

# Handy Handouts®

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## Creating a Sensory Stimulation Kit

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Sensory stimulation kits can be a tool for children with sensory integration disorders, seizure disorders, or for coma stimulation after experiencing a traumatic brain injury. Parents, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and teachers can use items to encourage responses from children, expose them to a new feeling (sensation), or decrease a dislike to a particular sensation. The kit should include a variety of items to stimulate all 5 five senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.

Using a sensory stimulation kit with toddlers and preschoolers also helps them explore their world. A parent or therapist can use the items to encourage movement and/or language. A teacher may use one item from the kit as a writing or expressive language prompt in school-age children (e.g., "Describe this item." "How would you use it?" "What is its function?"). A therapist can use a sensory stimulation kit as a screener to see if a child is developing appropriately.

Before using sensory stimulation kits for therapeutic purposes, I recommend that you always consult a speech-language pathologist or occupational therapist first. Ask the therapist how long to expose the child to the stimulus and

the appropriate level of intensity. Inappropriate stimulation can be dangerous for children with disorders. For example, if a child experiences difficulty swallowing thin liquids, exposing him/her to sour tastes may cause an increase in saliva and may create a choking hazard. Or, if a child overreacts (is hypersensitive) to touch, using a massager on its highest setting may cause a negative (aversive) behavior. **Remember, always consult a therapist before initiating a sensory stimulation program and never force a child to participate if they seem distressed, upset, or avoidant.**

Use the following ideas to build your own custom sensory stimulation kit based on the child's specific needs.



### Sound

- Loud noise makers (e.g., whistle, cow bell, cymbals)
- Familiar voices and conversation
- Music
- Auditory feedback device
- Environmental sounds



### Touch

- Temperatures (e.g., hot/cold)
- Textured fabric (e.g., soft and hard side of Velcro®, feathers)
- Massagers (with varying speeds and/or textured attachments)

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- Textured balls
- Textured foods (e.g., crackers, pudding, licorice)
- Modeling clay
- Sand
- Brushes



## Vision

- Black and white / color photographs (actions, family, friends, and pets)
- Pictures of different shapes and colors
- Moving objects



## Smell

Present smells while child's mouth is closed.

- Familiar scents (e.g., mother's perfume, shower gels, air fresheners)
- Contrasting scents (sweet vs. pungent)
- Odors of foods (e.g., citrus, coffee, onion, garlic)
- Oils (e.g., peppermint, lavender, eucalyptus, citrus)



## Taste

Present new tastes gradually and with consent through exposure to new foods and flavor profiles. Please note that when it comes to food preferences and aversions, smell, texture, or appearance can be just as important as taste."

- Sour: explore mildly sour flavors such as citrus/lemon, vinegar-based sauces, yogurt, pickles
- Sweet flavors: fruits, juices or smoothies, applesauce or other purees, syrups or honey, candies
- Salty: foods seasoned with salt, soy sauce, cheeses
- Umami: tomatoes, cheese, meat, fish, shiitake mushrooms
- Bitter: grapefruit, coffee, bitter greens (kale, radicchio), dark chocolate
- Explore taste or spice combinations: soy sauce, seaweed, or jerky (salty + umami); citrus candies (sour + sweet); spice blends

## Tips for Sensory Stimulation Kit Use

1. Do not force a child to interact with stimuli that seem aversive, painful, or distressing. A slow, progressive, steady, and play-based approach is the best.
2. Try to assign meaning and function when using the stimulus items. Tell the child why you are using it or playing with it. (e.g., "We are going to see if you like the taste of new things today." "Let's see if we like how this sounds.")
3. Use the stimulus items to encourage fine or gross motor movements and/or communication.
4. Present noises intermittently. Noises should not be continuous. (The brain will drown out continuous sounds.)
5. Expose children to text labels on pictures to encourage language skills.

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