

Sensory Activities for Infants and Toddlers

Infants

Babies are born marvelously primed to receive and respond to sensory stimuli.

Touch

Babies like to explore textures. Silky cloth, furry and fuzzy material, the bumpy surface of an old washboard, lukewarm air from a hair dryer blown onto their arms - these sensory experiences are wondrous to the baby just learning what the world is like. Of course, loving touches, calm music, and soft conversational talk are a wonderful combination to satisfy baby's need for contact and listening.

Hearing

Babies are keenly sensitive to sound - jumping at sudden noises, as shown by the startle reflex, and crying out at sudden, jarring tones. Instead, they prefer soft, melodious sounds. Coo with a baby, pausing so she can coo back to you. Babies even a few weeks old enjoy back-and-forth games during which they respond with open, throaty vowel sounds as you vocally express delighted affection. Be sure not to overstimulate a young baby. If he turns away his head, he is signaling that he has had enough of this game.

Play waltzes and soft songs. By eight months, babies often have a wonderful sense of rhythm and bounce on their bottoms as you sing a melody they've come to know. Young babies also like the strumming soft sounds of a guitar.

Scents and Tastes

Babies have hundreds more taste buds for "sweet" than adults. So it's understandable that they love such sweet foods as homemade apple sauce and fresh-squeezed orange juice. Experimenting with taste, babies will even relish the salty taste when they lean down and lick your arm on a hot day. Use feeding times to satisfy their need to experience food textures and tastes - the crunchy texture of Cheerios, the slippery feel of a cooked spaghetti strand, and the stickiness of mashed potatoes.

As you know, babies pop most anything into their mouths to taste, chew, and teethe on. As caregivers, we need to be alert that there are no tiny objects, such as paper clips, or any poisonous leafy plants, such as poinsettias, in infant rooms.

Watching

With your face about 12 to 18 inches away from baby's, talk lovingly, and she will regard you closely, trying to communicate with cooing sounds. Put babies safely on a warm floor, with interesting toys near their hands, and they'll reach to touch and grasp each one. Safe hanging plants, such as pothos and ivy, make a drooping green cascade that attracts an upward infant gaze.

Kinesthesia

Babies respond to being rocked and moved. Their proprioceptive and kinesthetic receptors make whirling in your arms a real pleasure. Use safe baby swings that give a gentle back-and forth rock. Push a baby on a trike so that she feels herself moving through space and watch the delighted grin on her face.

Toddlers

Toddlers are great explorers!

Touch

Toddlers love to touch, squeeze, poke, and rub to find out about a toy or an object. When you let your toddlers pet an animal such as a gerbil, be sure to hold it carefully so they don't squeeze too forcefully. Say, "Let's pet the gerbil gently," as you show them how.

After a meal, toddlers love to help wash plastic dishes and feel the soapy suds. They'll gleefully splash water in the tub and also enjoy searching for plastic toy animals hidden in a sandbox.

Cornstarch goop, with its silky texture, is a favorite among toddlers to squeeze and explore, just as they relish squishing, pounding, and rolling play-dough with fingers and palms. Cookie cutters and a small rolling pin enhance their attraction to this experience. Toddlers are terrific finger painters too. At first, some may make tentative strokes with their fingertips but soon will be vigorously creating wiggly strokes and circular motions. (Be sure to have large aprons for this activity, since some toddlers are sensitive to messing about and might not enjoy this tactile experience if they are afraid of getting clothes dirty.)

Listening

Don't be surprised if some of your toddlers hum along in tune when you sing "A Tisket, a Tasket." Many not only have a good sense of rhythm but can also pick up melodic lines by listening to favorite nursery songs daily.

Try giving toddlers a large square of colorful nylon and then put on slow, dreamy dance music and encourage children to sway and move. Some toddlers create such graceful hand and torso gestures in response to beautiful music. Try Mozart and Strauss waltzes too.

Vision

Toddlers are eager to look at and feel any new toy or object. They may act wary and watchful, at first, with new people. But as they gain comfort watching how you move and how you talk, most will smile broadly when you come near and often toddle after you to keep you within their sight.

Toddlers love activities that combine sensory experiences with motoric ones. Perhaps that is why bubble blowing is such a delight - staring in wonder at the rainbow colors, squealing happily, stretching their little hands, trying to grasp the bubbles, and running after those that drift to catch them and feel the wetness on their hands as bubbles burst.

Taste and Smell

Try experiments with smell. Put cinnamon on buns you are warming for lunch. Encourage children to sniff the new scent as they enjoy the taste. Bring a vanilla bean in a little jar and let them smell the

wondrous aroma. Bake challah bread, muffins, and cookies with older toddlers. The smell of freshly baking snacks will engage their wholehearted participation in rolling and squeezing and pounding dough as well as in eating the finished product!

Kinesthetic Experiences

Provide safe travel spaces for your tots. They exult in pedaling a trike and feeling the wind blow in their hair. Toddlers also enjoy the up-and-down motions of seesaws and swings.