

PLAY

Play is an essential part of development & daily life for children of all ages. It is through play that children learn, develop creativity & imagination. Physical play improves motor skills and motor planning, pretend play / role play improves communication and interaction skills. Play provides opportunities to problem solve, take turns, share, follow rules and develop their emotional regulation & impulse control.

Encourage play and develop play skills by:

- * Playing 1:1 / joining in when your child is playing; using items / toys / games / songs that they are interested in to encourage them to play & to create interaction. Experiment with different games & toys to understand what kinds of things your child finds fun and enjoyable
- * Following your child's lead, and imitating the way they are playing with items to encourage them to carry on and to reinforce what they are doing
- * Modelling how toys can be used in different ways to help your child initiate play / play with new things (if your child struggles with imitation show them what to do and then state "your turn" before hand over hand guiding them through the action / motion with the toy
- * Showing your child videos of other children playing to give them additional ideas of how to play with items
- * Playing face to face so that your child can look at you, see what you're doing & communicate with you; and playing in different places

Occupational Therapy



ANXIETY

The Covid-19 outbreak has changed life for everyone, and such change can sometimes cause feelings of anxiety. Anxiety is a common feeling, typically caused by a source of unease. Anxiety can affect people in many different ways, impacting upon daily life and often presenting in a range of behaviours in children:

- * **Anger**
- * **Defiance**
- * **Lack of focus**
- * **Over planning**
- * **Difficulty Sleeping**
- * **Over-reactivity**
- * **Avoidance**
- * **Negativity**

Try interventions to help manage the feelings of anxiety and minimise it's impact on daily life:

- **Relaxation techniques** - try counting, breathing exercises, stretches, yoga, meditation etc
- **Pacing strategies** - ensure children pace themselves throughout the day and preserve energy where possible
- **Grading activities** - break them down with small, structured steps
- **Physical exercise**
- **Self-awareness skills** - support children to understand & be aware of their own bodies when their anxiety is rising or affecting them
- **Creative activities** - activities that are not too challenging but that have therapeutic value e.g. music, art, colouring, writing, drama, pottery etc

EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

Include children in every day activities / household tasks to promote skill development whilst also encouraging a sense of responsibility:

Strength & proprioception:

- * Taking out the rubbish
- * Mopping & hoovering
- * Loading the washing machine
- * Pulling out weeds

Bilateral coordination:

- * Sweeping
- * Folding laundry
- * Washing up
- * Cooking (stirring & pouring tasks)

Visual & cognitive skills:

- * Following recipes
- * Putting shopping away
- * Setting the table
- * Matching up socks, and picking out suitable clothes

Fine motor skills & hand strength:

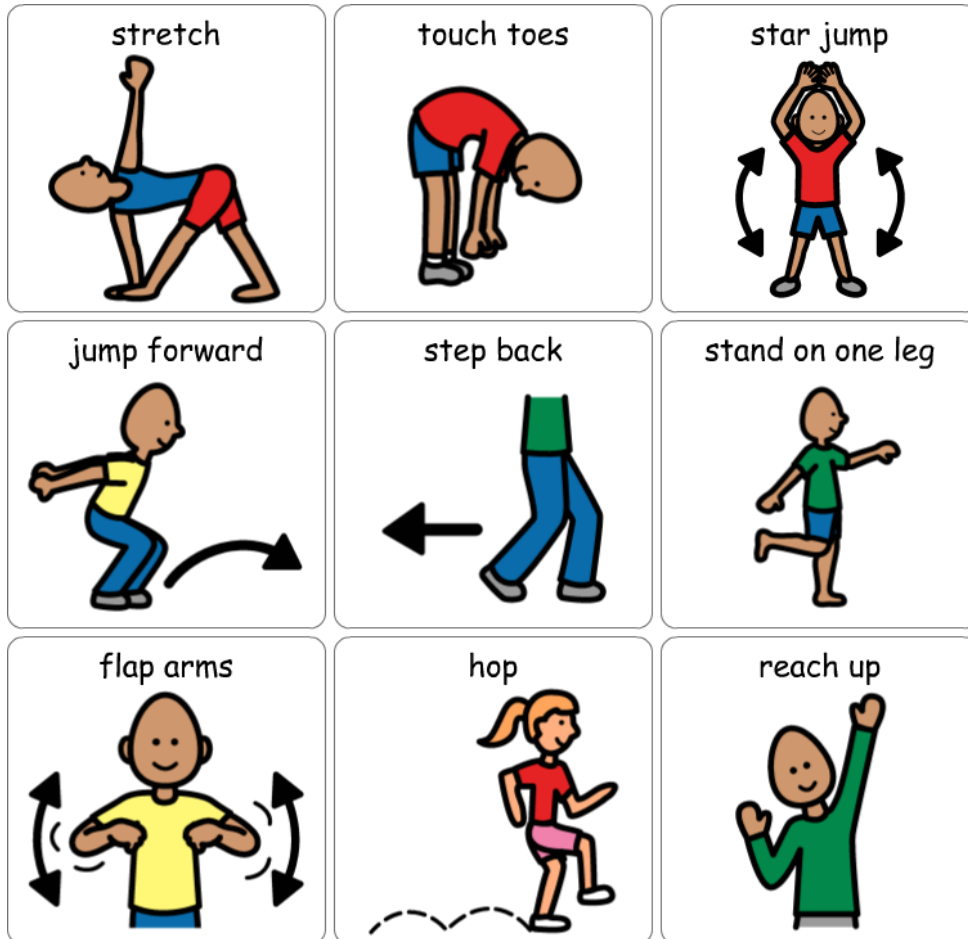
- * Washing up and squeezing the sponge / cloth
- * Folding clothing
- * Watering plants using a spray bottle
- * Hanging clothes on the washing line with pegs



MOVEMENT BREAKS

Within school movement breaks are incorporated throughout the school day, providing much needed sensory input & supporting them to feel calm and regulated so that they are more engaged. Using a combination of formal and informal movement opportunities e.g. exercise videos, set workouts vs. free play, bike riding, walking, bouncing etc, movement supports learners to be more calm, experience fewer meltdowns, reduce stress, and improve attention / focus.

Examples of simple movement breaks:



SENSORY OVERLOAD

Sensory overload can occur when there is an increase in sensory input within our environments e.g. lots of lighting, lots of noise (TV, radio, telephone calls, conversations etc), lots of people, lots of household clutter etc. Changes to routine, anxiety, stress and changes in social interactions (seeing more of people than usual, different voices, busier home environments) can all trigger sensory overload too.

Difficulties with sensory overload can impact upon participation and function in daily life, so being aware of the signs and having strategies to support / calm is really important.



Sensory overload can present in a variety of ways:

- * Loss of balance / coordination
- * Stimming (flapping, clapping etc)
- * Refusing / avoiding demands
- * Repeating words / phrases
- * Racing heartbeat
- * Stomach ache / nausea
- * Lashing out
- * Anger / agitation
- * Hysteria /crying
- * Skin flushes / going pale
- * Sweating
- * Verbalising "stop"

CALMING SENSORY INPUT (Children may respond to single strategies or a combination of strategies):

- * Reduce noise (use ear defenders, headphones, ear plugs – if tolerated) & light levels (dim lights, use lamps); create a den or safe space
- * Speak with soft / quiet voices; try quiet rhythmic music / white noise / nature sounds
- * Use an oral chew; blow bubbles; blowing feathers / cotton balls; suck a cold drink through a straw
- * Make your own sensory bottle (water, oil, beads, glitter etc)
- * Slow rocking or swaying (on a swing, in a rocking chair, over a gym ball or pile of pillows / cushions)
- * Sit on or under a bean bag / large pillows; wrap in a duvet; roll whilst wrapped in a blanket or duvet (supervise at all times)
- * Guide the child in active and passive stretches e.g. yoga
- * Provide fidget toys or something to squeeze e.g. a ball, cushion / pillow, soft toy, or make your own squishy
- * Distraction / engagement in a preferred activity, preferably something that usually promotes attention or is repetitive e.g. threading, pressing buttons / switches, colouring etc
- * Deep pressure e.g. placing / squeezing hands on shoulders; rolling a tennis ball on the back or down the arms; stretching a theraband, a piece of elastic, or a long sock; encourage self-squeezes (wrap arms around self, hold arms, and squeeze); wear tighter clothing; wear a backpack around the house for added pressure and sensory feedback

Auditory (noise) activities:

- * Provide opportunity to listen to preferred music / theme tunes / household sounds (provide on a device with headphones if they prefer a louder volume)
- * Be mindful that humming, repeating phrases, and vocalising (including shouting & crying) can be a child seeking sound and therefore creating it themselves, but that it can also be an attempt to control auditory input and block out environmental noise around them that may be too much to process or too loud

Movement activities:

- * Press-ups, wall push-ups, chair push-ups, online exercise videos
- * Bounce on a gym ball or wobble on a pile of cushions / pillows
- * Use cans of food or toys as weights
- * Set up an indoor obstacle course

Tactile Seeking (Touch) activities:

- * Play-doh, Arts & Crafts (painting, finger knitting, scrap-booking, tearing paper, making salt dough etc)
- * Tactile Adventure Bins (hide toys or jigsaw pieces in porridge, sand, lentils, rice, popcorn etc to retrieve)
- * Shaving Foam & Bubbles (draw in them, blow them & pop with fingers / hands)
- * Kitchen Activities (mixing, measuring, tasting, smelling, washing up)
- * Extra baths / showers (bubbles, soap, sponges, flannels and brushes)

SENSORY SEEKING

Some learners can crave more sensory input than others, and their constant need to gain ('seek') more sensory input can affect their ability to concentrate, listen, engage in activities, and have appropriate self-control. Sensory seeking can look like: a constant need to touch objects, surfaces, textures and people around them; being hyperactive & impulsive; putting non-food items in their mouths and frequently wanting to chew things; loving loud noises, having a need to talk loudly or create a lot of noise; being constantly 'on the go' and struggling to sit still; jumping, spinning, climbing, and / or bumping into things; being fascinated / heavily focused on patterns, spinning items, moving items, and / or certain colours & shapes; and frequent smelling / sniffing things.

If you are able to identify the types of sensation your child may be seeking, activity ideas to increase different types of sensory input are listed below:

Visual activities:

- * Provide spinning items, flashing toys, torches & mirrors etc
- * Try Apps such as 'Sensory Electra' and 'Sensory Magma'

Oral activities:

- * Use an appropriate oral chew (if available) or try crunchy / chewy snacks to provide similar sensory input e.g. carrots, strawberry laces, breadsticks, different cereals

SAFE SPACES

Providing a contained 'safe' space that offers a retreat when learners are overloaded / distressed / agitated / in need of their own space can be beneficial, and five to ten minutes spent inside such a safe space can really help learners to calm down.

Safe spaces can be created by:

- * providing a small tent to retreat to
- * creating a den by laying a blanket over a small table / across two chairs
- * using a large cardboard box to play in
- * providing a sleeping bag to lie in / relax in
- * providing a quilt or beanbag to play under

