

# *Sensory Activities for Autistic Children*



Autistic people, including children, sense the world around them differently. In some areas, autistic children may be hypersensitive, meaning they are easily over stimulated by certain situations, such as loud or multiple sounds, or bright lights. In other areas, they may be hypo-sensitive, meaning that they have reduced sensitivity, which can lead them to seek out stimulation for those senses.

### **How sensory activities can help Autistic children**

Sensory play is important for all children as part of their development to help them to learn to use their senses, to expose them to new sensations and experiences, to prepare them for life in the wider world and to stimulate their curiosity and creativity. For autistic children with sensory issues, it can have several additional benefits, such as identifying areas where extra or reduced sensitivity is present and helping your child to experience and get used to new sensations in a fun and unpressurised setting.



Sensory activities can also help to calm autistic children when they are anxious or distressed. Many autistic people will have habits, such as foot tapping or arm waving, known as stimming, that they use to manage stress, and there is nothing wrong or abnormal about this. Introducing sensory activities and toys, such as fidget toys, can help to give other outlets for this and options for helping your child to overcome stress in different environments and situations.

There are, of course, many different sensory activities that you can try, and we can only scratch the surface in suggesting 3 broad areas to explore here. Adapt and make use of the resources and surroundings you have available and tailor the activities you use to suit your child's needs and preferences. Almost anything and any situation can be turned into an opportunity for some form of sensory play, be it eye-spy, listening to bird song, spotting objects of different colours and so on.

Remember, trying an activity and finding that your child has a strong aversion to one or more of the sensory aspects of it is not a failure – you are learning more about your child's preferences which may help you to avoid stress in the future.

If you find that your child struggles with bright lights or particular noises, you can seek to avoid these, and possibly even use sensory play to narrow down exactly what causes the problem.

If you find that your child craves stimulation to a particular sense, you can find safe ways to provide that without them resorting to potentially damaging things like eating non-food items. Perhaps it is as simple as carrying a small piece of a particular fabric that your child likes to touch that you can give them when they become stressed – for many years as a child I took the silky edge of a baby blanket everywhere with me, the rest of the blanket having long worn out and been thrown away!



Sensory play can also be a way to introduce new sensations to your child. They may find them strange at first, but by getting used to them while playing, they may be more relaxed when they encounter them in other situations.

## **Sort it out!**

Many autistic children (and adults!) love order and patterns, so sorting or ordering a mixture of things out can be satisfying and therapeutic in itself while exposing your child to new sensations according to what you decide to sort together and the criteria you use to sort them. The possibilities are limitless and can easily be adapted to suit your child's age, abilities and preferences. You can sort anything from household objects like buttons, to toys like building blocks or beads, and pictures or foods.

Try to encourage your child to use different senses as part of the sorting process. For example, if you were sorting snacks, you could sort them by colour, size or shape, but also by which ones your child liked to eat the most, which are rough and which are smooth, which are the strongest smelling and so on.

You can also encourage your child to sort objects into patterns of their own invention. They may well find this pleasing, and it may also give you an insight into their mind - do they prefer a rigid, symmetrical order, or a more abstract pattern? What colours do they like and dislike? Listen to what they say as they put the pattern together, as this too may teach you more about how your child thinks, and what they do and don't like.

## **Animal Magic**

There is much research that shows the benefits to our health of time spent with animals, be it petting them, caring for them or having pets around. Animals offer huge opportunities for sensory play, and you do not need to have a pet to take advantage of this.

If you do have a pet, encourage your child to interact with the animal as much as possible if it is safe for them and the animal for them to do so. An animal can and will stimulate many different senses, through watching their behaviour (good or otherwise!), hearing their sounds, smelling them (and being smelt by them), feeling the texture of their coat, feathers or skin, and, if you are lucky enough to have chickens, eating their eggs! Make the most of the opportunities that your pet offers by getting your autistic child involved in learning about the animal and its needs and playing a part in caring for them.

Younger children can stroke the pet and hear the sounds they make, while older children can take responsibility for feeding them, grooming them and so on.

Whether you have a pet or not, an autistic child will benefit from exposure to animals in a visitor friendly farm or wildlife park.

It can be hugely stimulating for children to see, hear, smell, and possibly touch a wide variety of different animals, and to learn for themselves in a safe environment, for example, that while snakes may look smooth, they can feel quite rough to the touch. They can also use their senses in experiencing the different habitats provided for the animals - hot or cold, dark or bright, sandy or grassy etc - and to see and smell their food as well as hearing the many different sounds.

The sensory play need not stop when you go home. Talk about the animals you have seen, try to copy their sounds, make pictures or models of them, pretend to be the animals and so on. Use your imagination and adapt to the needs and interests of your child.

Remember too that autistic people will often have or acquire a very specific and focused interest, so if your child is particularly fascinated with one animal, feed their curiosity.



## **Sensory Art**

Autistic people are often hugely creative, and even if your child is not, they will likely enjoy and benefit from trying all sorts of art projects. Tailor what you do to your child's age, needs, abilities and interests, but be creative and look beyond simple drawing and colouring.

Most children enjoy messy forms of play, and with a bit of prior thought and preparation, the clean-up need not be too stressful for you either! Consider things like finger painting, handprints, paper mache, clay modelling and even making your own play dough, salt dough or slime. All of these will expose your child to textures, colours and smells, and help them to express themselves in different ways. Build on your child's interests rather than pushing them in several new directions at once - if they love trains but are new to model making, build a model train.

If your child strongly dislikes something you try, or a smell or texture they encounter, for example, do not force them but learn from it and use that information to inform the future - better to find out at home that your child cannot tolerate anything sticky on their hands than when they are first given a sticky cake to eat while visiting someone's house!



Equally, try to learn from and reinforce the things that your child enjoys, and adapt these into quick solutions to potential meltdown situations or for dealing with stress in the future. You may not be able to start clay modelling on a moment's notice but keeping a pack of plasticine or play dough in your bag for use if calming is required could be helpful.

Both the opportunities for and the benefits of sensory play are near enough limitless. You will learn huge amounts about your child from playing with them – and it is vital that you join in with whatever sensory play you choose, rather than just watching – and you may well find new ways to calm your child and new things that they enjoy.

Sensory play can give many autistic children a voice that they may otherwise struggle to express.

Once you start looking for the sensory play ideas all around you, you may find it hard to stop!

