they've recently heard or seen. Once a child has the skills to convey their story in a compelling way, others will join the telling and the story will grow more complex or turn in a new direction. One day we had a round tray filled with palm sized flat stones, small pebbles

and a large set of plastic chameleons. We had the watercolors and brushes out. We had been reading Leo Lionni's *A Color of One's Own*. I imagined that everyone would want to paint the chameleons, rinse them off and then paint them again. Instead, some of the children saw that the watercolors changed the color of the water. A child decided he did not want the colored water near his area, and that the chameleon he was holding would not want the "polluted" water either. The children then spent about a half hour putting the chameleons on the larger dry rocks and using the pebbles to dam off the colored section of water. They negotiated through a series of scenarios to clean the water, mostly by diluting it with fresh water I provided at their request. The fixed location of the front table and the limited tools and materials there (we do get more supplies when they are needed but they are still much more limited than they are in, say, the sandbox) give the children an

ability to focus deeply. Because they are almost always standing (some do occasionally request a chair) their bodies are active and engaged and they can move about and around the experience. This combination of limits and freedom brings out an opportunity for complex conversations. Watching the group share new vocabulary, practice storytelling, explain, question, and take turns speaking is a joy to watch.

**SHARING/NEGOTIATING A SMALL SPACE**

Much cooperative play is about equality and fairness. You have a baby and I have a baby. We will give them a bath. Perhaps we put a puzzle together piece by piece and jockey for the opportunity to put the last piece in. We each have a car, but I want the red one and I'm going to need to wait until you are done with it and play with the blue one in the meantime. When we are at the front table with sensory materials, a lot of that kind of competition falls away. Our

bodies are busy, but we are relaxed. Many of the materials are very plentiful (gems, beads, sticks) or we are doing very different things with them (I am making muffins with the oats and you are trying to rake them away from an entire section of the tray with a small squeegee). Even though we are working side by side and using the same materials, over time the children show a lot of flexibility and cooperation. Sometimes a child has a very specific plan and we give her a separate tray and supplies, but the sensory experience is almost always either a shared journey or an individual endeavor supported by peers. The front table is the place in our school where one student can be using "all the cups" and their classmate either joins that play or finds a different tool or material and sets to work in parallel. Often children notice that another child is collecting and lining up, say, the green mini apple erasers, and will pass them over whenever a new one is unearthed. Having enough of the items out, giving children the freedom to come and go as long as the play is engrossing, and letting them move freely around the space allows the children to respect the work of their peers while also getting what they need.

Putting these experiences together daily requires a selection of materials and tools that can be used and combined over the course of the year. It is inexpensive and flexible. Children find great contentment and community at our front table. They are free to come and go, and they may stay for a long time or check in briefly. Sometimes eight or ten children crowd around the front table, other times one child stays long after the rest have moved along. But the benefits are the same as those we find when we feel the stretch of our muscles, hear the waves at the ocean, see the sparkle of the fireplace reflect off the silverware, smell the pine and dry leaf aroma of the woods in the fall, taste our hot coffee on a lazy morning, and touch the cool needles and warm wool of our hand work. And the children, like us, are ever striving to become their best selves.





**C**ertainly we know that growth and learning in all developmental areas in young children is reliant on input from their senses and use of their physical bodies; however, as children of all ages spend more and more time involved in indoor activities and interactions with various forms of technology, opportunities for physical and sensory learning experiences become much more limited in scope. Watching a video about leaves changing color in the autumn involves second hand sensory information of seeing the leaf colors, and of sound by listening to the auditory segments offered.

Imagine the greater breath of first hand sensory interactive experiences that become possible for children who actually take a walk in the woods in the autumn. They can hear the crunch and swish as they wade through the deep drifts of brown, dried leaves on the forest paths, look up and see the riotous display of a multitude of autumn leaf colors of those still on the trees, smell the scents of damp decaying leaves and moist earth hanging in the air, feel the difference between the dead crumbling leaves they pick up from the ground and the still fresh live smooth leaf they caught that was floating on the breeze, and, finally, if they think no one is watching, sneak a taste of the cool, moist dew droplets still present on the leaf in their hands. They were able to freely engage all five of their main senses and build all sorts of brain connections in a span of less than five minutes in a way that was natural, joyful, and non-stressful. Nature and sensory development just make so much sense together.

It is helpful to mentally prepare yourself for these experiences in nature. We are grown-ups. We have set goals and planned experiences and are prepared for all kinds of wonderful activities. It's what we DO. Ready yourself mentally to let your pre-conceived plans and itinerary for the event take a back seat to the children's ideas. As much as possible, let the children lead and control their own experiences. You may have planned on leaf comparing, but one child may become obsessed with patting springy cushions of moss while another is fascinated with unrolling the fuzzy fiddleheads on some ferns, and yet another has located some toad tadpoles

in a puddle. It's a good thing you brought collection containers. You might encourage children to use expressive vocabulary to explain what their senses are telling them, or maybe you will simply let the children be absorbed in their experience without adding the complexity or distraction of finding the right words to use. Very often you will find that as your walk progresses, and the novelty wears off a bit, the children may be more eager to focus on some of your planned activities or to practice using descriptive vocabulary.

### **SIGHT**

As you walk into the forest, field, or whatever natural area you have chosen, the sense of sight is almost always immediately engaged. There is just so much to see! One way to help children focus their sense of sight is with some pretend binoculars. These are easy to make by taping two toilet paper rolls together. Make them ahead of time and carry them in your pack until needed. Or even simpler, perhaps bring towel roll spyglasses. Somehow, looking through these pretend props helps children to eliminate distractions and really engage their sense of sight. A child could closely observe the structure of the hundreds of plants in the cushion of moss, or notice the brown spores on the unrolled fiddlehead. It might be a good time for your planned leaf comparing - notice the different sizes and shape patterns of leaves, or the different arrangements of the leaf veins in oak leaves versus maple leaves.

Collecting items is a wonderful activity for children. They will find many things they think are interesting to bring home - acorns, pine cones, bark bits, rocks, feathers, seeds, nuts, dead beetles (or possibly some live ones) are just a few possibilities. These could be great added to the sensory table when you get home, or for using in follow up scavenger hunt activities.

Another interesting activity I have tried is called Snapshot. It's pretty tricky, and works best with school age children. Have the group of children make a standing circle, with their backs to the center of the circle. The children hold their hands in front of their eyes and chant, "Take the

picture - SNAP!" On SNAP! The children quickly uncover their eyes then look out for one quick second, recover their eyes, turn to the center of the circle and sit. Pass out pads and crayons, and each child can draw something about what they saw. Another option is to take turns talking about what they saw. Repeat for as long as interest holds strong.

## SOUND

Often out in nature, the main sound we hear are the children's excited voices. But nature is full of interesting sounds and it can be fun to have a sound scavenger hunt as you walk. A sound scavenger hunt is a fun activity to help children really try to attend to what they hear. Prepare a set of sound cards for each child and place them on a book binding ring. Suggestions could include: children, birds singing, birds flying, a dog, the wind, trees swaying, leaves rustling, feet walking, and a frog. The goal is to shout out when you hear something on one of the cards. You could bring blank cards and add pictures of any unrepresented sounds that children may identify.

Making sounds in nature is another activity children will immediately enjoy. They can try using rocks to pound on things like other rocks, trees, the ground, and stumps. Help them compare different tones and pitches produced by pounding different objects in different places or with different intensities. The paper towel spyglasses can also be used for this, or simply grab a comfortably thick stick to add sounds made by swirling leaves around or swatting low branches. Of course you will need to set some limits here to ensure they do not use their sound instruments on each other!

Identifying the source of sounds in natural areas can be very challenging. I like to play a game called Compass Sounds. The children all sit in a circle. To get them prepared to play we may start with a little peaceful breathing, and children listen as they slowly breathe air into their belly, and then slowly hiss it out. We also try seeing if we can hear our own heartbeat. Sometimes it helps if you plug your ears for this.

We listen for the sound of our bodies moving as we wriggle and hear leaves rustle under our legs. To play the game, the child whose turn it is closes their eyes, and simply points their arm in the direction of a sound they hear. Then they can tell us the sound if they know it, or perhaps someone else will know it.

## TOUCH

Touching is probably children's favorite, and there are so many wonderful textures to experience out in nature and so many words to express them - rough/smooth, thick/thin, fuzzy/silky, scratchy/soft, round/square, pointy/curvy, wet/dry, etc. Children can add to the scavenger hunt collections things they find with new or interesting textures and bring them home. Another interesting touch souvenir can be created with play-dough. Children can smoosh a chunk of play-dough to a nice flat pancake in their hands, and then drape the pancake over an object with an interesting texture and push it down to create a "texture print" of the item. This is a great way to save the texture of tree bark. Try taking a texture print of a very deeply grooved tree such as maple or oak, and then one of a smoother tree, such as silver birch or sycamore. Smooth a sheet of play-dough over various sections of a boulder for different textures from the same item. For another play-dough choice the children could wait until they get home and then roll out a very large thick slab of play-dough, press their collected items in one at a time and then remove them, to leave imprints of each item in the play-dough. After it air dries, the children can re-examine their play-dough imprints, and try to figure out which of the collection items made each imprint.



## SMELL

The sense of smell is probably my own personal favorite as I wander through nature. I continually will sample the leaves of plants that I encounter as I walk along by tearing them up and sniffing, and I offer a whiff of interesting smelling ones to the children. Some pleasant ones to try are goldenrod, pine needles, wintergreen, wild mints, wild onions, and garlic mustard. Look them up on the internet to see what they look like. Of course, all kinds of wildflowers have lovely smells. Just be careful not to pick too many, you want more to be able to come back next year!

If you and the children collect some samples in bags, when you get home you can make a matching game. Put a small amount of each item in two containers and then mix the containers up. The challenge for the children is to sniff each

container, and then to find the matching pairs. You can get creative with your scented items. Give children some small shovels and let them go digging. Earth from different locations or digging depths has different smells. See if children can discern that. Take some soil samples home.

It is amazing the way that just one walk in the woods with a child can provide so many different opportunities for them to explore their world using their five senses. Nature and sensory experiences just naturally go hand-in-hand. Taking nature walks with children makes perfect sense, and is great for adults and children alike.

As always, remember to take safety and health precautions when enjoying the outdoors!



# Engaging the Senses in the Natural World



by Irina Cardoso



**A**s someone who grew up on a Caribbean island with only two perceptible seasons, summer and winter, I truly delight in the ability to experience all four seasons in Upstate New York. This is one of the reasons why, as an early childhood educator, going outside with children during all seasons has become indispensable. I have observed preschoolers sense of joy and wonder as they discover the cycles of the natural world. Exploring the outdoors is one of the most spontaneous and effortless ways to engage in sensory experiences. Sensory experiences in nature not only aid the development of gross motor skills, self-regulation, problem solving and development of the imagination; but also ensure a sense of belonging and care for the living world beyond the classroom and home. Even during the times of the year when we spend time indoors, there are many opportunities to connect with nature, either by being outside or by bringing the outside in.

### THE SOUND OF BIRDS IS THE SOUND OF WINTER

Pulling attention from the silence of winter to the birdsongs, wakes up children's senses. Go on a walk and encourage children to be silent and look up in to the tree tops. Caregivers can also set up bird feeders near windows accessible to the children. They can participate in filling the birdfeeders with sunflower seeds. Add extra seeds to the sensory table or bin, for stimulating touch and scientific explorations. Make feeding the birds a routine to facilitate a conservationist disposition in children. You can extend learning

*In winter  
all the singing is in  
the tops of the trees*

*Mary Oliver*

by setting books with bird songs close to windows. The Backyard Song Book, from the Cornell Cooperative extension, is a fun resource for children.

Make a sound map of your neighborhood or close by natural spaces. You can extend this activity into a visual one by making a color map every of season in your neighborhood or nearby natural environments. Ask children about what they notice. The song: "Little Bird, Little Bird," interpreted by Elizabeth Mitchell, can be learned and sung by children and invoke further curiosity about birdsongs.

### GATHERING NATURE

Collecting parts of nature to bring inside aids awareness of scientific processes. Outdoor collections can be used for observation and creative play though all seasons. Make collages of loose parts found outside and tell stories. Facilitate discussions and exploration of the textures of the materials.

### MAPPING THE INSIDE LIGHT

Playing with shadow and light is another sensory experience the fascinates preschoolers. Ask questions about how the light from the sun affects them outside and inside. Turn the lights off and do a light scavenger hunt. Give the children tape so they can mark where they see the light from outside coming in. Come back to their markings an hour later and experience their wonder as the light has moved.

### LITTLE HANDS CAN TOUCH THE SOIL AND GROW A PICKING GARDEN

Find out about easy to grow edibles that children can freely pick and try. You might see even those "greens averse" preschoolers occasionally pick a leaf of cilantro and delight in the taste. Some edibles that are safe for children are carrots, mint, radishes, bush beans, snap peas and dill.

### GROWING HERBS

You can harvest and dry your herbs to make tea in the winter. Children can learn to choose their preferred teas by smelling the herbs. I remember the interesting impressions of children in my classroom with smelling teas and spices. On a bright spring or late fall day, make sun tea. Bring your herbs outside and let the children smell their choice and let the sun make their tea.

### MUD KITCHENS ARE GOLDEN

A mud kitchen is a popular resource to have in your program. Even though it can be a messy endeavor, remember that young children love messy play. Having extra clothes is useful, or open the mud kitchen close to the end of the day. Add pine cones, rocks, evergreen hardy leaves, shells, wood coins, and join in the fun.

When we present opportunities for children to enjoy the outdoors through their senses; we help them be a little freer, a little more risk taking, and to know more deeply how to share in the beauty of our natural world.



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# THE PROPRIOCEPTIVE SYSTEM

By Patricia Curley, M.S., OTR/L, Pediatric Occupational Therapist

## Why is it important to Early Childhood Development?

The proprioceptive system senses the position, location, orientation and movement of the body muscles and joints.<sup>1</sup> Proprioception is activated by receptors in the body (skin, muscles and joints) that connect with the brain through the nervous system so that a person knows what his or her body is doing without using their vision.<sup>2</sup> The proprioceptive sense helps us to understand where our body parts are in relation to each other, what our body parts are doing, and how much effort is required to do different actions/tasks.<sup>3</sup> Proprioception begins to develop in the womb, when a baby presses her arm against the uterine wall, her proprioceptive and tactile receptors are activated and she begins to learn about her body and how it moves.<sup>3</sup>

The proprioceptive system is important to early childhood development for many reasons. The proprioceptive system is responsible for coordinated movement.<sup>3</sup> Proprioception is the reason a young child can learn to bring a fork to their mouth without stabbing their face, or can walk across a room without bumping into furniture or other people. The proprioceptive system also allows us to use the correct amount of force for different activities.<sup>3</sup> For example, proprioception impacts how hard a young child pushes down on a crayon when coloring on paper or how hard they throw a ball toward a friend standing a few feet away.

When a child's proprioceptive system is not functioning efficiently, they can present with movement that is clumsy and uncoordinated. Poor proprioception can impact a child's motor planning which negatively impacts their ability to learn how to do new things.<sup>2</sup> Activities such as going up and down stairs, cutting, throwing and catching a ball, and riding a bike can be very hard for children with proprioceptive dysfunction. They can also present with sensory seeking behaviors (that provide proprioceptive input) such as rough play, banging their head, excessive chewing on clothing or toys, biting others, toe walking, teeth grinding, pushing or banging into others and being rough with toys and crayons.<sup>2</sup>

Another area of challenge for children with proprioceptive dysfunction is poor postural control which leads to difficulty with sitting up straight, inability to stand on one foot and resting their head on the table or desk while working.<sup>2</sup> Other possible characteristics of proprioceptive challenge include using too much or too little force on pencils, scissors, objects and people, looking at their body parts (hands/feet) when completing simple tasks, falling out of their seat and constantly being on the move.<sup>4</sup> Proprioceptive dysfunction in young children often negatively impacts their motor planning and body awareness which affects their ability to be successful with daily tasks.<sup>2</sup>

What activities can we do with young children to provide proprioception? Engaging the proprioceptive system is often referred to as heavy work. The following are play based activities that provide proprioceptive input: weight bearing activities (such as crawling, animal walks, wheelbarrow walks, yoga, pushups), resistance activities (pushing or pulling a wagon, shopping cart etc.), heavy lifting (books, weighted balls or bean bags, gallon of milk etc.), running, jumping, chewing on crunchy foods, deep pressure massages, hugs, sitting in a beanbag chair, climbing on playground equipment, hanging from monkey bars, swimming, and drinking a thick liquid through a straw.<sup>4</sup> These activities can be completed with children at home, school or in daycare environments.

Engaging in the aforementioned activities can assist a young child with learning about their bodies, improve their ability to gauge their movements, improve motor planning and improve a child's overall organization and ability to learn. If a child is demonstrating significant difficulty with motor and/or proprioceptive function, it is highly recommended that these concerns are discussed with the child's pediatrician and that the child is referred to a qualified pediatric occupational therapist for a complete evaluation.

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# SOAK IT ALL IN

EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES THAT ALLOW CHILDREN TO USE ALL OF THEIR SENSES

by Tami Callister

Children and adults learn best and retain the most information when they engage their senses. Think about some of your most favorite memories. It's hard to think about them without also thinking about one or more of the sensory experiences associated with them. Some of my most memorable moments involve family time spent digging our toes into the sand, listening to the waves, listening to my children's laughter, watching everything unfold, feeling the breeze coming gently off the ocean, feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin, the gentle touch of my husband's hand on my arm as we shared the moment of joy, feeling the gentle spray of water on my face, tasting the mild taste of salt as the spray hit my lips, smelling that ocean smell and enjoying that physiological response that happy moments like those brings. Soaking it all in!

It's a phrase that has meaning. We absorb information through our senses. Soak it all in and create/retain incredible memories that we can replay over and over again as sensory experiences trigger those memories. If I walk on the beach today, those wonderful memories come flooding back and are triggered because they are based in deep sensory rich experiences.

If I close my eyes, I can picture my infant daughter and feel the sensation of her in my arms for the first time. We say we "go to our happy place." Sensory experiences build our happy place.

Sensory development and the use of the senses is a crucial part of how children perceive the world and gain knowledge. Children's brains are made up of trillions of brain cells called neurons and the connections between those neurons are called synapses. The first three years of every child's life is a critical period when the most rapid brain growth occurs. Stimulation of the senses or sensory stimulation experiences are important for brain development and for

strengthening sensory related synapses and functions. As children grow and experiences repeat, those synapses remain, if experiences do not repeat then those synapses are pruned or disappear. This is referred to as experience dependent plasticity or neuroplasticity. The wonderful thing about brain architecture in early childhood is that neuroplasticity allows the brain to change neural pathways or synapses to rewire the brain.

For example, Suzy, an 18-month-old, is playing and the new puppy jumps on her and scares her. She now associates puppies with a negative experience. Her parents slowly reintroduce the puppy providing multiple opportunities to safely pet and interact with the puppy. The positive interactions gradually overshadow the initial negative experience so that puppy now triggers happy memories and feelings instead of terrifying ones.

I don't think we have to get into the trillions of synapses that happen at each stage of development, but we do need to understand that exploration through the senses is how we learn and build healthy brains. Information through the senses is sent to the brain via the central nervous system. This process, called sensory integration or processing, is how our body then understands how to respond to sensory information over time. For some children in your care, they may respond atypically to sensory information (for example, scream inconsolably if the lights are dimmed) which in turn can create a number of difficulties in learning, development, and behavior.

This atypical processing is most commonly referred to as sensory processing disorder. If you notice children who have heightened or limited responses consistently, you should seek advice from a specialist. This is really important because sensory processing disorders can look

similar to behaviors that occur as a result of trauma experiences (as in the example above, a child screaming inconsolably when the lights are dimmed may be due to a processing issue but may also be due to trauma and darkness not being safe).

Providing opportunities for children to actively use their senses as they explore during sensory play is crucial to brain development. Sensory play not only helps build synapses in the brain's pathways, it also increases the child's ability to complete more complex tasks, supports cognitive growth, language development, fine and gross motor skill development, social skills, and problem-solving skills. It's a win-win!

Sensory play allows children to safely experience sights, sounds, textures, movement, and tastes that will help them build tolerance to sensory experiences. Repeated exposure to sensory experiences also helps children refine their tolerance for different sensory information which helps their brain create stronger connections to process and appropriately respond to sensory information. It helps them understand what is safe, what is dangerous, and what is enjoyable.

Children may be timid or unsure about touching the squishy stuff inside the pumpkin or climbing up the slide to slide down or engaging in any number of new sensory experiences. In a secure environment, as the experiences are repeated and expanded upon, children let go of their worries, enjoy the play, and learn! This isn't a cognitive thought process but rather a reaction to the sensory memories previously stored in their brain. Sensory play helps shape the choices children make, impacts their behavior and also their responses. They learn to filter out sensory information that they don't need to pay attention to (children talking on the other side of the room, the siren blaring, etc) as they engage in more quality interactions with peers.

When you are planning for the children's day, it's important to plan in such a way that you are exposing the children to a variety of sensory experiences so that the development of efficient sensory processing occurs. I respond to sensory information in a different way than someone else might. I might prefer muted paler colors, less cluttered spaces, lower lighting, and soothing rhythmic music. I enjoy getting my hands dirty and smelling the dirt as I dig and plant whereas others may not. I don't like the sensation of spinning while others may. I love being alone curled up with a good book and hate the feeling of busy crowded places. It's important as caregivers to think about what you positively respond to in regards to your senses and consider that what pleases your senses (your preferences) may not be the preference of every child or team member. Make sure that you are including activities that may not be in your sensory preferences.

***Sensory play helps shape the choices children make, impacts their behavior and also their responses.***

Explore how colors, sounds, movements, tactile media such as sand or playdough make the children feel. Teach children mindfulness by asking questions like

how does it feel? What does it smell like? What sound does it make? How does it taste? What does it look like? As they answer these questions you will also learn their preferences and reinforce preference differences as being normal.

You could read the book "No Ordinary Apple - A Story About eating Mindfully" by Sarah Marlowe. It's a story that explores the apple's nuances of colors, temperature, feeling, and the sound it makes when being bitten into and how sweet and wonderful it tastes.

You could read "The Listening Walk" by Paul Showers. This story can be adapted for younger children. It's about a little girl and her father who take a quiet walk and identify the sounds around them. You could extend the activity by taking listening walks with the children.



## THE SENSORY TABLE

The sensory table is underrated! Not only is it a place where children can explore and experiment with textures, temperatures, solids and liquids, it is also a place that often calms the central nervous system supporting children's ability to reduce anxiety, agitation, and stress. All materials should reflect the backgrounds, knowledge, abilities, and experiences of the diverse children in your classroom. Culturally relevant practices validate and empower all children no matter their racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds. This practice also creates a positive connection between children's home and school lives that provides a strong foundation for learning.

Think carefully about using food in the sensory table and the unintended damage to relationships as well as the mixed messages you may be teaching. For example, Biyu - a young Chinese child, Zach - a young child whose family is quite poor, and several other children are playing at the sensory table filled with rice and toys. The children are playing, rice spills on the floor, Biyu stands back and just observes, Zach stops playing and starts to cry. What might each child be thinking in that moment?

As a child raised in a home where the Chinese culture is paramount and rice is a food staple, Biyu may be wondering why there is food to play with and it may be why she is standing back and not participating. She may be thinking, we don't play with food, why is the teacher letting us play with food? What about the rice on the floor that gets swept up by the teacher and thrown away? What message might that send to any of the children in-regards-to disrespectful and unnecessary waste of food? Could it be why Zach is crying? Use that sensory table every day - just be sure to use it mindfully.

## PROCESS ART

Process art allows children to choose the media for their creations which becomes an exploration of colors and textures. Process art also provides a greater sense of accomplishment because

the children are the sole creators of their work, giving them confidence in their own abilities. Each piece of art can look different and provides a rich opportunity for questioning, noticing, and wondering!

You can find endless ideas on process art activities such as sand art. If you care to take a peek, one resource to visit is <http://mericherry.com/2015/04/01/sand-art-2/>.

Resources such as Lisa Daly and Mariam Beloglovsky's "Loose Parts" series are filled with activities appropriate for toddlers and preschoolers to explore and use their imagination to experiment, create, discover, and learn in sensory rich activities.

Embedding mindfulness activities related to listening, seeing, smelling, tasting, and moving strengthens neural circuits and supports children in increasing their attention and focus as well. Focusing on just one sense actually helps them to be more attuned to the information that sense provides. Have a taste party where children can taste and describe - always with the ability to say no. As they explore their own reactions to sensory information and listen to other's reactions, they learn that we all might perceive things a little bit differently. This will also support children in learning that differences are actually normal.

Help them build their proprioceptive and vestibular senses. Have items available that children can pull, push, carry and move. Have items that children can climb on, balance on, and even hang from. Let them spin, crawl, climb, and dance!

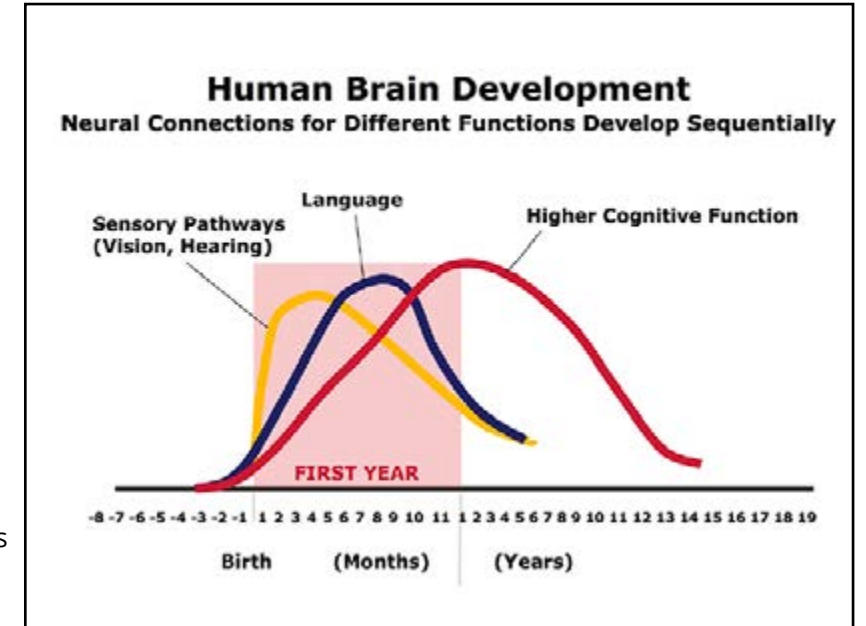
Make a chart with the senses listed across the top with the schedule of the day along the right-hand column and put a check every time you're intentionally supporting sensory growth and development. Try to increase the number of checkmarks so that all senses are checked each day. Create word walls as you build vocabulary related to the senses. Create K-W-L charts

with the children to determine what they already know, want to know, and want to learn more about.

As you focus more intentionally on the senses and sensory development, notice your own responses to the activities and share those with the children.

This article could be a book or even a series, but for now, I hope you finish reading with a better understanding of why the senses are not just a theme that we study for a few weeks, but rather a significant part of each and every one of us that deserves careful, thoughtful attention and nurturing.

*The above graph from Harvard Developing Child indicates that sensory development begins in utero. Positive sensory experiences can be introduced before babies are even born. There is research that indicates babies in utero can sense the touch of a father or mother's hand on the mother's stomach and that babies respond to and remember sounds which is why babies respond to rhythmic beats that mimic the heartbeat. The research is constantly being updated to provide us with more information about how children grow and learn.*



# THE SENSES

**TASTE** : the stimulation that comes when our taste receptors react to chemicals in our mouth. Children learn sensory attributes such as spicy, salty, sweet, textured, etc.

**TOUCH** : the stimulation that comes from touch receptors in our skin that react to pressure, heat/cold, or vibration. Children learn sensory attributes such as hot, cold, sticky, dry, smooth, rough, etc.

**SMELL** : the stimulation of chemical receptors in the nose. Children learn sensory attributes such as fruity, floral, sweet, woody, chemically, etc.

**SIGHT** : the stimulation of light receptors in our eyes which our brains then interpret into visual images. Children learn sensory attributes such as bright, dark, dull, vibrant, etc.

**HEARING** : the reception of sound via mechanics in our inner ear. Children learn sensory attributes such as loud, soft, melodic, rhythmic, etc.

**PROPRIOCEPTION (Body awareness)** : the feedback our brains receive from stretch receptors in our muscles and pressure receptors in joints which gives us information about our posture, muscle tone, and body position in space.

**VESTIBULAR (Balance)** : the stimulation of the vestibular system of the inner ear to tell us our body position in relation to gravity which helps us with balance and movement.

**INTEROCEPTION** : perceives the internal state of the body either consciously or unconsciously. It tells us we are hungry, tired, needing to use the bathroom, and feeling ill.



# LOVEYS:

## More Than Just a Love Story

BY SARA BALDWIN

Image by Rudy and Peter Skitterians from Pixabay

It's 5:35pm, I've just said goodbye to the last parent and child to leave the child care for the evening. I return to my desk in the office to shut down my computer and the phone rings. The caller ID displays the name of one of our toddler families, so I quickly pick up the phone. "Oh. My. Gosh. I was so worried I wouldn't be able to reach anyone! Xavier left his lovey in the cubby!" Wordlessly, I motioned to my coworker and mouthed "Xavier, lovey, cubby!" and pointed toward his classroom. Before I'd even finished mouthing the words she took off down the hallway as I reassured Xavier's parent that we would meet them out by their car with the lovey. My coworker and I expressed relief to one another over having returned the lovey to the child. We both knew that without it, he (and his parents) would have had a seriously rough night. This very occurrence happened every so often at the center where I worked as an administrator, and during the day we saw a lot of "lovey love,"

so we knew just how important these comfort items were to children. In my travels to child care centers and in speaking with teachers and families, the topic of loveys comes up with some frequency. Often, adults talk and joke about just how much their child adores their lovey or comfort item. I've heard folks ask if it's ok to allow their child to have it all the time. Should they keep it at home while their child is in group care? Leave it in their cubby to be used only during nap time? When should children give up their lovey for good?

As with so many questions about young children, there is really no perfect answer. A child who has grown attached to an object such as a stuffed animal or blanket may be for a variety of reasons. My personal view of children and comfort objects has evolved and changed over time. I now try to ask myself, "what need is being met?" when a child spends a lot of time

with a lovey or asks for it at certain times of the day. For a child starting in group care for the first time, a lovey might provide comfort and stability by reminding them of home. If it's possible to allow a child to hold a lovey throughout the day, it could reduce their level of stress. In turn, this may leave space for more harmony in the group for children and adults alike. Naturally, in many instances expectations will need to be in place. If there's a concern about spreading germs (say if the item is attached to a pacifier) adults may find themselves considering other options. This part is key – if a child is using an item to self-soothe, taking it away without addressing the underlying need can cause more stress. Offering children a big hug, cozy areas to relax and decompress, or other sensory items to play with can be great alternatives.

In addition to meeting the need for comfort, children will often personify their comfort objects, as some children personify imaginary friends. This provides them with a tangible item to interact with and promotes creativity, empathy and problem solving. The purpose of a lovey may evolve as a child grows older. What began as a way to regulate their emotions might unlock their imaginations as they act out their experiences, hopes, fears and learn about themselves and the world they live in. I've witnessed 3 or 4 year olds turn to their lovey for comfort or grounding when they need it. What a fantastic multi-purpose item!

If you are curious about what need is being met by a child's lovey, my recommendation would be to observe them. Watch how they interact with the item, notice and try to withhold judgement. If you can, ask the child questions about their lovey. This can be a great way to promote language skills and engage children in open-ended conversation. It never ceases to amaze me how a small, often unremarkable toy may come to hold so much meaning for a child. Sharing in the "lovey love" could be a wonderful opportunity to connect with a child. Parents: perhaps consider purchasing two of the item in order to leave one at daycare. This could save you a lot of headache in the long run. Trust me, I'm a professional holding a teddy bear.





forest bathing

by Kimberly Polstein, LMSW

# forest bathing

John Muir, the “Father of our National Parks,” once said “In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks.” I have always found being in nature makes me feel more alive. I feel happier and more at peace with the world when I’m outdoors, whether it’s a walk in my neighborhood, a small park, or hiking the high peaks of the Adirondacks; being in nature always makes me feel good. There are documented studies to show that this is not just an effect that I feel personally however, studies show that extending your time in nature has noticeable health effects.

The term Forest Bathing comes from Japan. Shinrin-Yoku, Forest Bathing or “taking in forest atmosphere,” was coined in the 1980’s and became very popular in Japan as the practice of spending extended periods of time in nature. Shinrin-Yoku’s purpose was to provide an “eco-antidote” to the growing use of technology as well as to inspire reconnection and protection of Japan’s natural resources. In the 1990’s scientists around the world began studying the effects of Shinrin-Yoku and found what some consider common knowledge; spending time in nature is good for your health.



Several studies suggest that a 40-minute walk in a forest or in a natural setting is associated with an increased positive mood, feeling healthy and feeling stronger. As stress plays such a large role in our lives and the lives of our children, it is important to be active in preventing and reducing stress. Stress has been known to play a role in headaches, heart disease, high blood pressure, skin conditions, asthma, you name it! Stress buildup over time can become toxic to our bodies; one way of “cleansing” the stress is by practicing forest bathing.

Many studies show that the stress hormone Cortisol is significantly reduced when humans spend time surrounded by nature. One study stated that the average amount of stress hormone in people who were exposed to forest scenery for 20 minutes was 13.4% lower than those people who were in urban settings at the time. Cortisol also was shown to decrease in research participants at a faster rate when walking in the forest versus taking a walk in a laboratory setting, suggesting that walking in nature has a greater impact than simply walking. The science behind this is that forest

bathing accelerates the parasympathetic nervous system which is the part of our nervous system that prompts rest and energy conservation. This part of the nervous system slows the heart rate, increases intestinal and gland activity as well as relaxes the muscles in the gastrointestinal tract. Engaging the parasympathetic nervous system is healing for the body after a stress response. Consistent engagement of these calming responses helps to lower the intensity of stress responses over time.

Decreasing stress and promoting healthy stress responses also helps the body to boost its immunity. A 2007 study showed men taking two-hour walks in the woods over a two-day period increased their killer cells by 50%. Killer cells are a type of white blood cell that play a major role in rejection of tumors and virally infected cells in the body. These studies help to illustrate the positive psychological and physiological impact forest bathing has on our health.

So how do we do it? Reaping the benefits of forest bathing can be done by simply taking a walk in any natural environment or through a more structured experience. Some eco-therapy or nature therapy groups take structured 2-3-hour meditative walks in the forest led by a trained professional who can help participants connect with nature in a healing way. Forest bathing, however, can be done by taking a long walk in the woods, surrounding yourself by nature and consciously connecting to what's around you.

A simple trick for helping you to consciously forest bathe, rather than just stroll through nature is to focus in on your 5 senses. Start with sight; notice what you see around you. Take note of the different colors and textures nature has to offer to you visually.

Then you may focus in on what you feel. Notice what the ground feels like under your feet, whether you're wearing sneakers, boots or going barefoot, each new patch of dirt, trail, mud or grass will give you a different experience. You might reach out and touch a tree and notice how the bark feels against your skin.

Next you may choose to listen closely as the breeze rustles some leaves, tune in to the birds chirping or the sound sticks make as woodland animals scamper across the forest floor. You might even hear yourself breathing or your heart beating. Take notice of your heart rate, can you feel it and hear it change as you exert more energy walking up hill versus if you take a moment to rest?

You might then notice how the forest smells. You might try to distinguish the smell of the air with the smell of the dirt. Maybe you hear water rushing nearby and try to notice if the air smells any different as you get closer to the water; and finally, you will focus in on what you taste.

How does taking a long sip of cool water taste and feel for you after walking through the forest? Maybe you still taste the morning coffee on your tongue. Maybe you don't taste anything, but you've moved your focus from the day to day hustle and bustle to a conscious connection to the natural world around you, and that's all that matters.

National Geographic's article on Forest Bathing lists 5 of the best places to practice forest bathing. One of these places listed is in our very own back yard, the NYS Adirondack Mountains. So, whether you take a quick walk in the park, a hike in the Adirondacks, or a structured forest bathing course, get outside, get back to nature and notice if you've received more than you set out to find.



A close-up photograph of a child's hands. One hand holds a whole, green, bumpy-skinned avocado. The other hand holds a piece of white bread. The background is softly blurred, showing the child's face and a red garment.

# FOOD EXPLORATION

& THE FIVE SENSES  
by MEGAN MORROW, RD, CDN

## SOME OF THE BEST

lessons learned in life, those that leave lasting impressions, come directly from our experiences. This is especially true for young children as they continue to grow and interact with the world around them. Every day is chocked full of new experiences for them to learn from the best way that they know how: hands on. This allows them to use each of their five senses (sight, sound, feel, taste and smell) to really explore these new situations and gain a sense of familiarity. A good example of this, and a wonderful learning opportunity for young children, is with food exploration. Activities such as helping to prepare their own snacks or meals, or a little playing with their food, provide children with the opportunity to experience their food in a way that goes beyond simply eating. It's also a win-win for parents and caregivers as research has suggested that children who engage in these activities are more willing to try new foods and be less picky eaters.<sup>1</sup>

Think of food exploration in the way a child would. What tools do you have available to you at that age? Your senses! A youngster may not know that carrots are an excellent source of beta carotene or dietary fiber. However, what they do figure out is that a carrot is easy to pick up and hold in their small hands, it has a loud crunch when you bite it and can taste a little bit sweet. This is known as sensory learning and is a good way for children to get to know what's on their plate, in their hands, or between their fingers before it enters their mouth. Engaging in hands-on learning with the food items removes the mystery that surrounds new foods. The more familiar children become with new foods, the more the trend can continue.

An article on sensory learning from Penn State Extension states that, "Because of their age and fine motor skills, infants and toddlers use their fingers to eat, and meals easily become sensory activities! Especially when trying foods for the first time, they often play with foods – squishing food, pushing it around, licking, smelling, and finally tasting it."<sup>1</sup>

Infants and toddlers, being introduced to new foods quite often, are using their senses whether they know it yet or not – and they are doing this in a fairly unstructured environment. However, at the preschool age, meal skills are starting to be developed at home and in the classroom where we learn playing with our food isn't always the most "appropriate" thing to do at the table. Fear not, there is still plenty of room to use their senses when exploring a new food versus simply "playing" with it. They can (and should!) still poke at it, smell it, snap it and lick it, and continue to try to taste it without it being food waste. At this point, preschoolers are able to understand the difference between cooked and raw food, the difference between a fruit and a vegetable, different characteristics of foods, and the basic understanding of various smells and tastes.<sup>1</sup> This improved reasoning as they grow brings on a whole new level of food and sensory exploration that is a bit more advanced from their toddler years.

For teachers, parents and caregivers, there are many sensory related questions you can ask your preschoolers after exploring new foods (or previously tasted foods for that matter):

1. Which food has the brightest color?
2. Which food do you think will make the loudest sound when you eat it?
3. Which food is smoothest to the touch?
4. Which food has the sweetest smell?
5. Which food tastes the sweetest?
6. Which food is the crispiest?

Penn State Extension lists tips for focusing children's learning on using their senses:<sup>1</sup>

**Smell:** Have children smell foods and describe the aroma. Does it smell like any other foods that they eat?

**Sight:** Let children look at foods before cooking or preparing and describe color, shape, and size. Then look at foods after cooking and preparing. Does it look different? What has changed?

**Sound:** Ask children to listen as they prepare and eat food. Does the food make a sound? What is it?

**Texture:** Allow children to touch foods and manipulate foods. How does it feel? Is it squishy? Is it hard?

**Taste:** Encourage children to describe the taste, not just say if it tastes "good", and to compare tastes. Is it sweet or sour? Does the grapefruit taste like a grape?

When doing a lesson or activity surrounding food exploration and using our five senses there are many websites that provide templates that you can print out and show to the children. With each new (or already tasted) food that's on their plate, encourage them to talk about one sense at a time. This allows for a more in-depth exploration of each food item. Using carrots as example again:



**Smell:** How does the carrot smell?

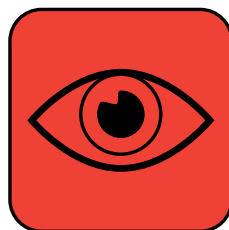
**Sight:** What color is the carrot?

**Sound:** When you snap this carrot, what do you hear?

**Texture:** How does the carrot feel on your hands?

**Taste:** What does the carrot taste like? Did you try licking it?

One of our roles as caregivers is to provide our children with the best nutrition. Offering them healthy options such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy and incorporating the food into a sensory lesson is a great learning experience for all ages. They will be able to experience these nutrient dense foods on a whole new level. By exploring it with their own senses, they may be even more willing to try it, along with other new foods.



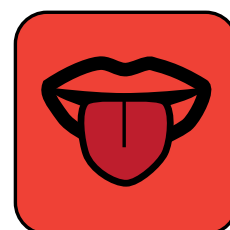
SIGHT



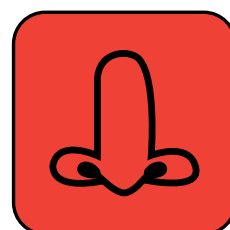
SOUND



FEEL



TASTE



SMELL



# I Don't Want to

# Get Dressed!

by Jessica Orellana

**W**e each have a unique set of sensory needs. Each person needs sensory input throughout the day to satisfy their tactile system. Running our hands under water, holding a warm coffee mug, hugging a friend or putting on a cozy sweatshirt are all experiences that feed our tactile system. The tactile system refers to the information our brain receives from the receptors in our skin, otherwise known as our sense of touch. Our sense of touch helps us gain coordination and awareness of our own body and the space around it. It also functions as a protective mechanism and alerts us to anything dangerous or unpleasant, for example, a hot stove or a wet surface. This system helps us discriminate our environment and keeps us safe. Although every person relies on this system, we all process sensory input differently.

For some, everyday sensations that the majority find tolerable, are perceived as strange or even painful. For example, getting dressed in the morning becomes a series of suffering. First the t-shirt with the scratchy tag, then the jeans with the zipper and the socks with seams that never seem to line up the right way. Adults who experience tactile sensitivity either learn to cope or make changes to their routine. For example, they don't wear jeans or they purchase socks without seams. Children on the other hand, do not have as much autonomy over their choices or the language to communicate their discomfort. This results in emotional or behavioral responses that can interfere with daily routines. These reactions can cause a great deal of stress to the child and their family.

Children with tactile sensitivity can exhibit mild to severe behaviors. Some children might complain about a particular item of clothing, while others might become distressed, fearful or aggressive. It is important to remember that every person has unique sensory needs and behaviors may be developmentally appropriate or temporary. However, for children with tactile sensitivity, the reason for their behavior may be overstimulation. When children engage in challenging behaviors it is a signal that a need is not being met. It is helpful to see the behavior through an investigative lens to discover the function of their behavior. What is the child trying to communicate and why are they engaging in this behavior? Depending on the function, our response can help children get their needs met in an appropriate way.

As we observe and notice the child's behavior, we can use this information to figure out what the child is trying to communicate. It could be tactile sensitivity or an unrelated behavior. Are they trying to escape or avoid getting dressed because they would rather continue playing? Are they trying to get your attention because you are helping someone else? Do they want something tangible, perhaps another piece of clothing? Or are they experiencing tactile sensitivity? Once the function is identified (and it may be more than one function), we can use strategies to decrease the behavior and model more appropriate ways for children to have their needs met. Imagine a child begins to scream and cry when you ask them to put on their shirt.

Function	What the child might be communicating:	Strategy	Prevention
Sensory	"I do not like this texture! It makes my skin crawl."	Provide calming strategy:  Deep pressure (hug, tight squeeze)  Weighted products (heavy blanket)  Quiet space such as a cozy corner to reduce stimulation.	Begin to notice which fabrics or textures elicit a negative response and provide alternatives if possible.  Gradually introduce a variety of textures through play and demonstration on yourself.
Escape/Avoid	"I don't want to put that on. I want to keep playing."	Give the child choices:  Do you want to put on your dinosaur shirt or your shark shirt?  Do you want to get dressed by yourself or do you want me to help you?	Preset the child before it is time to get dressed. For example, "You have two more minutes to play, then it is time to get dressed." A sand timer is a great tool to help children understand the abstract concept of time.
Attention	"You are paying attention to someone else, pay attention to me!"	Provide a more appropriate way to communicate. Ask the child to repeat a script in a calm and confident voice. For example:  "If you want my attention say, 'help me please.'"  Ignore behavior until the child stops screaming. As soon as they calm down, provide positive attention.	Spend quality time and provide positive attention before the behavior happens.
Tangible	"I want the other shirt, it's my favorite one!"	Provide a more appropriate way to communicate. Ask the child to repeat a script in a calm and confident voice. For example:  "I want to wear a different shirt."  "Can I pick my shirt?"  "I don't want to wear this shirt."	Provide specific praise when a child uses their words and communicates effectively. For example, if a child asks for something nicely you can say, "Thank you for saying that so confidently, I understood what you wanted."

## OTHER SCENARIOS THAT MIGHT EVOKE TACTILE SENSITIVITY ARE:

Brushing teeth or hair; cutting nails or hair; cutting, zipping, buttoning, tying laces, etc.; Walking barefoot; wet or messy textures; hugs, kisses or tickles; drawing or writing; certain foods

*Note to the reader: This article is not written by an occupational therapist and you should seek professional input to confirm any diagnosis and/or treatment strategies.*



# Spotlight

The directors at Life Kids Guilderland are passionate about supporting children's social-emotional development. Earlier this year, they invited Brightside Up's Jessica Orellana to stop by and help them to create a cozy corner.

A cozy corner is a physical space that serves as a strategy for building self-regulation, the ability to understand and express feelings and react pro-socially. In the workshop participants identified the key components of self-regulation through hands-on experience with cozy corner tools and created positively stated rules for the area. The staff worked very hard to set up two cozy corners for the wide age-range of children. Thanks to the Community Foundation Grant and the dedicated staff at Life Kids, 60 children now have two brand new cozy corner spaces equipped with materials such as kinetic sand, solution cards, breathing visuals, timers, and social-emotional books. We can't wait to hear what the children think.



Do you have a cozy corner? Send us pictures and you could be in a future Spotlight!  
Email [ksmith@brightsideup.org](mailto:ksmith@brightsideup.org)



# BRiGHTSiDE UP

A world where all children are understood