

Occupational Therapy Service for Children and Young People

Calming Activities

Our sensory systems have a strong impact upon our arousal states and our ability to manage our own levels of alertness. This is called sensory regulation.

Children with sensory processing difficulties struggle to regulate themselves effectively. They may often appear tired, sluggish and sleepy or over excited, hyperactive and filled with excess energy when their peers may be calmer and more alert. Providing controlled sensory input through activities such as those exemplified below can help a child to calm themselves.

These activities may be used as preparation for a seated activity (e.g. before the child needs to sit and eat or sit to do their homework) or at any time during play if they become over excited / distractible.

Care should be taken with all activities to ensure the child's safety, particularly where moving / handling objects is involved or in push / pull activities.

Activities may include:

- Use of slow rocking movements such as going on a swing, using a hammock, or rocking chair, rolling forward and back over a peanut therapy ball etc.
- Deep pressure tactile contact: this type of touch is calming for the nervous system. Try giving your child big bear hugs, or play games such as;
 - **Steamroller:** Get your child to lie down on their tummy on the floor or a mat. Get a therapy ball and roll it over the length of their body to provide a deep pressure squash. Ask the child if they want 'harder' or 'softer' pressure. Avoid the face!
 - **Hot dog rolls:** Roll your child up tightly in a blanket or thin mat, (with their head out the top of the blanket so they can breathe!). Roll the therapy ball over their body while they are rolled up in this, or use your hands to squish and press down on the blanket to provide lots of deep pressure.
- Playing of soft, rhythmical music

Spend time in an enclosed space with low lighting, e.g., pop up tent / small den made from blankets. Fill the space with soft cushions, blankets, twinkle lights, etc. This can be a safe space for your child to retreat to, to help them calm down.

- Give your child snacks to chew or crunch e.g. sugar free gum, chewy sweets, carrot sticks, apple, crackers, bread sticks, pretzels etc.
- Give your child items which they need to suck on e.g. hard sweets, lollypops, thickened liquids through a straw (milkshake), or liquids through spouted beaker.
- Plays games that require blowing e.g. through a straw, bubbles, whistles, instruments.
- Encourage play with toys which vibrate, e.g. body massagers, vibration cushions, vibrating snakes, etc.
- Use items which are warm, e.g. heat pads, microwavable soft toys.
- Play with Play-doh and encourage your child to roll out / squeeze / push the dough. You can also try Theraputty, which is like Play-doh but comes in different strengths (soft/medium/firm). This will provide more resistance to the hands which can be calming.
- Pushing / pulling activities are calming. Encourage your child to try and push down the wall as hard as they can, push against your hands, play tug-o-war, push their bottom of the chair 10 times (chair push-ups).
- Use calming visual toys / activities e.g. watching a fish tank, oil and water toys, bubble tubes, use of soft / dimmed lighting.

These activities may have both a calming and stimulating effect. You will need to try them with your child over time and note their effects.