

Sensory Play

Tip Sheet for Early Years Educators



What is Sensory Play?

Sensory play includes any activity that stimulates a young child's senses of touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing, as well as anything which engages movement and balance (NCSE, 2021). It is play that engages one, many or all of the senses: tactile, auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory, kinaesthetic, vestibular, proprioceptive or interceptive (Prendiville & Fern, 2017).



Sensory Play with jelly stimulates the sensory system and supports the development of fine motor skills.

Sensory Play is important for children as it:

- Increases body awareness
- Encourages problem solving skills
- Supports expressive communication and language skills
- Promotes self-regulation and stimulates or soothes all the sensory systems
- Stimulates the sensory system in a developmentally appropriate and fun way
- Fosters positive learning dispositions

(LINC, 2022).

Examples of Sensory Play Materials

Dry: rice, lentils, spaghetti (cooked and uncooked), porridge oats, rice krispies, shredded paper, playdough, sand.

Wet: ice, water, gloop, custard, jelly, slime, bubbles.

Active (proprioceptive): bubble wrap, fidget toys, exercise ball, peanut ball, balance/wobble board, slide, climbing frame.

Soothing: sensory bottle, liquid timers, putty, music, musical Instruments, blankets, coloured fabric, light table, black out tent, bubbles, smelly bottles, cotton balls, mindfulness and meditation activities.



Bubble wrap activities provide tactile, proprioceptive and auditory input. Popping the bubbles using fingers supports the development of fine motor skills, particularly pincer strength.



Creating sensory boxes using natural materials provides children with opportunities to learn about themes, for example, seasons, in a fun and interactive way.

Preparing the Environment for Sensory Play

A sensory environment includes designated spaces which can optimise children's active learning and participation. When designing a sensory space, ensure it is flexible and adaptable to children's differing needs. There are certain environmental factors to consider when creating a sensory space in preschool. These include the auditory environment, lighting, spatial sequencing, calm quiet corner, equipment and storage (NCSE 2021). It can occur in both the indoor and outdoor environments. When preparing a sensory learning environment, consider these six key areas:

1. **Location:** where people and things are located
2. **Boundaries:** how areas are separated and divided up
3. **Variety:** choice of materials and activities available including dry and wet textured play materials
4. **Storage:** where materials are kept and where they are accessed
5. **Time:** the amount of time available for activities
6. **Mood and atmosphere:** inviting, calm, homelike.

(ASPG, 2022)

Risk Benefit Assessment and Supervision

Safety precautions: Keep materials clean, well-maintained and replace as needed. Be aware of any allergies that children may have and avoid using open ended materials if they are linked to allergens, for example, milk cartons or materials that may have been in contact with nuts. Also, be mindful of materials that might pose a choking hazard.

(ASPG, 2022)

How to promote sensory play during the daily routine

Small group activities: This can be achieved by creating a sensory play area where children have access to a variety of resources to choose from. Provide water play, sand play, messy play, paint, playdough, gloop, natural open-ended materials e.g. feathers, leaves, flowers, chestnuts, shells.

Circle time: Introduce sensory trays reflecting the theme/story. Using story sacks and aprons. Fidget toys, sensory bottles, theraputty, sensory cushion, music, meditation.

Transitions: Use sand timers, visual timers, fidget toys, music.

Small world experiences: Add small world resources such as figurines, animals, cars or trucks to sensory play materials to facilitate children's emergent interests and to provide opportunities to develop imaginative, interactive and co-operative play skills.

Outdoor Play: Provide mud kitchen, water and sand play, natural open-ended materials.



Adding small world resources to sensory play materials supports development of imaginative play skills.

Providing alternatives to facilitate sensory preferences

- **Tactile preferences:** It is common for young children to demonstrate an aversion to some textures, either due to discomfort or lack of exposure to a material. Some alternatives to consider for supporting children who are uncomfortable with the texture or consistency of a material are:
 - **Resealable plastic bags:** Place sticky, messy substances in a resealable bag. This offers children an alternative way to explore the material if they are not yet ready to touch the material with their hands.
 - **Tools for Manipulating Sensory Materials:** Provide spoons, scoops, funnels, cups and brushes. This facilitates children in being able to explore a texture without having to touch it directly.
- **Preferences regarding noise:** Provide alternative spaces when sensory experiences may be overstimulating. Some children enjoy creating loud noises with musical instruments or banging pots and pans, other children find these noises unsettling.
(High Scope, 2011)
- **Targeted Strategies:** For targeted strategies, seek advice from therapists supporting individual children.

Useful Links

Aistear Siolta Practice Guide, *Creating and Using the Learning Environment*, available at:
<https://www.aistearsiolta.ie/en/creating-and-using-the-learning-environment/overview/pillar-overview-creating-and-using-the-learning-environment.pdf>

Aistear Siolta Practice Guide, *Using Open Ended Materials*, available at:
<https://www.aistearsiolta.ie/en/building-partnerships-with-parents/resources-for-sharing/using-open-ended-materials.pdf>

Barnardos, 2020, *Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care*, available at:
<https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/files/download/0d80ac9221b8eec1.pdf>

LINC Programme, *Sensory Play*, available at:
<https://lincprogramme.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sensory-Play.pdf>

NCSE, *Sensory Spaces in Schools*, available at:
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NCSE-Sensory-Spaces-in-Schools-2021.pdf>

References

Hightscope. (2011) *Look, Listen, Touch, Feel, Taste: The Importance of Sensory Play*. Volume 25, No 5.

Prendiville, S and Fern, M. (2017) Coming alive: Finding Joy Through Sensory Play. In E. Prendiville and J. Howard (eds) *Creative Psychotherapy: Applying the Principles of neurobiology to play and expressive art-based practice*. Oxon: Routledge.