

Sensory Play for Autistic Kids

A practical guide for parents and caregivers

Why sensory play matters

Children learn about the world through their senses. For autistic children, this process can feel very different.

Sensory play gives them a safe, structured way to:

- Explore their environment
- Build skills
- Regulate their emotions
- Feel more in control of their bodies

It is not just “play.” It is a key part of development.

Repeated sensory experiences can support learning, coordination, regulation, and development, especially when they are safe, child-led, and matched to the child’s needs.



Understanding sensory differences

Autistic children often process sensory input differently.

They may be:

- **Hypersensitive (over-responsive)**
Sounds, textures, lights, or smells may feel overwhelming or even painful
- **Hyposensitive (under-responsive)**
They may seek out intense input like spinning, jumping, or touching everything
- **Mixed**
Sensitive in some areas, seeking in others

These are not behavior problems.

They are differences in how the nervous system processes information.

Sensory processing differences are now recognized as a core part of autism.



The 7 senses (not just 5)

In addition to the five familiar senses, two more play a major role:

1. Touch (Tactile)

- Texture, pressure, temperature
- Challenges: avoiding messy play, picky eating, clothing discomfort



2. Sight (Visual)

- Light, color, movement
- Challenges: sensitivity to bright lights, visual overload



3. Hearing (Auditory)

- Sounds, volume, background noise
- Challenges: covering ears, distress in noisy spaces



4. Taste (Gustatory)

- Flavors and food textures
- Challenges: limited food preferences



5. Smell (Olfactory)

- Scents and environmental smells
- Challenges: strong reactions to odors



6. Vestibular (movement & balance)

- Located in the inner ear
- Helps with balance and motion
- Challenges: fear of movement or constant need to move



7. Proprioceptive (body awareness)

- Awareness of body position and force
- Helps with coordination and control
- Challenges: clumsiness, crashing into things, seeking pressure



What sensory play helps with

When done regularly and in a supportive way, sensory activities can:

- Improve emotional regulation
- Reduce meltdowns and overwhelm
- Build fine and gross motor skills
- Support language and communication
- Increase focus and attention
- Help children navigate everyday environments with more support

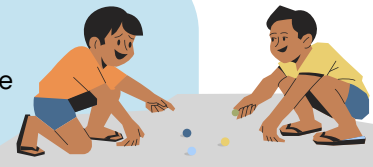
Sensory play can also help children gradually learn how to process and respond to sensory input more comfortably.



Types of sensory activities

Tactile (touch-based)

- Playdough, kinetic sand, or homemade slime (use with supervision and store carefully, as humidity can cause mold)
- Sensory bins with close supervision, using safer materials such as rice, beans, fabric scraps, or large non-choking items
- Finger painting



Movement-based

- Swinging, jumping, bouncing
- Obstacle courses
- Dancing or spinning

Visual

- Bubbles, lava lamps, light-up toys
- Shadow play or sensory bottles



Auditory

- Music, nature sounds
- Simple instruments
- Sound-matching games



Multi-sensory

- Cooking or baking
- Art with textures and scents
- Outdoor exploration



Start with what your child already enjoys. Then slowly introduce new experiences.

What to keep in mind

- Follow your child's lead
- Do not force sensory experiences
- Watch for signs of overwhelm (covering ears, withdrawal, agitation)
- Keep activities predictable and safe
- Short, positive experiences work better than long, stressful ones

The goal is not to "fix" sensory differences.

The goal is to support regulation, comfort, and confidence.



What about therapy?

Some children work with occupational therapists using **Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT)**.

This approach:

- Uses structured sensory activities
- Focuses on improving how the brain processes input
- Supports daily functioning and independence

Research on Sensory Integration Therapy is mixed but growing.

Some studies show benefits for daily functioning, self-care, play, and social participation, especially when delivered by trained occupational therapists using individualized goals, though more high-quality research is still needed.



A quick note for parents

If something feels "too small" to matter (like avoiding certain textures or reacting strongly to noise), it usually is not small for your child.

Sensory experiences shape how safe or overwhelming the world feels.

When you understand your child's sensory needs, you are not just helping them cope.

You are helping them feel understood.