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At Home Play Activities for Children

Play is important for developing sensory processing abilities, fine and gross motor skills, as well as social skills such as resolving conflicts and working with others.

Research based in the field of occupational therapy (OT) will guide the activities included in this pamphlet to promote learning and development of children through play.



SENSORY ACTIVITIES

Sensory processing lets us process and interact with the environment around us. The ability to successfully process and interact with the environment through play is essential for the social development and daily occupational engagement of children (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2012).

Salt dough craft

Work with your child to combine 2 cups of flour, 1 cup of salt, and 1 cup of cold water into a large bowl. Use this opportunity to let their child mix with their hands to create the sticky batter. From here, you can create shapes, candle holders, or hand imprints to bake in the oven at 250 degrees until hard-- then decorate! This activity helps to expose your child to new textures, while also allowing opportunities to practice motor control and ability to follow directions.

Sensory Bin

A sensory bin can be created with items found in the home. For example, rice, dry beans, or pasta can be mixed in with small toys for the child to feel through and find. You can make this activity more challenging by hiding puzzle pieces, and putting it together.

Shaving Cream

This common bathroom essential is a great way to engage in fun sensory play with your child! Try spraying some onto a counter to let your child spread it out with their hands, or even wash off small toy animals or cars.

Mystery Bins

Place objects of different sizes and textures into a box or bag you can't see through. Have your child close their eyes and place their hands in, then try to guess the objects based on feel. This will challenge your child's ability to recognize common objects through touch, rather than looking.

FINE MOTOR ACTIVITIES

Fine motor skills involve small, isolated movements such as picking up small objects or writing



The following activities are suggestions for encouraging fine motor development but are not substitutes for OT evaluation and intervention (OT Mom Learning Activities, 2020).

- **Cutting activities**— a good way to encourage tripod fingers (index finger, middle finger, and thumb) to work together
- **Clothes pin activities** – be sure child is gripping the pins with the pads of the fingers rather than the side of the index finger; Create “fish” paper clips to clip onto a paper plate “fish bowl”
- **Crumpling small pieces of tissue paper** – a good tripod finger exercise; Incorporate this into a craft such as creating a rainbow with crumpled tissue paper
- **Coloring** – if a mature tripod grasp has not yet formed, have the child hold a crayon down flat and use the tripod fingers to rub color over a large area
- **Play-Doh**— squash, squeeze, and roll to exercise hand muscles. This can be done as a warm-up before more intricate activities such as coloring or cutting.
- **Manipulate coins in one hand** – using a piggy bank (or create a coin slot in the top of a container found at home) have child hold 2-3 coins in their hand at a time & place them in the slot one by one
- **Using a spray bottle** – water the plants or draw on a window with window markers & use a spray bottle to wash it off

GROSS MOTOR ACTIVITIES

Gross motor skills involve large movements using large muscles in the arms, legs, torso, and feet

Obstacle Courses

- Use pillows, toys, boxes, and any other materials you can find to create an obstacle course that incorporates crawling, jumping, and using the body purposefully to encourage body awareness and gross motor skill functioning.

Yoga

- Yoga has been found to improve positive behavior that supports performance at school and at home, mental health, and social participation (Cahill, Egan, & Seber, 2020).
- Cosmic Kids Yoga is geared toward making yoga fun for children ages 3+ by making each video an interactive story. Their YouTube Channel can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/CosmicKidsYoga>



BUILDING SOCIAL SKILLS THROUGH PLAY

The development of a child's social interaction skills can be enhanced through interacting with others in play, as well as engaging in pretend play.



Playing with Family Members

- When choosing family activities, incorporate input from siblings and other family members to include everyone (Edwards, Millard, Praskac, & Wisniewski, 2003).
- Motivate children to take turns and problem solve with family members (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2012).
- Involve play activities into your family's daily routine (Edwards et al., 2003).

Independent Pretend Play

- Play without direction from adults allows them to learn how to work in groups, exercise conflict resolution, and share; when adults direct play, children can miss out on practicing group skills and creativity (Ginsburg, 2007).
- Provide children with "true toys" to increase creative benefits (Ginsburg, 2007). These toys and household items can allow a child to practice their social skills: dolls, stuffed animals, telephones, spoons, pots, and pans (AOTA, 2012).

PLAY SAFETY FOR CHILDREN

In selecting play activities and materials for your child, safety should always be a top priority to ensure the health and well-being of your child.



Basics of Materials for Activities

- Only “non-toxic” materials should be used for arts & crafts; this includes avoiding lead paint and only using crayons labeled “ASTM D-4235” on the box (The Nemours Foundation, 2018).
- Always clean toys after use, and follow the manual from the manufacturer for proper cleaning; some plastic toys may be dishwasher safe or can be sanitized with hot water and antibacterial soap (The Nemours Foundation, 2018).
- Fabrics of materials should be “flame resistant” or “flame retardant,” which can be determined from checking the label (The Nemours Foundation, 2018).

PLAY SAFETY FOR CHILDREN

Toys & Tots: What are safe toys for kids in preschool & younger?

“Remember when choosing a toy to consider whether a child must be supervised to play with it. Toys should not have small parts that break easily or can be swallowed” (AOTA, 2012).

- Ensure toys are at least 1.25 inches wide and 2.25 inches long to avoid choking (The Nemours Foundation, 2018).
- Inspect homemade toys and those from vending machines and carnivals that have not been required to meet safety regulations for loose pieces or sharp sides (The Nemours Foundation, 2018).
- Avoid playing with magnets or toys with exposed batteries, as swallowing these items can lead to serious digestive system damage or death (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018).



****NOTE:** This list is not fully inclusive of every safety precaution that should be taken in ensuring the safety of your child. For further information, you can consult with your health care provider for creating a safe environment specific for your child.*



SENSORY BIN

A SIMPLE AND FUN AT HOME ACTIVITY THAT FACILITATES LEARNING WHILE STIMULATING THE SENSES!

Amanda Gaynor, OTS

MATERIALS

Most can be found at home or easily purchased from the dollar store!

Base options:

- Dry beans
- Pasta
- Cotton balls
- Rice
- Sand
- Oatmeal
- Pebbles

Add in options:

- Small animal or bug toys
- Play kitchen tools
- Tongs
- Small shovel
- Foam letters/numbers

Simply add one of these bases along with your child's favorite toys into a bin & get creative!

PURPOSE

The purpose of providing sensory input to children is to regulate and organize their neurological systems. This translates into allowing them to participate in more difficult activities such as writing, cutting, coloring, and other fine motor activities. Sensory bins expose children to different tactile, visual, and even auditory sensations. This allows them to regulate different sensations so they're not foreign to them in their everyday environment.

SKILL BUILDING

- Add numbers or letters to the toys and have the child search for specific ones in order
- Have child search for foam letters/numbers in the sensory bin and complete a foam board
- Have child search for puzzle pieces in the sensory bin and complete a puzzle
- Have child add/remove items from the bin using tongs to incorporate hand strengthening, grasp, and dexterity
- Have different colored toys in the bin and have the child sort them



PHOTO SOURCE: MOSTLYUNDERCONTROL.COM

Tissue Paper Flower

Ages 3-5

Amanda Gaynor, OTS

Materials

- **Tissue paper**
- **Paper plate**
- **Glue**
- **Scissors**

Steps

1. **Draw a large flower on paper plate**
2. **Have child cut out flower**
3. **Crumple up pieces of tissue paper using index and thumb**
4. **Glue tissue paper to flower**



Skills Targeted

Grading the activity

- **Grade down:** have flower cut out already and just have the child crumple and glue the tissue paper
- **Grade up:** have child cut out flower on construction paper; this is more difficult because there is less resistance

Bilateral coordination

Visual motor integration

Dexterity

Hand strength