

Sensory Play: Define and Explore

Presented by: Erikson Infant Toddler Inclusion Project Consultants

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The 8 Types of Sensory Input:

- 1. Gustatory- Sense of taste:** This system recognizes edible vs. inedible foods; Touch (tactile) and smell (olfactory) help shape the taste experience.
- 2. Tactile- Sense of touch:** This system helps individuals understand touch—such as pressure, texture, temperature, and pain—and supports the development of fine motor skills like grasping and using small objects.
- 3. Olfactory- Sense of smell:** This system helps the brain understand smells and influences taste (gustatory).
- 4. Auditory- Sense of hearing:** This system helps individuals hear, recognize, and make sense of sounds around them.
- 5. Visual- Sense of sight:** This system helps people see and understand the world around them, recognize color, depth, and movement & use visual information to guide movement and focus
- 6. Vestibular-Sense of movement:** This system helps with balance and movement by sensing head position and motion, using signals from the inner ear.
- 7. Proprioceptive sense:** This system helps people know where and how their body is positioned and moving in the environment.
- 8. Interoceptive sense:** This system helps individuals feel what's happening inside their bodies, like hunger, thirst, bathroom needs, and discomfort.

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The Human Sensory System & Child Development:

Factors That Shape A Child's Development:

- Sensory play helps children ages 0–3 grow in all areas of development by:
- Building **language** as they explore and describe
- Strengthening **fine and gross motor** skills through hands-on movement
- Supporting **social-emotional** skills as they interact and regulate feelings
- Boosting **cognitive development** as they problem-solve and learn about the world.

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Developmental Domains

1. **Language development:**

Children will learn how to describe what they are doing and how it feels when their senses are engaged in exploration, play, and interactions.

2. **Cognitive development:**

Children's natural interest in sensory exploration can be further supported with hands-on activities that help children build cognitive skills involved in problem solving and abstract thinking. When young children are allowed to play independently, they are more likely to show natural curiosity and perseverance, two qualities that are crucial for success in school as well as later in life.

3. **Social-Emotional:**

Sensory-based activities and experiences foster social interactions, increase children's self-regulatory abilities, and encourage experimentation.

4. **Fine Motor Development:**

Through tactile play that focuses on building, pouring, and mixing, children develop their ability to use small muscle groups and coordinate movements.

5. **Gross Motor Development:**

Movements like rolling, crawling, jumping, and climbing help to build children's gross motor skills, which include motor planning, balance, and stimulation through big movements.

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Infants



- Sensory stimulation is an important way that babies first experience and learn about the world around them.
- Allowing them to explore freely and get messy can support their learning and enhance their bond with their primary caregivers.

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Infants Visual & Auditory Exploration Activities

- **Crib mobile:** A colorful mobile positioned over the baby's crib provides visually stimulating shapes, colors, and objects for infants to look at while in the crib.
- **High Contrast toys/objects:** Black and white colored cards, board books, and toys are visually appealing and easier for young infants to track during the first 3 months of life.
- **Face to Face:** Babies visually seek and enjoy faces, especially smiling faces. Make eye contact, smile, and position yourself face to face with infants during interactions, care routines, and play.
- **Mirror Play:** Positioning babies in front of a mirror and providing word labels and verbal narration for what they are seeing will help them begin to recognize themselves.
- **Peek-a-Boo:** Visual games paired with auditory sounds, like peek-a-boo, provide stimulation, anticipation, and fun surprise for babies. It also supports their early understanding that things, and people, still exist even when they cannot be seen.
- **Sing and Play Music:** Sing songs, or sing along with music, adjust your facial expressions and tone of voice to meet the observed mood and needs of the baby.

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Infants Tactile and Textural Play

- **Skin to Skin:** Primary caregivers should provide plenty of skin to skin contact during the early infancy period for comfort, soothing, and bonding.
- **Positive Touch:** Gentle touches and tickles while talking, singing, or caring for babies provides touch experiences that are nurturing and positive.
- **Hand to Hand Games:** Encourage babies to hold and shake age-appropriate rattles, explore and investigate shapes, sizes, and textures of different toys and objects in their surroundings.
- **Bath Time Fun:** Pouring and splashing water, naming body parts as they are being washed or rinsed, and allowing babies to explore the texture of wash cloths, bubbles, and water can help make the routine interactive and fun.
- **Dressing/Diapering:** Playing peek-a-boo with a onesie, helping the baby explore the texture of clothes, baby wipes, or the diaper paired with verbal narration and word labels can help make the routine interactive and interesting.
- **Bubble Play:** Blow bubbles for the baby, let the baby touch them, watch them soar through the air and pop when they land.

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Infants Edible Kitchen-Based Activities (supports touch, taste, smell, & vision)



- **Taste Tests:** Offer small, safe samples of different foods to explore flavors and textures.
- **Fun Feedings:** Make eye contact during feedings, sing simple rhymes about the food, name the tastes, and encourage the baby to investigate new textures and foods with their eyes, senses of smell, touch, and taste.

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Infants Motor & Movement

- **Supported Movement:** Lift the baby up and down, rock and hold them in a variety of positions to help develop their sense of balance and movement.
- **Ball Play:** Find balls with different textures and colors, show the baby how to hold, roll, drop, and bounce them.
- **Position Variety:** Play with the baby in a variety of positions, tummy, side, back, sitting up with support, stable sitting, supported standing, etc.
- **Floor Time:** Provide plenty of opportunities for babies to play on the floor. Place motivating toys and objects beyond their immediate reach to encourage reaching, rolling, grasping, crawling, and cruising.

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Toddlers & Twos:



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- Sensory activities for toddlers and twos involve exploring different textures, sounds, sights, and tastes all while boosting fine and gross motor skills, creativity, curiosity, and independent play.
- Sensory experiences for toddlers and twos occur in their daily routines and interactions with parents, relatives, teachers, people in their community, and peers.
- These experiences support the development of self-regulation, communication, social skills, and their understanding of their world.

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Toddler & Twos Tactile & Textural Play Activities

- **Water Play:** A simple tub with water, cups, sponges, and toys lets toddlers splash and pour, while adding food coloring or ice cubes enhances the experience.
- **Sensory Bins:** Fill a container with dry rice, beans, pasta, sand, or cotton balls, adding scoops, cups, and small toys for digging and scooping.
- **Playdough:** Homemade playdough (or edible versions) offers great resistance for rolling, squishing, cutting, and building fine motor skills.
- **Cloud Dough/Moon Sand:** Mix cornmeal or flour with oil for a moldable, taste-safe material, perfect for trucks or imaginative play.
- **Shaving Cream:** Spray on the bathtub wall or a tray for a fun, messy texture, or try taste-safe yogurt/applesauce finger painting.
- **Bubble Foam:** Make lots of bubbles with dish soap and have them play in the foam.

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Toddlers & Twos Visual & Auditory Exploration

- **Sensory Bottles/Jars:** Fill clear bottles with water, oil, glitter, beads, or colorful pasta for mesmerizing visual experiences.
- **Bubbles & Foam:** Blowing bubbles or making bubble foam with dish soap and water provides visual interest and sound.
- **Homemade Instruments:** Fill containers with rice or beans to make shakers, or bang pots and pans for musical exploration.
- **Sound Scavenger Hunt:** Go for a walk and listen to sounds like birds, cars, trucks, and rustling leaves.

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Toddlers & Twos Edible Kitchen-Based Activities (supports touch, taste, smell, vision)

- **Food Play:** Let kids explore textures with cooked spaghetti (colored), oatmeal, or even carrot peelings in a safe space like the highchair or bathtub.
- **Taste Tests:** Offer small, safe samples of different foods to explore flavors and textures.
- **DIY Paints:** Use yogurt or applesauce mixed with food coloring for edible finger painting.



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Toddlers & Twos Gross Motor & Movement

- **Indoor Obstacle Course:** Use pillows for jumping or creating tunnels to crawl through.
- **Sensory Paths:** Create a path with different textures like bubble wrap, foil, or rugs for toddlers to walk on
- **Outdoor Park Play:** Climbing, sliding, swinging with adult supervision on playground equipment.

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Reflective Practice Groups

Focus of the group is on providing space to discuss issues around supporting children with or suspected of developmental delays and disorders. This year we will have a general topic of discussion each month in addition to topics participants bring to the group.

- Groups are confidential and voluntary, no attendance taken
- Held once per month on Thursdays from 1:00-2:00 via zoom
- You will receive the zoom link in September

ADMINISTRATORS: site directors, program managers/coordinators, education and disabilities managers/coordinators, infant toddler specialists (if supervise others)

Dates: 1st Thursday of the month

STAFF: teachers, assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, FSWs/FSSs, infant toddler specialists, home visitors

Dates: 3rd Thursday of the month

Reflective Practice Group for
Administrators- sign up



Reflective Practice Group for STAFF
sign up

