

SENSORY FUN IN THE SUMMERTIME

A break from school offers a wealth of opportunities to focus on your child's sensory well-being...

BY LINDSEY BIEL, OTR/L



Summer can be a time of growth and exploration when kids get more exercise and adventure than during the regular school year. Other kids seem to regress over summer months. Changes in routine, unfamiliar activities, food, faces, places, and sounds can make it very hard for sensitive kids to relax and enjoy themselves. There's a lot you can do to help your sensory child blossom during summer months.

DON'T LET GO OF ALL STRUCTURE

Keep up systems and strategies that work during the school year. Use a calendar to plan activities and mark off each day of vacation so your child can anticipate what's next and when he or she will return to school. If your child is overwhelmed by sudden changes in plans, let him know what to expect each day and limit unnecessary transitions and chores.

While it may feel great for us to drop daily routines like waking up early, getting dressed quickly, and having a full schedule each day, many children with sensory challenges crave predictability and thrive on such routines. Studies show that kids today do not get enough sleep. During vacations, it's tempting to discontinue early-to-bed, early-to-rise routines. While you may adjust wake-up and bedtime slightly so your child can get more sleep, don't go overboard. Adjust sleep/wake cycles slightly, but then stick to a predictable schedule to help your child stay organized and self-regulated.

If your child receives occupational, physical, or speech therapy, ask if there is a special therapeutic program over the summer.

KEEP BUILDING SKILLS

All the work you and any therapists your child have been doing shouldn't fall apart over the summer. Your child can have fun and keep continuing to develop sensory processing, fine motor, gross motor, self-help, and academic skills with a little help.

With fewer clothes to put on and take off, now is a great time to increase independence

with dressing. Sequence the task by breaking it down into simple steps. To teach a child how to put on a tee-shirt all by herself, start by helping her to orient the shirt correctly and then to put it on "one arm, head, other arm." Then teach her how to orient the shirt so the front goes on to the front of her body. Teach her to look in the mirror to check whether she put on her clothes correctly. It helps to have a decoration on the front of a shirt, shorts, or dress so she can check whether she sees it in the mirror.

Now's the perfect time to introduce dot-to-dot books, mazes, how-to-draw books, craft kits, scissor skills workbooks and other cool activities you never seem to have enough time for during the regular school year.

Take the learning outdoors by having kids write with sidewalk chalk on a wall and then wash it off with water hose, squirt gun or Super Soaker. At the beach, have them write in wet sand with a stick. Buy a sketch pad and colored pencils, go outside, and draw what you see.

During warmer months, your neighborhood playground is likely to be more crowded and over-stimulating. Metal equipment such as slides will get very hot midday, and the sun may throw distressing glare off surfaces. If possible, get to the playground at off hours that are cooler and less crowded such as very early in the morning or at dusk when most kids are heading home for dinner.

SUMMER SENSORY DIET ACTIVITIES

Summertime is the perfect time to engage in sensory diet activities that will help your child stay at that optimal level of arousal: not too tired and not too wired.

Swimming is one of the very best activities for kids. Swimming, with its even hydrostatic deep pressure, is one of the best sensory activities on the planet. Warmer water, either still water or with even small rhythmic waves, typically relaxes body and mind. Cool water, especially with waves, invigorates and activates.

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However, getting into the cool water on a hot day is hard for kids who struggle to tolerate changes in temperature. It may help to have them splash themselves with cool water rather than urging them to go right in.

Some kids adore learning to snorkel in a swimming pool, learning to hold their breath and dive downward—the deeper they go, the more intense the water pressure. Of course the typical sensory seeker will splash right in and may also love visiting water parks. (For water safety information, see page ___.)

OUTDOOR CHALLENGES

Sunlight, wind, grass, sand, and buzzing insects can pose big challenges for a sensitive child in the summer. Here are some sensory smart tips for the great outdoors:

SUN, WIND AND BUGS

▶ Just as you'd never send your child outside in the sun for

hours without sunblock, you need to protect his eyes from the sun too. Kids, teens, and adults should wear optical-quality sunglasses with a neoprene strap if necessary. They can also wear a hat or visor with a wide brim.

- ▶ We're all so careful to use sunblock to protect against harmful UVA/UVB rays that it comes as a surprise to learn that many of the chemicals used are harmful themselves. You can find the safest sunblocks/sunscreens on the Environmental Working Group website (see sidebar and "Find Out More").
- ▶ Try a non-toxic, physical sunblock such as TickleTime™ mineral powder or a swim shirt or swimsuit that blocks rays (uvskins.com, alexandme.com and elsewhere).
- ▶ Put sunblock on child before going to the beach or lake to give it time to dry and attract less sand and dirt. Plus it may be easier to tolerate at home where there's not so much conflicting sensory input.

- ▶ Some kids really dislike the way sunblock feels when applied. The parent can use firm massage-like strokes to apply sunscreen lotion rather than a tickly light touch.
- ▶ Experiment with lotions and spray-on sunscreens to find the most acceptable formulation.

SENSORY ACTIVITIES FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

- ▶ **Set up an art studio in your backyard** by putting out an old shower curtain or tarp and let kids have fun with paint, clay, shaving cream, or another messy materials. While sensory seekers will love this, tactile sensitive kids may be more comfortable using a paintbrush or gloves.
- ▶ **Have kids run through the sprinkler.** If they are reactive to light touch, encourage them to explore this experience in the safety of their own backyard.
- ▶ **Play catch with water balloons.**
- ▶ **Build sand sculptures.**
- ▶ **Get in touch with nature** by going to a lake or ocean instead of a swimming pool.
- ▶ **Take a hike**, helping your child to notice all of the lovely sensory input such as the odor of pine trees, the gentle sound of a creek, the way the sunlight dapples the earth in a forest.
- ▶ **Camp out in your own backyard** with a tent and flashlights.
- ▶ **Create a sensory garden** with fragrant flowers, herbs, and wind chimes.
- ▶ **Jump outside** using visual targets both near (such as you) and far (such as a tree). If you have a mini-trampoline you keep indoors, bring it outdoors. Teach your child to do jumping jacks which you can modify by having your child bring her legs apart and arms out to the side (rather than above his head) and then bringing the feet together, arms against the body, singing "apart, together."
- ▶ **Bounce on the lawn with a Hop-It ball or Rockin' Rody.**
- ▶ **Set up your own sandbox or sensory bin** using a large plastic bin with a lid, sensory table, or other container.
- ▶ **Explore the feeling of grass, sand, and dirt with bare feet and fingers.**
- ▶ **Make your own bubbles** and use different sized wands to make bubbles large and small.
- ▶ **Log roll down a grassy hill** and do somersaults.
- ▶ **Try spinning toys but stop spinning every 10 rotations or so to let your child refocus.** You may need them to count your fingers to help them reorganize visually. Consult with your occupational therapist if your child has vestibular processing difficulties.
- ▶ **Ride a bicycle, tricycle, scooter, roller skate, skateboard, ride a horse, swim with a dolphin.**

The Essential 5
A practical guide to raising children with autism.

Author:
Colette de Bruin



Colette's hands-on approach has already won many hearts. The Dutch version of The Essential 5 is well-known among parents and educators dealing with autistic children. The Essential 5 has been written for parents and educators who have questions about raising and guiding a child with autism. It offers guidance for providing predictability and structure for autistic children. Who, What, Where, When and How are keywords of The Essential 5 method. Readers will gain insight about how to do what the Colette calls "putting on your anti-specs" to understand how an autistic child's mind works.

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- ▶ Your child may be more able to tolerate sunscreen and sand if you do therapeutic “brushing” first. Ask your occupational therapist if this is appropriate for your child and to teach you how to do it.
- ▶ Use a beach umbrella or tent to create shade and shelter from insects and wind at the beach, lake, or picnic.
- ▶ There are products containing both insect repellent and sunblock in both lotion and spray forms, so you can protect your child in one step. Consider repellents without DEET (a nasty but effective chemical) that use safer ingredients such as permethrin and geraniol. You can find such products online by googling “DEET free insect repellent” or try your local health food store.
- ▶ Have your child wear water shoes when walking on hot sand. Sand really is too hot for sensitive young skin.
- ▶ Bring along wipes or hand sanitizer that doesn’t contain Triclosan since soaps in public bathrooms are often slimy and smelly. Some great alternatives for disinfecting include CleanWell™ Foaming Hand Sanitizer; The Honest Co.’s Honest Hand Sanitizer; and BabyGanics Germinator™ Hand Sanitizer. All are available online (search by product name) and in some retail stores such as Whole Foods and Bed Bath & Beyond.

BATHING SUITS

- ▶ Consider various swimsuit styles, including ones that don’t flap around. For boys, compare a snug Speedo-style brief with a looser boxer-style swimsuit.
- ▶ No Netz microfiber, tag-free bathing trunks for boys and men replaces the chafing interior mesh/net brief inside most boys’ bathing suits with a fast-drying liner sewn with flat seams that is conforming but not too tight.
- ▶ Girls may prefer to avoid swimsuits with skirts or ruffles. Some girls find two-piece suits that expose their bellies to sun and wind intolerable while others dislike the feel of wet

NOTE

All kids (and adults) should avoid toxic chemicals whenever possible. This is particularly true for people with sensory challenges whose bodies tend to be extra-sensitive and susceptible to toxins. The Environmental Working Group web site is a comprehensive source of reliable information and safety ratings for consumer products such as suntan lotion, cosmetics, household cleansers, and more. EWG is perhaps most famous for its Shopper’s Guide to Pesticides in Produce, including the “dirty dozen” fruits and veggies that you should be sure to buy organic to reduce serious pesticide exposure.

nylon on their bellies when wearing a one-piece. Be patient: it may take some trial and error to find the right style for your child.

- ▶ Chlorine can smell like you are inhaling pure bleach for a child with sensory issues. Try nose plugs, an outdoor pool, a pool that uses something other than chlorine, or opt for a lake or beach.

PICNICS

Having a picnic in your own backyard, a park, or in the middle of a forest can be great fun. Of course, be sure to bring along food you know your child will enjoy, but remember that all of the sensory input of the great outdoors may be too distracting and exciting for your child to eat. If you think this may be the case, feed your child something before you head out, so he’s not starved but too excited to eat later on at the picnic.

For more sensory smart tips for summer and all year long, please read *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit sensorysmarts.com. Very best wishes for a happy, fun summer! ◀

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ TickleTime™... Tickletimesunblock.com
- ▶ Environmental Working Group... ewg.org
- ▶ No Netz Microfiber ... nonetz.com