

# Sensory Strategies: Play

## Children's Therapy Services



## Play

Play is often referred to as the occupation of childhood.

Play offers your child the opportunity to develop gross motor, fine motor, visual motor, cognitive, language, imagination, attention and social skills.

Play activities are the first social experiences for a child.

Play begins as a solitary activity and then becomes parallel (the children are in the same room but do not play together).

Finally, play progresses to cooperative play, where children play together – sharing fun, imagination, and skills. Sensory integration difficulties may play a role in why some children may have difficulty with play: problems manipulating toys, poor stamina, and problems with motor planning (creating and sequencing the steps of play in the right order).



## Sensory Strategies

- If your child has a comfort toy, one that is taken everywhere, wash it frequently and keep it as long as possible (if your child really likes a blanket or toy, try to buy two or three for “insurance”).
- Children who constantly mouth items can be using their mouths to gather information about their toys, or they may be self-calming.
- If a child uses mouthing to self-calm, try oral motor activities like chewing, whistles, and bubble blowing, which all provide calming input.
- Use massage in the palms of the hands; also try weighted wrist cuffs to increase feedback.
- Some children use touch excessively and may be socially inappropriate in their touching; try teaching limits through social stories.
- Encourage the child to gather information through vision and use memory to create information needed.
- Children with sensitivity to touch may not participate in messy play – try inhibitory techniques: such as pressure touch or massage.

- Encourage your child to participate in messy play using a tool or wearing gloves.
- Consider temperature and texture of the play material.
- Grade activities from neat to messy.
- Use a favourite character or game and integrate a tactile component into it; use motivation to get over the hurdle of avoidance.
- Children who are sensitive to balance activities may not participate in playground games or games where their feet are off the ground – try massage, joint compression, and “heavy work” activities prior to going on the equipment.
- Respect your child’s fear.
- Use routines that can be calming because they are so predictable.
- If your child seems to be unaware of playground boundaries, try using a homemade stop sign along with the proprioceptive input.
- Encourage your child to slow down and learn about body position and balance by creating an obstacle course on the playground equipment.

- If your child is uncomfortable in any positions, inform their caregiver and teacher and ask them to avoid stressful situations.
- If your child is afraid of swings, address the underlying skills of strength, balance, coordination etc.
- If your child always breaks toys and the tips of pencils, teach the difference between light and heavy touch, and practice playing with specific toys while working on the underlying areas of development.
- If your child is impulsive in play, break down the task into small steps.
- Teach each step in the style your child learns best – auditory, visual through demonstration, or by guiding the child through the movement.
- Cause and effect toys are excellent for children with motor planning difficulties.
- Give children a feeling of control and anticipation with predictable toys.
- Always look at function – what toy will enable your child to use the behaviour functionally?

- If your child chews on toys, provide a “chewie” (eg gum, chewy sweet,dummy etc) to increase oral motor input so that your child can play.
- If your child needs movement to stay organized, try playing on a swing or moving surface.
- Watch your child’s eyes; if visual tracking is difficult, place toys within the central visual field.
- Be aware of light intensity; your child may need to wear sunglasses.
- Encourage play with sounds within your child’s tolerance.
- Minimise background noise since it may be hard for your child to discriminate between sounds.
- Be aware of smell; wash toys with an unscented soap

### **Other Strategies**

- Attach language to each step.
- Try taking turns during play and teaching your child to pause and “check-in” with their friends.
- Give lots of opportunities for gross motor play and alternate between gross and fine motor play.

- Make play motivating and fun.
- Teach play skills.
- Encourage a willingness to share and communication of affection and appreciation for the efforts of others.
- Modify toys for fine motor difficulty.

### **Ideas for Self Help Skills – for children with Sensory Issues**

Adapted from 'Building Bridges through Sensory Integration' by Ellen Youch, Paula Aquilla & Shirley Suttan



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