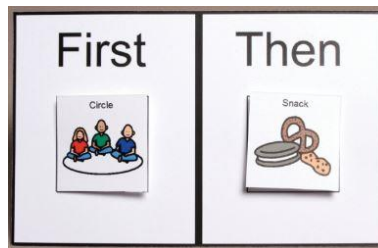


Sensory Strategies for Preschoolers

Below are some general strategies to consider to support children with sensory needs. Some common sensory challenges are outlined with associated strategies to trial as well. Also, please see our Sensory Processing handout or videos for more information regarding foundational sensory information.

General Strategies to Consider:

- **Caregiver self-awareness:** First, caregivers need to regulate themselves first before trying to help children to calm themselves. A dysregulated caregiver cannot help a child to self-regulate.
- **“First/Then” Statements:**
 - Using words “First” and “Then” to encourage a child to do something they don’t want to do
 - Schedule a preferred activity after child completes a task that is less desirable.
 - Example: “*First* we’re going to sit for 5 minutes at circle time, *then* you can ... (play with their favourite/special toy, or have a treat to eat as a reward)”



- Image from: <https://spedsupport.tea.texas.gov/resource-library/autism-toolkit/firstthen-card>
- **Visual Timer:**
 - To show the child how long they are expected to participate in an activity.
 - And/or... to show the child how much time is left during an activity to help with transitions and turn-taking
 - Gradually increase the amount of time child spends on a certain task (i.e. craft project) from week to week.
 - Examples of visual timers:



This resource is available electronically with link to an example of the products:

[60 Minute Countdown Timer](#)



This resource is available electronically with link to an example of the products:

[Hourglass/Sand Timer](#)

This resource is available electronically with link to an example of the products: [Traffic light timer](#)

- **Visual schedules:**
 - Scheduling activities in a specific order as part of the child's routine so that it is expected. Providing visual pictures of each task as a visual cue. Visual schedules may be helpful for bathroom sequences, dressing sequences or other daily routines, as well as helping with transitions between activities.
- **Social Stories:**
 - Social stories are social lessons in a storybook form.
 - Use of social stories can address many situations that a child can find difficult. Examples: going to a doctor's visit, for potty training, taking the school bus for the first time
 - Website and apps are available to help create social stories.
 - Refer to attached information sheet on "Social Stories"
- **Breathing as a calming technique:**
 - Teddy Bear Belly Breathing
 - How it works: Have the child lie down on their back and place a small stuffed animal (like a teddy bear) on their belly. Encourage the child to slowly inhale through their nose, watching the teddy bear rise as their belly fills with air. Then, they exhale slowly through their mouth, watching the teddy bear lower.
 - Why it is effective: This exercise focuses on deep belly breathing, which activates the body's relaxation response. The visual of the teddy bear rising and falling helps toddlers connect to the idea of slow, controlled breathing.

- Smell the Flower, Blow Out the Candle
 - How it works: Ask the child to pretend they are smelling a flower by inhaling deeply through their nose, then exhale through pursed lips as if they are blowing out a candle. You can make this exercise even more engaging by using visual props, like a flower picture or a toy candle.
 - Why it is effective: This exercise encourages slow, deep breathing through both the nose and mouth, helping the child focus on inhaling calm energy and exhaling stress.

- Bubble Breaths
 - How it works: Tell the child to pretend they are blowing bubbles. Have them take a deep breath in through the nose, then slowly blow out through their mouth as if they were blowing bubbles. You can even use real bubbles for a sensory experience.
 - Why it is effective: This activity encourages controlled exhalation and is a playful way to engage young children in deep breathing while also promoting focus and calmness.

- Lion's Breath
 - How it works: Encourage the child to take a deep breath in through the nose, then exhale forcefully through the mouth while sticking out their tongue (as if roaring like a lion). This can be a fun and silly way to release tension.
 - Why it is effective: This exercise incorporates both deep breathing and a physical release of energy. It can be especially helpful for toddlers who have excess energy or need to release frustration in a controlled way.

- Tips for Success:
 - Model the behavior: Toddlers learn by watching others, so model the breathing exercise yourself.
 - Keep it short: Toddlers have short attention spans, so make these exercises brief—around 1 to 2 minutes.
 - Use visuals and props: Using toys, pictures, or simple hand movements can keep toddlers engaged.
 - Make it a routine: Practice these breathing exercises regularly so they become familiar coping tools when the child is feeling overwhelmed.

- **Priming:**
 - To help children prepare for a change, give advance warnings/notice to let the child know ahead of time when their activity is expected to start or end.
 - Use the child's name to ensure you have attention before priming.
 - For example, say "(Child's name)...In 5 minutes, it will be clean up time." Instead of saying "Time to clean up now" without giving any notice.

- **Sensory Breaks:**

- Sensory opportunities should be provided regularly and multiple times throughout the child's day to help them stay regulated. Sensory opportunities may include:
 - Sensory bins with a variety of base textures such as water, cotton balls, uncooked pasta, pompoms, etc. A variety of manipulatives can be provided in the sensory bins such as small tongs, toys, spoons/shovels, etc. Supervision required.
 - Frequent movement opportunities as described below.
 - Quiet times and some children may enjoy music at times.
 - Pre-printing activities using a variety of materials such as paint, crayons, a chalkboard, Playdoh, etc.
- A child that has sensory sensitivities can be overwhelmed from sound and visual stimulation in their environment.
- Create a quiet corner or calming zone that the child can go to when they seem overwhelmed by sensory overload.
- Incorporate quiet time with lights turned off and keep things as quiet as possible.
- Offer the child earmuffs when they are overwhelmed by the noise in their environment; make sure that the child only uses earmuffs only on occasion because noise sensitivities can worsen if wearing earmuffs too often.
- If the child is very active, provide a movement break before and after a child needs to sit for an activity like craft or circle time. It is important to note that sometimes increased physical activity creates increased hyperactivity and is not beneficial as a sensory break for all children. If movement helps re-regulate a child, consider the use of heavy work. See the corresponding handout for heavy work or visit: https://hsnsudbury.ca/Portals/1/Services/Newborn_and_Childrens_Care/CTC%20Documents/OT/Heavy%20Work.pdf?ver=aylWpzo5QafvJ9yZbW8bEA%3d%3d
- If distracted by surrounding objects (i.e. toys), remove them until task is completed.
- A child may benefit from a weighted lap animal. Supervision is required and the item cannot be used on the child's head. The weight should not exceed 5-10% of the child's body weight and the child needs to be able to take it off of themselves easily. An example of a weighted lap animal:
 - This resource is available electronically with link to an example of the products: [manimo Weighted Dolphin](#)



- Always discuss with other caregivers of the child as they may have strategies that are beneficial in the environment the child is in with them.

Examples of sensory challenges in children and suggestions to consider:

- **Picky eating:**
 - Encourage fun, pressure-free food exposure whenever possible. This can be done outside of mealtimes through play or during meal prep/baking. This exposure introduces them to different foods in a safe way, which may encourage them to interact more with new foods. There's no pressure to eat the food during these exposures.
 - Encourage the child to interact with new or non-preferred foods, even if they are not ready to eat them. This could involve her touching the new food, smelling the new food, or licking the new food. Children need to be comfortable with all these steps before they may be ready to try a new food. Please see the Steps to Eating handout that was reviewed during the consultation.
 - Present a tiny portion of a new or non-preferred food (for example, as small as a grain of rice) alongside preferred food. The smaller the portion, the less threatening and more manageable it is.
 - Please see the Feeding Aversion tips handout for more information.
 - Visit <https://www.feedingplus.com/blog/25-sensory-play-ideas-to-help-with-picky-eating> or <https://www.feedingplus.com/blog/food-play-ideas-for-picky-eaters> for further strategies.
 - The NEO Kids Children's Treatment Centre Feeding Team provides assessments for children who experience, or are at risk of, feeding and swallowing difficulties. The goal of the feeding team is to assist families in creating a safe and comfortable feeding environment for their child and family. Families of most picky eaters 3 years of age or older are eligible for our Picky Eater Workshop.
 - Early warning signs may include:
 - Recurrent gagging
 - Vomiting and/or coughing during drinking or eating
 - Limited intake (bottle and solids)
 - Limited repertoire of foods eaten (or the absence of foods from an entire food group)
 - Although the minimum age for the Picky Eater Workshop is 3 years of age, strategies in the video link below can be applicable for younger children. However, you must consider the child's ability to properly chew the food.
 - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AGDuCoQXmM3k_bUPJNrRvEzTKGXDbViU/view?usp=sharing
 - Disclaimer: The content of these videos are not to be reproduced or redistributed without express permission of NEO Kids Children's Treatment Centre. The creators of this video are not experts in this area nor claim to be. These resources are provided for informational purposes only and are not a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis or treatment, from a qualified health-care provider.

***Please note that this handout reviews general strategies that may not be appropriate for all children. Direct supervision is important during feeding to ensure safety. Consult with your family physician or nurse practitioner if you have concerns regarding your child's feeding skills.**

- **Mouthing non-food objects:**

- If a child tends to put non-food items in their mouth to explore or to eat, they might be seeking oral-motor input; They may need to participate in such activities more frequently to decrease inappropriate mouthing of objects.
- Redirect the child by providing them something more appropriate to chew, as a safe substitute for mouthing exploration.
- Example:
 - Chew tools such as Sensory Chewelry (silicone chew pendant necklace or bracelet).and Chew Tubes. Note: Supervision is required for all chew tools. All chew tools need to be inspected frequently to ensure no choking hazards. Consider the risk associated with a chew tool that is worn around the neck.
- Activity ideas that can be regularly offered throughout a child's day:
 - Bubble Volcano – Fill a bowl with water and have the child blow bubbles with a straw (bendy or curly straws may work best); once the child is able to blow consistently (not sucking in the water) you could add soap to create many bubbles.
 - Blower Knockdown – Set up small figures/toys; have the child lie on his/her stomach; using a party blower they can blow to knock down items (pretend to be a lizard with a long tongue catching food, etc.)
 - Curly Straws – The extra work required from drinking through a curly straw can assist with regulation and strengthening.
 - Chewing – Chewing crunchy and chewy foods can provide increased input to the mouth. Proprioceptive opportunities/input can be provided by the use of wearable, chewable items.
 - Vibration – Tools such as the Z-Vibe can offer increased oral motor stimulation for children seeking this sensory input.



Z-vibe tool:

- Note: supervision is required for this tool. All chew tools need to be inspected frequently to ensure no choking hazards. Vibration tools cannot go near the child's ears due to vibration. Refer to instruction manual for proper use

- **Tactile defensiveness:**

Tactile defensiveness is when children are overly sensitive to touch, textures, or certain sensory stimuli. For example, a child might not want to play in sensory bins and might not want to finger paint. In settings like daycare or school, where children are constantly engaging with different or new materials, it's important to provide strategies that help them feel comfortable and supported while gradually building their tolerance to tactile input.

If a child's sensitivities to touch is impacting their participation in activities, try the following strategies:

- Prior to tactile play, some children benefit from vibration input to their hands (i.e., using Wiggle Wandz vibrating toy) in preparation.
- Gradual Exposure to Textures
 - How it works: Gradually introduce different textures in a controlled and non-overwhelming way. Start with textures that are more tolerable to the child and slowly work towards those they are more sensitive to.
 - Example: Begin with something soft like a fuzzy blanket or a stuffed animal, then progress to items like playdough or water play. Allow the child to explore with their hands, but encourage them to approach each new texture at their own pace.
 - Why it is effective: This approach builds tolerance over time, without overwhelming the child, and gives them the opportunity to engage with tactile materials when they feel ready.
- Use of Sensory Bins
 - How it works: Sensory bins filled with materials like rice, beans, sand, or water can be a great way to allow children to experience tactile input in a controlled way. These bins can be used for play or learning activities.
 - Example: Create a bin with soft items like pom-poms or fabric scraps that the child can touch and explore at their own pace. You can also allow the child to use scoops or spoons to move the materials around instead of using their hands directly if this is more comfortable.
 - Why it is effective: Sensory bins provide a structured and safe environment where the child can explore textures without feeling overwhelmed. Plus, it's a great way to incorporate tactile exploration gradually.
 - **Supervision required so that small items are not put into mouth.**
- Introduce Tactile Play with Non-Intrusive Materials
 - How it works: Allow children to explore textures that they can engage with without feeling overwhelmed. This can include materials that are non-invasive or can be used in a way that feels safe.
 - Example: Playdough (non-toxic), kinetic sand, water play with gentle splashing, or shaving cream (with gloves or using a small tool) can be great options. Food painting can also be fun, using pudding or whipped cream on a cookie sheet to trace/draw. Allow the child to engage with the material in ways that feel comfortable for them—perhaps by using utensils or gloves to avoid direct contact.
 - Why it is effective: Non-intrusive materials give children the freedom to explore at their own pace and control their tactile experiences.
- Positive Reinforcement and Choice
 - How it works: Encourage the child to explore tactile materials through positive reinforcement. Providing choices about which materials they want to engage with and when helps the child feel empowered and in control.
 - Example: If a child is hesitant about touching playdough, you might give them a choice: "Would you like to touch the playdough with your fingers or with a spoon?" Praise them for any attempts, even small ones, to engage with the material.

- Why it is effective: Giving the child control and celebrating small successes can increase their confidence in managing tactile experiences.
 - Consistent Routine and Predictability
 - How it works: Tactile defensiveness can sometimes be linked to sensory overload from a lack of predictability. Maintaining a consistent routine in terms of when and how tactile activities occur can help children feel more secure.
 - Example: Create a predictable schedule that includes sensory-friendly activities or sensory breaks at certain points in the day. Let the child know in advance when they'll be asked to interact with new textures.
 - Why it's effective: A structured routine helps children anticipate and mentally prepare for sensory experiences, reducing anxiety around unexpected touch
- **Tactile sensitivity for clothing:**

Example: Not wanting to wear certain clothing or doesn't tolerate wearing socks and/or shoes.

 - Ensure there are no factors impacting the comfort of the item (for example, the tongue of the shoe is situated appropriately, no wrinkles in socks, no wet sleeves, etc.).
 - See the visual schedule recommendations above to help the child prepare for having to put on outdoor clothing.
 - Work toward increasing the child's tolerance to certain clothing. For example, use a visual timer and have the child wear indoor shoes for 30 seconds with the timer and then remove. Increase time as able.
 - Use first/then statements, "first we will put on our boots, then we will play outside."
 - Visit <https://theotbutterfly.com/clothing-sensitivity-in-children/sensory-processing/> for more strategies. On this website, there is also a link to a podcast – Clothing Sensitivity in Neurodivergent Children. This link also has an e-book called "From Stressed to Dressed" which must be purchased; however, it offers a structured approach to addressing sensory dressing challenges.
- **Limited sitting tolerance and/or movement seeking:**

Examples: Difficulty with sitting during seated tasks such as meal times and craft/fine motor activities. Constantly on the go, and needs to climb, run, jump.

 - Limit sit-down periods to shorter times, such as one minute to start, to ensure sustained attention. Increase time as able. Consider the use of a visual timer to assist with activity tolerance. See visual timer recommendations above.
 - Use first/then statements such as, "First we sit to eat our snack, then we can stand up to play."
 - Provide movement breaks throughout the day as discussed above. Movement opportunities should occur before seated tasks.
 - Some children may require frequent opportunities for movement throughout their day to help regulate their bodies. For example, some children may need high-energy physical activities every 30 minutes for 5-10 minutes. Also, see the movement suggestions above.
 - Consider seating such as a cube chair that may offer more support with body positioning which may assist in attention to tasks. Also consider use of fidget cushion that can allow some movement while in sitting position.

- **Noise sensitivity:**

Example: Sensitive to noise of automatic toilets/hand dryers in the washroom.

- Consider providing noise reducing earmuffs if the automatic faucet/toilets/hand dryers are too loud for the child.
- Consider putting a piece of toilet paper over the sensor of the toilet so that the flush does not startle the child. The child or adult can then count down and remove the toilet paper from the sensor so that the child is prepared for the noise associated with the flush.
- Activate the automatic faucet/hand dryer for the child when the child is further away from it, then have the child approach it. As the child gets used to the noise, try to activate the faucet/hand dryer when the child is closer and closer.

*Note: Earmuffs should only be utilized when needed during noisy activities and for short periods. Extended and/or prolonged use of earmuffs can worsen noise sensitivities.

Other Resources/Programs to Help Manage Sensory Challenges:

- Discuss with your daycare's Child Care Resources (CCR) consultant to see how these strategies can be implemented within your daycare.
- Infant and Child Developmental Services (ICDS):
 - ICDS is a NEO Kids and Family Program at Health Sciences North. ICDS workers support families of infants/children from birth to school entry who are at risk of, or have a known developmental delay. They may help in the areas of developmental screening/monitoring, supportive coaching, information and resources, case management, consultations with professionals regarding specific children (with parents/guardians consent), support transition into childcare and school, community planning with other services providers, student placements and community education.
 - ICDS is often the first service involved in supporting families, assisting them with transitions; one common transition is to daycares.
 - ICDS continued involvement for children in daycare is based on family concerns or needs within the home environment.
 - Once a child has entered daycare, ICDS will review each client on a case by case basis for the needs of our services.
 - Families/guardians and caregivers can self-refer for this service: <https://ocean.cognisantmd.com/intake/IntakePortal.html?eReqRef=df2ace4b-ccba-4d19-a19b-685734563cd1>
 - Healthcare professionals can refer for this service as well: https://oceanhealthmap.ca/?rtRef=neo_kids_family-12778862
 - For more questions, contact the Central Intake Team at 705-523-7120.