

# SENSORY PLAY in the family day care setting

*“Our senses teach us what we need to know about our world and a whole lot about ourselves too.”*

CONNELL, PIRIE AND MCCARTHY, 2016

Sensory play incorporates any activity that stimulates a child's senses; touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell as well as anything that engages movement and balance. When it comes to sensory play, simple materials presented in their original form with all their imperfections, offer the ultimate sensory experience.

As adults, we notice the colours, movement, textures, sounds and smells in our environment and for children, this experience is often heightened and amplified. Sensory exploration comes naturally to babies and young children and is fundamental to their growth and development.

Natural environments offer diverse sensory experiences for babies, toddlers and preschool children and the more exposure a child has to sensory experiences throughout the day, the more integrated and organised the brain, senses and body become. (Angela Hanscom, *Balanced and Barefoot*)


- **A babies'** senses are ignited as they watch bubbles float, feel the soft tickle of feathers and grass, experience the sensation of cool or squishy sand underfoot or listen to wind chimes and the sound of water falling
- **A toddler's** sensory experiences might include playing with dirt, leaves, mud and water, exploring their surrounds whilst barefoot or climbing, turning and rolling on fixed objects
- **Pre-schoolers** can often be found undertaking their own sensory experiments; exploring textures of bark, pebbles and sand with hands and feet, mixing up potions with herbs and citrus, climbing, rolling and spinning or creating sensory buckets of their own.

The changing seasons provide for authentic multisensory exploration with rain, leaves, dirt, sunshine and wind acting as the perfect platform for children to develop a deep understanding of their world and their place within it.

## Benefits of sensory play

The benefits of sensory play are endless and an important part of children's development:

- Supports the development of fine and gross motor skills
- Enhances memory
- Calms anxious or frustrated children
- Is perfect for children to learn about textures, weights, patterns, shapes and what happens when you bang, rub or crush them together
- Facilitates a connection with the very 'real' and imperfect natural world
- Allows babies and toddlers to explore, discover and experience an abundance of unique tones and textures with adults nearby to nurture their inquisitive spirit.
- Is cost effective, easy to source and fun to collect
- Helps to build nerve connections in the brain
- Supports language development
- Encourages 'scientific thinking' and problem solving.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a cup filled with a thick, brown, textured substance, likely mud. The cup is made of a dark, textured material, possibly metal or wood. The background is blurred, showing a person in a white shirt.

# TEACHING AND LEARNING with sensory play

*“Sensory integration is simply taking in all of the stimuli detected by the senses and organising information about them for functional use - taking all of the puzzle pieces and pulling them together in order to create a bigger picture”*

[ANGELA HANSCOM, BALANCED AND BAREFOOT](#)

Children learn in many different ways and respond differently to a range of learning environments. Most children not only gravitate towards, but also highly benefit from, sensory experiences in both an indoor and outdoor environment.

Natural environments provide the perfect platform for multisensory learning experiences - everything in nature has a unique texture, smell, temperature, taste, weight and design. Providing an environment that supports sensory play is fundamental to children's early development.

Educators promote learning through sensory play when they lead with a sense of wonder and gentle guidance and provide a balance between child led, child initiated, and educator supported learning. ([EYLF, pg 17](#)) It is important to be supportive of children and provide a sense of security and comfort, but to acknowledge a child's role in directing their own learning and ultimately, recognise spontaneous teachable moments.

## Setting up for sensory play

- 1 Review the outdoor environment to assess how best it supports the development of each sense and create sensory opportunities for children at multiple heights to encourage them to bend down, look up and look around. Grasses, river stones, mud, water walls and wind chimes can be used to provide such an experience.
- 2 Ensure that sensory play opportunities can be easily accessed and transported by children of all ages.
- 3 Consider how local flora and fauna can be introduced into the environment to create a sensory wonderland.
- 4 Built features within the environment can support engagement in sensory play; mud kitchens, sand pits, grassed areas for barefoot play and pumps and vessels for water play are a great place to begin.
- 5 Use questioning such as: how does it feel, what does it look like and what sound does it make to encourage children to engage multiple senses at one time. Alternatively, focus on one sense at a time with guiding questions and experiences to tune into that particular sense.

*Tip: Ensure all materials are age appropriate and have been deemed safe for the age and stage of children in your care.*

### FURTHER RESOURCES

*Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident, and Capable Children*, Angela Hanscom  
Nature Play SA [info sheets](#) for Mud Play and Sensory Play for Babies

Department for Education – [sensory activity ideas for early years](#)

Department for Education - [sensory ideas and teacher notes](#)

# TEACHING AND LEARNING

## with sensory play



It is important to have a clear understanding of each of the senses, how they work and the important role they play in a child's overall development. With this knowledge, educators are able to intentionally optimise the learning environment to support sensory integration and facilitate positive experiences for all children.

Sensory System	Explanation and learning connections
<p><b>Auditory</b> (listening &amp; hearing)</p>	<p>The auditory sense plays an important part in sensory integration. <i>"Listening is a whole brain, whole-body experience that connects us to our environment and is the precursor to interaction, speaking, reading and writing (Hanscom, 2016, pg. 51)"</i> The natural environment has the potential to provide a dizzying array of varying sounds such as breeze blowing, bird calls, water trickling and insects buzzing.</p>
<p><b>Visual</b> (seeing)</p>	<p>Our sense of sight helps us to make sense of the world around us and can often confirm what our other senses are telling us. Seeing movement, colour, patterns and other variances in the world are all important for healthy child development. Children can be easily overstimulated indoors with clutter but soothed by natural outdoor environments.</p>
<p><b>Tactile</b> (touching and feeling)</p>	<p>Our sense of touch gives us critical information about the world around us. Touch can act as a warning, as a source of comfort and many things in between. From tactile play, children learn about pressure, change in temperature, vibrations, and so much more. Walking barefoot gives us new opportunities for developing body awareness through touch; it develops a sense of balance, builds strong feet and ankles and ground us to the earth.</p>
<p><b>Olfactory and Taste</b> (smell and taste)</p>	<p>The sense of taste and smell work in conjunction with one another and are well developed in very young children. Taste and smell are important and are connected with emotion and memory. Nature provides a great canvas for the sense of smell to surprise children and adults alike; the earthy scent of mud, taste of rain, flowers, wetlands, and other natural elements are often a source of wonder.</p>
<p><b>Vestibular</b> (balance and movement)</p>	<p>The vestibular sense is one that alerts us to where our bodies are in space and helps us to maintain our balance. It helps us move through the world with ease. Our sense of balance and movement comes from the vestibular system, which is located in the inner ear. Rolling around, hanging, swinging, spinning and jumping all contribute to a child's development of balance as well as exploring climbable rocks, logs and tunnels.</p>
<p><b>Proprioception</b> (body and spacial awareness)</p>	<p>Through proprioception, children develop body awareness and a sense of how their arms and legs work in conjunction with the rest of their body. Children develop their sense of proprioception as they run at different speeds and terrain, climb things such as trees and logs, push, pull and lift objects of various weights and shapes, and swing on ropes and swings. All of these movements help children develop spatial awareness of their body.</p>

# 20 learning inspired ideas for sensory play in a family daycare setting



## LEARNING OUTCOME 1:

CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

- 1 Collect sticks and make them smooth with sandpaper of various grit
- 2 Go on a scavenger hunt for 'natural treasure'
- 3 Gather a beautiful collection of pods, seeds and flowers to use in your play kitchen
- 4 Go on a nature walk and take a collecting basket. When you return, make an artistic interpretation of your journey with what you've collected

## LEARNING OUTCOME 2:

CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH, AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

- 5 Use a mortar and pestle to crush up petals and leaves to explore scents and colours
- 6 Collect a large bag of dry leaves and explore how they crunch underfoot
- 7 Make playdough scented with citrus, herbs, flower petals and spices
- 8 Leave a patch of grassed area to 'grow wild' for a month and then explore it

## LEARNING OUTCOME 3:

CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

- 9 Dig yourself a mud pit, pop in a few loose parts and go mud dipping for treasure
- 10 Create sensory tubs with natural materials of different textures
- 11 Take time to enjoy barefoot play and adventures
- 12 Create a beautiful mandala with flowers, leaves and stones

## LEARNING OUTCOME 4:

CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS

- 13 Explore the magical transition of solid to liquid using ice cubes frozen in various vessels
- 14 Mix up perfumes and potions with flowers, herbs and seed pods
- 15 Place babies and infants in dappled shade and under trees to experience the gentle and subtle sensory input from the breeze and sunlight
- 16 Play blindfold games with natural items hidden in a secret bag or box to handle

## LEARNING OUTCOME 5:

CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

- 17 Give babies plenty of tummy time on surfaces of varying textures
- 18 Arrange a series of containers with samples of herbs and citrus rounds in them – with a peephole to smell them. Create a photo wall of children's expressions after smelling each of the surprise scents.
- 19 Go on a walk for opposites in nature; smooth and rough, hot and cold, wet and dry
- 20 Use a range of child safe clays and doughs for both indoor and outdoor play.

Ensure all materials are age appropriate and have been deemed safe for the age and stage of children in your care.

# EXPLORE, DISCOVER AND WONDER with sensory play in the family daycare setting

Sensory play incorporates any activity that stimulates a child's senses; touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell as well as anything that engages movement and balance. In fact, sensory play can be simply viewed as offering experiences that allow exploration of the senses as a child engages in play. Simple materials, presented in their original form with all their imperfections.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

1.2 Children feel safe, secure and supported.

1.4 Children develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities.

2.4 Children become socially responsible for their own health and wellbeing.

3.2 Children take increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing.

4.1 Develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity.

4.2 Develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesizing, researching and investigating

4.4 Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials.

5.1 Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes.

5.3 Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media.