

Sensory Play: Early Exploration Through the Senses

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Have you ever witnessed a child's bad mood disintegrate with a splash in the bath? Or maybe you've seen intense concentration in a child's face when sifting dry rice or sand through his fingers? Although children respond differently to sensory experiences, these experiences can be therapeutic, improve motor skills, raise awareness of how the world works, and contribute to language acquisition.

Exploration from Birth

When babies first interact with the world, they don't have words to describe what they encounter, but they do absorb information through their senses. A newborn's sight is limited at first, but as they get older their sight becomes more finely tuned. A newborn also begins to hear sounds in the womb and can distinguish her mother's voice from other voices at birth. She can differentiate between sweet and sour tastes, will gravitate toward more pleasant smells, and is comforted by warmth and a soft touch.



As babies mature, their awareness becomes heightened. A once "content" or "easy" baby may suddenly take fright at loud noises, be annoyed by a wet diaper, or reject the texture of a new food. These changes may confuse or frustrate parents, but they can also signify developmental maturity as the child begins to make sense of the world.

Language Acquisition

While babies may not have the words to describe their experiences, sensory play can help babies build vocabulary and understand language. By using words and questions that relate to the child's experience, a parent or caregiver can link sensory experiences with cognitive growth. Here are a few examples of how you could articulate a sensory experience for a baby:

Touch: "I'm pouring warm water on your head. Do you feel the wet water?"

Sight: "Do you see the bird in the tree?" "Where do you see a squirrel? Oh, I see the squirrel on the fence."

Smell: "Would you like to smell this flower? Mmmm, it smells sweet."

Taste: "I think you like the lemon. Ooh, is it sour?"

Sound: "Do you hear the airplane? What sound does it make? Woooooosh."

Using descriptive and action words such as *cold*, *hot*, *bumpy*, *shiny*, *smooth*, *pour*, *dump*, *scoop*, *sift*, and *splash* in the context of experiences will help solidify the meanings of these words in a young child's mind.

