



the children's charity

improving young lives every day

Make your own sensory kit at home!

This guide is for parent carers of children and young people for whom sensory activities will help them to manage their sensory inputs more effectively.

The activities suggested here will be of particular benefit for children and young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or sensory processing disorder (SPD) but they will also be useful for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or other hyperactivity conditions by helping them to focus.

Many of the activities will also help reduce anxiety, irrespective of whether there is an underlying health condition. If your child is struggling to process their sensory inputs, constantly fidgets, finds it difficult to concentrate, has increased levels of anxiety or can become agitated quickly then this no-nonsense guide might be for you.

Taking advice from teachers and parents, Variety has compiled these simple, practical tips and tricks to help make life easier and calmer while at home or out and about. None of the suggestions are aligned to particular age groups as many work just as well with young people as they do with younger children; calming activities are a good example. Some suggestions, however, aren't suitable for youngsters who are prone to putting things in their mouths.

Only try things that you think will be suitable for the age and developmental stage of your child. This isn't a medical guide and if you have any worries about the healthy development of your child you should contact your GP.

Almost everything can be made from items lying around the house and if you don't have something, you should be able to pick it up easily and cheaply. And don't worry if something gets broken - that's quite common with adventurous use and you can always make it again.

The brilliant thing about making your own sensory kit is that you can tailor it to your child. You can link it to their interests, favourite colours, smells, sounds, objects and imagination.

Using this guide

Throughout this guide you'll see some useful symbols which let you know which of the senses are stimulated by each suggestion. These will help you to decide what to include in your kit.



These are suggestions which are good for TACTILE stimulation. They activate the nerve signals beneath the skin's surface that inform the body of texture, temperature and other touch-sensations.



These are suggestions which are good for stimulation through SMELL.



These are suggestions which are AUDIBLE and good for sound stimulation.



These are suggestions which are good for VISUAL stimulation.



These are suggestions which are good for PROPRIOCEPTIVE stimulation. They help a child connect with the position and movement of their body.



These are suggestions which are good for developing our sense of MOVEMENT (direction and speed). Our movement system enables us to stay upright, to adjust our position, to balance, and to detect motion.



These are suggestions which can help with FIDGETING.



These are suggestions which are good for CALMING. They provide healthy and effective ways to help your little (or not-so-little) one soothe themselves, calm down, take deep breaths and work through their emotions.



These are suggestions which enable you to GET CREATIVE! If your child likes craft activities, keep an eye out for these.

Aim to include a balance of things that will help stimulate your child's senses so that they are alert with things that will help to calm them down by reducing stress and sensory overload. You're likely to need both at different times as their needs change throughout the day.



Your kit bag

Many children with sensory needs struggle with organisation so find a bag or cardboard box and have them decorate it however they'd like. Use wrapping paper, pens, pages from their favourite comic, posters – whatever you have that makes it really personal and unique. By keeping everything together they will be able to easily find something when they need it. And it doesn't just have to contain sensory items - keep a couple of their favourite books or toys in there as well because, let's face it, you can never find them when you need them!

1. Velcro (hook-and-loop fastener)

You can get two sensations for the price of one with Velcro! Rubbing it over different parts of the body can either stimulate or calm (depending which side you use) and ripping it apart is great for auditory stimulation too. Stick a piece to the underside of the table you are working at so your child can use it as a fiddle toy. If you're feeling creative, turn it into a bracelet so that your child can use it independently and so that it's always to hand.



2. Sandpaper or nail files

Sandpaper or nail files offer the same tactile stimulation as Velcro, just make sure it's not too coarse and is used safely.

3. Sponges

Sponges are great for tactile stimulation when dry. They feel great when wet too, and you can dip the sponge in water with added food flavourings or other scents to introduce smells. If you have essential oils, these work brilliantly with sponges either in the water or separately through a diffuser.

If you're feeling creative, cut out shapes or make a sponge bomb so that the sensation is even more stimulating. All you'll need are some sponges, a pair of scissors and some hair bands or string.

To find out how visit www.apumpkinandaprincess.com/make-sponge-bombs/



4. Cotton wool balls

Cotton wool balls are great for sensory stimulation and can be incorporated into lots of activities – painting, arts and crafts.

For 25 creative ideas of what to do with cotton wool balls check out www.growinghandsonkids.com/25-cotton-ball-hands-activities-kids.html

5. Wadding or fluff from an old soft toy

This has a similar effect as cotton wall balls but lasts a lot longer and can be reused many times over.



6. Squishy stress balls

Make your own stress balls by using three regular balloons and either rice or flour:



Step 1: Stretch out your first balloon and place a funnel into the neck (if you don't have a funnel, carefully use a little jug).

Step 2: Slowly fill the balloon with your rice or flour, taking care to avoid clogging the neck. Push a pencil down into the balloon to clear any blockages that occur.

Step 3: When it's full, carefully let as much air out as you can, taking care not to puff flour everywhere!

Step 4: Tie the balloon tightly.

Step 5: Take your second balloon, snip off the end then stretch it over the first balloon so it covers the end with the hole. This adds much needed durability.

Step 6: Finally snip the very end of the third balloon but leave enough to tie it.

Step 7: Stretch this over as well and then tie the end.



For a video demonstration check out: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbmAbL7BZ5g

7. Make your own sensory bags

These can be used as a fiddle toy or to develop fine motor skills. You'll need a thick plastic food bag, a small tub of hair gel and something creative!



Step 1: Empty the entire tub of hair gel into the bag followed by your choice of glitter, sprinkles, water beads, small plastic shapes, food colouring etc.

Step 2: Make sure all the air is pushed out of the bag and seal it

Step 3: Add some sticky tape around the end of the bag for extra safety.

8. Bath time sensory socks

Bath time for some children can be stressful so make a bath-proof sensory ball by filling a clean sock with oats and tying it up. The texture and weight of the wet sock can calm while also providing waterproof tactile stimulation.





9. Emergency foil blanket/space blanket OR tin foil

If you have a first aid kit, check to see if it has a foil blanket in it as it's more durable. If not you can use tin foil. Foil is shiny, crinkly and a very popular multi-sensory resource. Tear off a long strip and keep it smooth. Children will respond differently; some will love the feel of it on their feet and the metallic sound it makes, others will wear it as a cape and enjoy the calming crinkly noises. Some will want to scrunch it into a ball and feel the pressure of it on their hands or limbs.

10. Rice cereal calming strategies

Crisped rice cereals are very gentle and, for young people, popping a bowl of them one by one can be a very calming activity. Try it at night with a light up jar or by torchlight (see suggestions 18 and 20).



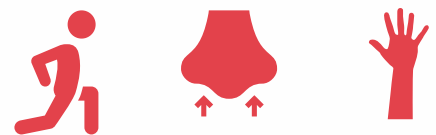
11. Sports water bottles

The hard sports cap found on drinking bottles can be bitten down on and chewed for ages, providing oral stimulation and deep pressure massage. Fill them with water too to provide a weighted effect and to help with hydration.



12. Chewing gum

For children and young people who are less at risk of choking, the oral stimulation that chewing gum can provide is unrivalled. Try to choose sugar free gum with little flavour so it isn't seen as a treat.



13. Crayon rubbing

Similar to brass rubbing, have children run their crayons across paper over various surfaces. Wax crayons are best but any other type will do just fine. Create a display of their rubbings and add to it each day. Use the ground, the carpet, leaves, tree trunks, brick walls, fences, graters (go carefully), brushes, you name it!



14. Crash mat

Place cushions, pillows, blankets and soft toys inside a single duvet cover, making sure that there are enough items to cover the floor underneath. Your child can then crash into this, do forward rolls or climb underneath to use it as a den.



15. Create an obstacle course around the garden

Use items such as chairs, tunnels, trampolines, slides, swings, logs, benches, beanbags, hoops, cones, footballs, gym balls – whatever you have that you don't mind using in the garden. Challenge your child to complete the course in a set time, whilst hopping, holding a sibling's hand (without letting go), without touching the floor, or whilst carrying a space hopper. They can also be involved in setting up the course.



16. Draw a chalk challenge trail

You can do this in the garden with chalk or around the house with coloured tape and paper. Include activities such as jumping, spinning, hopping, wall pushes, hopscotch, walking backwards, etc.

Check out this online clip for some ideas:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICYBkNht_j8



17. Coloured rice

Create a rice bin full of coloured rice. This is great for textured play and with bright colours can be more fun. All you need is rice, vinegar and food colouring as well as a big box or bucket and some of your child's favourite little toys.

Check out how to make it online here:

www.littlebinsforlittlehands.com/dye-rice-sensory-play-colored-rice/

Make up your own rules and mix different colours together for even more fun!



18. Light up jars

Fill an empty jar with battery powered Christmas lights and make sure the top is screwed on tightly. This is perfect for discovery play or for young people to have as a calming light in a dark space.





19. Rain sticks

Make rain sticks from the sturdiest cardboard tube you can find (the ones in foil and cling film are perfect).



Step 1: Paint the tubes or glue on some wrapping paper or old material you have lying around for an added tactile experience.

Step 2: From some old plastic wrapping (anything will do) cut out two large circles which are bigger than the holes at the ends of the tube.



Step 3: Cover one end of the tube with the circle and fix it in place with an elastic band or tie it with some colourful wool so it looks like a little hat.

Step 4: Experiment with filling the tube with different things such as pipe cleaners, rice, pasta, seeds, nails or anything else you can find.



Make as many as you like with a range of stimulating sounds.

For a video demonstration visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0C-K0VxMMk

20. Torches

Cover the end of a small torch with coloured sweet or food wrappers to provide different effects. Doing activities by torchlight at night can be very calming and they give a child the ability to control the lighting in their environment themselves.



21. Calm down jars

These swirling, glittering jars can be perfect for reducing stress. There are lots of ways to make them but we recommend the following:



Step 1: Start off by adding warm water a third of the way up the jar (or plastic bottle if you want to be extra safe) that you are using, followed by 60g of glitter glue (in whatever colour you like).

Step 2: Add just three drops of food colouring in a matching shade and stir. Add more if you need to, but if it becomes too dark you won't see the glitter.



Step 3: Add in 60g– 80g of glitter and then top up with warm water. Make sure you leave a little gap at the top so it can all move around easily.

If you want to be extra safe, glue the top on. The jars last for ages and you can make lots of colours to suit your child's different moods.

Recipe courtesy of www.goodtoknow.co.uk

22. Mirrors

Mirrors help a child articulate, learn about their emotions and increase their body and self-awareness. The shimmering and diffracting light also provides visual stimulation. Use plastic mirrors, small pocket mirrors or affix a mirror to something sturdy so it can't be easily broken. Use it at various points in the day to discuss different emotions and feelings and have them hold or use the mirror in different ways to reflect how they feel in that moment.



23. Sensory smell bottles

These are great as a sensory activity or as a calming technique in moments of stress. Simply gather some little bottles - spice bottles or travel toiletry bottles work brilliantly - or use small plastic containers if you need to improvise. Pop some cotton wool which is dosed with your chosen scent into each bottle and, if you can, drill some small holes through the cap of each bottle. If you don't have a drill just leave the lid off (the scent will evaporate more quickly). Keep some of your child's favourite scents handy or check out www.thechaosandtheclutter.com/archives/sensory-smell-bottles to learn how to turn them into a fun sensory activity. Try using coffee, cinnamon, peppermint oil, lavender, rosemary, coconut oil, lemon juice or any of the fragrances from your bathroom.



24. Weighted gloves

Weighted objects like blankets and lap pads offer deep pressure relaxation. For a low cost version, get hold of some fingerless gloves which have a flap on the top to lift over the fingers.

Step 1: Sew the flap in place on the back of the hand. Use self-adhesive Velcro as an alternative.

Step 2: Fill the pocket with washers, 2p coins or something similar.

Step 3: Sew (or Velcro) the flap in place.

Hey presto! They'll help to calm stress and can be worn while writing or doing other activities.



25. Play some calming music

Music impacts us emotionally, mentally and psychologically and there are loads of free options for you to build your own music library from. Meditative music in particular can be calming and relaxing. Find the relaxing music channels on whatever streaming service you use or take advantage of YouTube. There are lots of options but we recommend starting with the Autism Calming Sensory channel.



Top Tip! Use timers

The concept of time can be difficult for children and teenagers to learn. If we are constantly telling a child they have to do this activity for five minutes, but they have no idea how long five minutes is, they are more likely to become frustrated and angry. Use a simple timer such as a countdown clock, egg timer or a timer on your phone so they can see how much time is left before the activity is over.



26. Heavy work activities

Tasks that involve heavy resistance are brilliant for the muscles and joints. They involve proprioceptive input, body awareness and movement and are great as a physical break or before completing table top activities. Try having your child:

- Carry a laundry basket full of clothes
- Take the rubbish bins out
- Mow the grass
- Rake the leaves
- Do the vacuuming
- Water plants using a watering can
- Wash the car
- Undertake tasks in the kitchen like mixing cake batter, using a rolling pin or kneading dough.



27. Download some mindfulness and relaxation apps

There are loads of free apps aimed at children and young people which cover everything from breathing techniques to yoga, meditation to emotional processing and relaxation music to storytelling. This is particularly good for children and young people with anxiety.

Check out this list, written by the mum of a girl with ASD:

www.parentingchaos.com/anxiety-apps-kids/

The list is geared for iOS but you'll find most of the apps on Android too.



28. Homemade putty

This sensory putty is brilliant for fidgeting fingers when they need to be quiet and focused or as a stress putty to squish and pull when anxious. There are loads of recipes online but here is one of our favourites.

You'll need: 100g white school glue, 1.5 tsp sodium bicarbonate, gel food colouring, 1 teaspoon contact lens solution and 7 tablespoons cornflour.

Step 1: Mix the glue and bicarbonate of soda in a large glass bowl.

Step 2: Add a drop of food colouring until you get the colour you want. If you're adding glitter to your putty then now is the time to mix it in.

Step 3: Slowly mix in the cornflour.

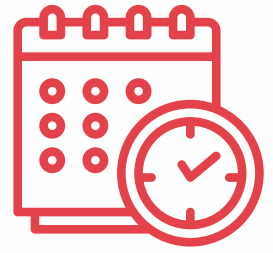
Step 4: Add in the contact lens solution and stir until it begins to separate from the sides of the bowl and stick together.

Step 5: If your mixture is too sticky keep adding cornflour until you get the consistency you want. Knead the putty with your hands until it is combined and no longer sticky.



Top Tip! Create a schedule and stick to it

This is particularly helpful for coping with changes in routine. Write or draw your schedule on a wall, stick it to the fridge or use a diary to record the daily schedule in. Use as many verbal clues as you can to help signpost through the day, such as 'First we are going to do this and then we will do this, etc'. This technique can make communication easier so there is less frustration for everyone and your child is more likely to be able to complete the activities you set. If you can, use a timer alongside your schedule.



Time to get messy!

Sometimes the most fun can be had when you get a bit messy... these activities can require a lot of cleaning up afterwards, so don't say we didn't warn you!

29. Dry cereal sensory play



Dry cereals provide an endless world of texture for younger children that is also safe to eat. Wheat biscuits, cornflakes, rice cereals, multi-grain hoops, malted wheats are all different and can be really stimulating for many children.

30. Rainbow foam

Rainbow foam is great at stimulating loads of senses at the same time. You can make lots of colours or just stick to your child's favourite.



Step 1: In a bowl, add 2 tablespoons of hard soap (use a grater) and 50ml of water.

Step 2: Add non-permanent food colouring or watercolour paint (which works just as well) to the mix along with some food flavouring if desired. This can give it a lovely aroma but make sure you use unscented soap so the smells don't mix.



Step 3: Mix using a whisk on the highest possible setting for 1-2 minutes. Your foam should be able to form stiff peaks that hold their shape.



31. Mix cornflour and water



This is an absolute favourite and perfect for the garden (or a contained area indoors). You can mix up this gloopy, drippy mixture in advance or let your child do it themselves. Mix one part water to two parts cornflour and feel free to add a few drops of colouring if you want (though keeping it simple is often best). As a rule, you won't be able to make enough of the stuff. Not only is it fun, but this type of messy play enables a child to manage their own levels of tactile stimulation. Usually follow this activity with a hose down or a shower!

32. Mix porridge and water

For an alternative to cornflour and water, mix porridge and water to create a more textured mixture. Try it with warm porridge for an extra sensory experience. You can also use boiled pasta for a less messy option.



33. Cloud dough

Cloud dough is fluffy, dry and doesn't stick to your hands. It's also entirely safe to eat, so you don't need to worry if it ends up in the mouth. All you need is flour, vegetable oil and optional food colouring. Mix the ingredients using a ratio of 1:8 (1 part oil to 8 parts flour). If you are using food colouring, make sure it's oil based and mix it with the vegetable oil first. Simply put all of the ingredients in a bowl and mix with your hands before tipping out into a large container.

For a step by step guide with pictures visit:

www.powerfulmothering.com/how-to-make-cloud-dough-recipe/



For more suggestions, try some of the following websites which are full of good ideas from parents (please note that Variety isn't responsible for any of the content):

www.childhood101.com/sensory-play-ideas

www.littlebinsforlittlehands.com

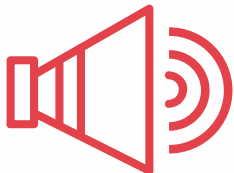
www.lemonlimeadventures.com

www.thechaosandtheclutter.com

If you have an idea of your own...

We'd love to hear your suggestions and ideas for other activities and tips that work for you! Email them to us at enquiries@variety.org.uk and you might find that they make it into our next edition of this guide.

Want to hear from the experts?



Listen to Pod-Ability, Variety's regular podcast series which explores the unseen, complex challenges facing the parents and families of disabled children, offering in-depth discussion as well as practical suggestions and signposting.

You can listen at www.variety.org.uk/pod-ability.

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Our closed Facebook group offers a safe, private, supportive and understanding space to talk about issues raised by each episode of Pod-Ability with like-minded parents and families of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

www.facebook.com/groups/varietypodabilitysupportgroup/



Apply to Variety for funding for sensory equipment

Variety provides grant funding directly to low-income families for children and young people who are aged 18 and under, are resident in the UK and who have a recognised disability or long term health condition (including a learning difficulty). Our average grant for sensory equipment is £1,200 but can vary depending on your needs from £60 to £4,000.

To find out more or to download an application form visit www.variety.org.uk/equipment or give our grants team a call on 020 7428 8100.



If you and your child need more support for:

- Anxiety and ADHD: visit www.youngminds.org.uk
- Autism: visit www.autism.org.uk
- Sensory processing: speak to your GP or, if your child is in mainstream education, the Special Educational Needs & Disabilities Coordinator (SENDSCO) at your child's school.



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