



# Sensory Play



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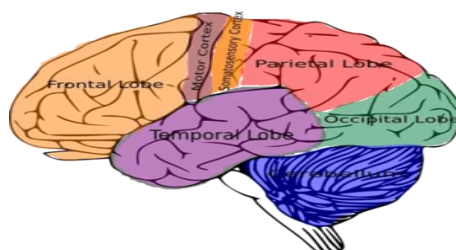
## What is Sensory Play?

Sensory play involves the use of all five senses, smell, hearing, touch, taste and sight. Although these are our main senses, our whole body can be actively used to explore our environment and play activities (Gascoyne, 2013).

## Why is Sensory and Messy Play so important?

Messy play is important for young children, giving them endless ways to develop and learn, especially about the world around them. Sensory activities and experiences help children to process information which can help improve their knowledge, thoughts and creativity as explained here:

"Each time a child (or adult) encounters a sensory stimulus, a neuron (brain cell) connects to another neuron, establishing new connections in the brain. Signals flow along these complex neural networks, from one neuron to another, allowing the brain cells to communicate with each other by relying information about emotions as well as everything we see, hear, taste, touch and smell. Each new sensory stimulus adds to the network, while repeated experiences increase the thickness and strength of the connections, helping signals to travel faster" (Wartik and Carlson-Flannerty, 1993, cited in Gascoyne, 2013:3). This means that "the richer our experiences the more intricate will be the patterns for learning, thought and creativity" (Hannaford, 1995:30, cited in Gascoyne, 2013:3).



## What do children learn from sensory activities?

- ✚ Sensory activities are connected to recalling memories especially associated with the senses of touch, smell and sight. For example you may have experiences a pleasant smell, which will bring up memories of when you first encountered that smell (Gascoyne, 2013).
- ✚ Messy play helps children to develop and improve their gross motor skills (large movements) and fine motor skills (small movements, especially the fingers) and coordination. Activities where children can create marks with their fingers, for example shaving foam, can help and encourage children acquire pre-writing skills in readiness for school.
- ✚ Children become so absorbed in messy play that it helps to extend their concentration and develop their thoughts and thinking skills.
- ✚ Children work cooperatively and collaboratively, and use all their senses to discover their imagination, creative thinking and develop the ability to solve and experiment with solutions.
- ✚ New vocabulary is introduced in the form of descriptive language such as, sticky, runny, hard, soft, fluffy, wet, dry, shiny, dripping, pouring, bury, hide, gooey, cold, warm and so on.
- ✚ Sensory play is accessible to all children including those with a disability, a special educational need or with special needs. There is no wrong or right way to play, you just need to use your imagination.
- ✚ Sensory or messy play can be done both indoors and outdoors, each providing a different sensory experience.



## How does sensory play link to the Early Years Foundation Stage?

### Expressive Art & Design:

Exploring & using media & materials and Being Imaginative.

### Understanding the World:

People & communities, the World and Technology

### Personal, Social and Emotional, Development:

Self-confidence & Self-awareness;  
Managing feelings & behaviour & Making relationships

### Communication & Language:

Listening & attention;  
Understanding & Speaking

### Physical Development:

Moving & Handling and Self-care

### Mathematics:

Numbers and Shape, space & measure

### Literacy:

Reading and Writing





[Try these Sensory activities at home.](#)

Cereals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thread hoops onto string.</li> <li>• Place in tray with pots, spoons, bottles and so on.</li> <li>• Make gooey paste for mark making.</li> </ul>
Couscous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place in a tray with funnels, spoons, bottles and pots.</li> <li>• Pour into bottles to make a shaker and add glitter or sequins for added sparkle.</li> <li>• Add to paint to give a different texture.</li> </ul>
Clay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make models of animals, pots, people and so on.</li> <li>• Create imprints from stones, sticks, leaves.</li> </ul>
Gloop made from cornflour, water & food colouring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place in tray and encourage to push along with fingers,</li> <li>• Encourage to squeeze in hand then open hand and watch the ball melt.</li> <li>• Make makes with fingers.</li> <li>• Use with spoons, pots, funnels &amp; bottles.</li> </ul>
Ice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place ice cubes in tray to explore. Place items in cubes for children to melt and find the objects.</li> <li>• Fill a balloon with water &amp; freeze overnight. Place on tray and remove balloon. Allow children to feel balloon &amp; see how long it takes to melt.</li> <li>• Add food colouring to ice cubes and place in a tray or bowl. Watch what happens to the colours as the cubes melt.</li> </ul>
Jelly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place in tray with spoons, bottles and pots.</li> <li>• Add animals for imaginative play.</li> </ul>
Wet/dry sand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place in tray &amp; add snakes, lizards and so on logs, stones to make a reptile habitat.</li> <li>• Spades, buckets and flags to make sand castles from wet sand.</li> <li>• Moulds, boxes, bottles, pots and sieve to pour dry sand.</li> <li>• Add numbers or letters to bury to have a letter/number hunt.</li> <li>• Add stones, logs, leaves &amp; toy dinosaurs to make a dinosaur land.</li> <li>• Add cars, trucks, diggers, dumpers to make a building site.</li> </ul>
Soapy Sand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place cover on table. Add sand, water and washing up liquid and mix together with hand. Watch as the colour</li> </ul>

	of the sand changes and bubbles appear in-between your fingers.
Soil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Place in tray, add logs, leaves, twigs, stones. Place animals, insects or dinosaurs to make a habitat.</li> <li>Add pots, spades, buckets, rakes for children to dig, fill and pour from pots.</li> <li>Plants flower, herbs &amp; vegetable seeds and watch them grow.</li> </ul>
Mud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Old bowls, pots, spades, spoons, mud, water to make mud pies, soups and magic potions.</li> <li>Place diggers, trucks, dumpers, tractors to make a building site or a farm.</li> </ul>
Spaghetti, noodles, cooked & uncooked pasta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thread dried pasta onto string to make necklaces, worms or snakes.</li> <li>Stick to card or paper plates to create collage.</li> <li>Add pots, spoons, kitchen utensils for scooping, lifting and filling.</li> <li>Add to bottles to make shakers.</li> <li>Place a plant pot upside down and place straws into the holes. Ask child to thread cooked pasta onto the straw.</li> </ul>
Tomatoe sauce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Squeeze onto table and allow children to make marks with their hands.</li> <li>Squeeze onto tray and encourage children to scrape an old comb through the sauce to make marks.</li> </ul>
Rice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Colour dry rice by mixing it in a bowl with food colouring. Place in tray with spoons, pots, bottles to fill and pour.</li> </ul>
Flour, salt or sugar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Place in tray with pots, spoons, bottles etc.</li> <li>Add cars, trucks, trains to create marks.</li> <li>Add polar bears, penguins to create a cold habitat.</li> </ul>
Playdough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Add rolling pins, cutters, plastic knives to make cakes, biscuits and food.</li> <li>Add twigs, stones and leaves to make models of people, monsters, insects or animals.</li> <li>Roll into long shapes to make snakes and worms. Introduce rulers to measure how long they are.</li> <li>Add glitter, ginger, curry powder to promote extra use of senses.</li> </ul>
Shaving foam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make marks with fingers, combs or cars.</li> <li>Add animals to play in pretend snow.</li> </ul>
Paint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use fingers and hands to make prints.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mix in sand, tea leaves and so on to change the texture.</li><li>• Use cotton buds to dip in paint to encourage fine motor skill.</li><li>• Place paper in bowl and cover marbles in paint. Roll marble in tray to make marks and patterns.</li></ul>
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### Your role as parents

1. Safety - check objects for rough or sharp edges before play. Decide the best and safest place to carry out the activity, and remember that sand and other messy ingredients can be slippery when spilt on the floor. Don't use items that your child is allergic to and ensure that the children wash their hands afterwards.
2. Stimulating resources - ensure that the items that you add to the activity are appropriate for the age and stage of your child. Giving toys that are too young for a child will be dull as they will not challenge or advance their skills further.
3. Space - Provide lots of space for the activity, as children will need extra space to manoeuvre around the activity, to reach certain objects and to explore the whole area.
4. Time - Give your child plenty of time to fully explore and investigate the sensory play provided, so they can become fully engaged and absorbed in their play.
5. Support their learning - Encourage the children to talk to you about what they are doing and what textures they can feel. Introduce new words especially mathematical language such as full, empty, half full, nearly empty, long, short and descriptive words such as prickly, bumpy and lumpy and so on. Introduce new ideas on what to do with the play items such as burying a toy or their hand, draw shapes, letters and numbers in the shaving foam.

## Summary

Now you know the importance of sensory play all you need to do is to try it at home. Your only limitation is your lack of imagination. Have a go and see what you can do!

For more ideas on sensory play activities please visit

<http://theimaginationtree.com/>.

For playdough and paint recipes please download our booklet from our website.

Happy Playing!!



## References

Gascoyne, S.(2013), Sensory Play, London: Practical Pre-school Books.