

SENSORY PLAY

What Is This Developmental Skill?

Sensory play involves exploring through touch, sight, sound, smell, taste, movement, and body awareness. Activities such as splashing water, digging in sand, squeezing play dough, climbing, and listening to music help children understand their bodies and environments.

How Does This Normally Develop?

Sensory exploration begins in infancy as children look, reach, mouth objects, and respond to sounds and movement. As they grow, children seek more varied experiences and gradually learn which sensations are calming, exciting, or uncomfortable. Responsive caregivers provide safe opportunities to explore while helping children manage overwhelming sensations.

How Can Neglect Interfere with Its Development?

Children who experience neglect may have limited opportunities for safe exploration or may spend long periods confined or without responsive interaction. Chronic stress can also affect how the nervous system processes sensory information. Some children become highly sensitive, while others seek intense movement, touch, or sound.

What Might This Look Like?

A child may constantly run, climb, crash, or spin. Another may avoid loud sounds, certain foods, messy materials, grooming, or physical touch. Some children mouth objects, become overwhelmed in busy environments, or have difficulty calming their bodies.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers can offer predictable sensory experiences such as water play, play dough, swinging, carrying objects, or outdoor movement. Observe which activities organize or overwhelm the child. Avoid forcing uncomfortable sensations, and consider occupational therapy when sensory needs significantly interfere with daily life.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of asking, "Why is this child being difficult?" ask, "What is this child's nervous system communicating?" Sensory behaviors are often attempts to feel organized, safe, or calm.

