



Services for Young Children

Sensory Play - Prospects March 2016

The importance of young children's learning through sensory play

For the Early Years practitioner focusing on providing quality sensory play experiences to stimulate children's senses, **Taste, Sight, Smell, Hearing and Touch** can have the most exciting, impactful learning outcomes on young children.

Providing a rich learning environment through the use of sensory materials and resources provides huge benefits to learning through play. The possibilities are endless. The best part is that developing these experiences rarely needs a trip to the shops and lots of money spent! Focus on your natural environments and interesting items and materials you might have at home or around the setting! Here are a few ideas and thoughts to get you thinking and reflecting on what you do now and how you might develop your provision further.

Language and communication

When young children do not always have the words to describe their experiences, sensory play can support children to build and extend their vocabulary and understanding of language. By using words and appropriate sensitive questioning that relate to the child's experience, a practitioner can link sensory play to support children in gaining newly acquired knowledge and understanding; **cognitive** growth.

Here are a few examples of how you could articulate a sensory experience for a young child using descriptive and action words: cold, hot, bumpy, shiny, smooth, rough, pour, scoop, sift, dry, wet, sticky.

Exploration and Fascination

When babies first interact with the world, they absorb information through their senses. Babies can enjoy the feeling of water in a pool or bath, feel the wind on their face when outside and respond to music and natural sounds in the environment. As babies grow and develop, they need to feel a wide variety of materials and textures, scoop and sort small objects, and explore around the cause and effect; for example what happens if I tip out the sand from this bucket?

Here are a few examples of sensory fascinations; jelly (dissolved and set), ice, custard, sand and water, rice and pasta, mashed potato, play dough with scents and textures, painting with beetroot and/or berries, lavender sprigs, pine cones, leaves and twigs, tearing and feeling wet paper. We are sure you have more ideas and thoughts to add to this.

Independence

Practitioners should organise learning experiences so that children are actively engaged and content to independently explore with their senses; children benefit from having space to play independently and unhindered. Sensory activities may have to be introduced quite artfully, especially if a child has previously shown a dislike of wet or sticky things to touch.

Here is an example of how sensory activities can be introduced methodically; a tray of dry pasta, move onto gloop or crazy soap and then produce a tray of dissolved sticky and wet jelly.

Initially you could even introduce the resource through a protective barrier if the child finds touch too stimulating i.e. placing in a clear, sealed pouch to allow the child to explore without direct touch or encourage the use of small tools to enable movement and experimentation of the resource without direct touch, until they are ready for the next step.

The role of the adult

The role of the adult is paramount to provide an independent environment with not too much clutter at once so the child is able to fully benefit from the specific learning experience. Use your best judgement and pay close attention when introducing your children to new textures and small objects. Through really exciting sensory play the adult will clearly see how children express themselves by engaging the brain and the body. Consider also that you too are a play resource for the child; a fun play partner that judges best when to skilfully support and scaffold the learning outcomes.

Examples of practical solutions for the role of the adult: invest in large builders tray, buy some large cheap trays, use large washable mats, the use of the outside space, ensure adequate supervision and appropriate risk assessment.

Further information to support your reflection and provision of sensory play can be found at the following websites. You may find others that you can share with us and your colleagues on the Prospects Facebook group, including your reflections and additions to provision and practice following this article via: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/384551638384221/>

www.abcdoes.com – in particular you might want to have a look at the fabulous ‘texture kitchen’ articles

<http://theimaginationtree.com/>

<http://www.learning4kids.net/list-of-sensory-play-ideas>

<http://www3.hants.gov.uk/childrens-services/childcare/providers/eyfs/quality-improvement/quality-improvement-tools/eyfs-gallery.htm>