

Building the tool box: Sensory regulation activities

Children who have a history of separation, loss, abuse and neglect are likely to present with both attachment difficulties and sensory processing difficulties. Their capacity to tolerate sensory stimulation from the environment and others is affected. They may have an intolerance of everyday events because of an association with early loss and trauma (emotional base) or because they find the sensory experience of the event irritating and overwhelming (sensory base).

‘Self-regulation is the ability to attain, maintain, and change arousal states, appropriately for a task or interpersonal situation (William’s & Shellenberger ‘96)’

The brain takes on a role that is similar to that of a music producer using a mixing desk. It makes regulating adjustments to incoming sensations to allow the just right balance of stimuli and facilitate the appropriate arousal state. The primary goal is to achieve homeostasis. The individual also takes overt (body) action to achieve modulation. This is achieved through sensory seeking or sensory avoiding behaviours that are adaptive. Children develop their capacity to modulate the senses through active engagement with the environment and others. This process is first stimulated in infancy by the sensory input received from parents. Parents provide sensory motor stimulation through caretaking activities such as feeding, dressing, bathing, and play. Your child requires input that provides them with just right balance of calming and alerting input. This facilitates them to increasingly self-regulate and become less dependent on you. This is very important then when your child is triggered either overtly or covertly, if they are not able to regulate their response then they will show all their challenging behaviours. Both the Connect group and Theraplay work to help your child to regulate. In the group your child has learned about several foods and actions that will help them to self-regulate, and you need to be working with your child to promote this as much as possible. But you can also use these strategies in the early moments of your child becoming dysregulated, OR have they passed the point of no return when they need help to calm quicker than would be their usual time.

Arousal Regulators

- **Enables parents and children to discover the art of using sensory experiences to self-regulate and to co-regulate.**
- The aim of these regulators is to help the child achieve the just right level of arousal and remain in that regulated state whether it is relaxed, calm alert, or excited.

Food

Comforting and Restorative

- Sweet, salty foods, warm spice such as grated nutmeg.
- Sucking thick milk shakes through a straw
- Sucking food against the roof of the mouth such as chocolate or a sweet
- Dipping biscuit or chocolate bar into a hot drink and sucking it.
- Sports water bottles for water / juice.

Agitation, Feeling Tense or on Edge

- Munch Crunch Food
- Crisps, nuts, raw vegetables, apples, biscuits, cereal

Anger

- Chewy bars, toast, meat

Alert & Focused

- Citrus, Spice
- Orange segments, yogurt, mint sweets.

The rule is: the higher the stress level, the more heavy work the tongue, lips and jaws need to do.

- Combination foods provide for different needs. For example, a snickers bar provides sweet and salt flavours, munch crunch of the peanut, chewing the caramel and sucking on the chocolate. This combination soothes while helping to lower one's level of tension at the same time.

Movement , Heavy Body Work & Deep Pressure Touch

- **To facilitate a calm & alert state (which is the optimal arousal state for learning)**

Movement: Linear movement

- Jumping on a trampoline, jumping on the spot 10 to 20 times.
- Sitting on gym ball and bouncing up and down.
- Grasp child's hands firmly to assist child to bounce higher on ball.

Heavy Body Work

- Pushing, pulling, lifting, carrying, hanging from bars, climbing.
- Get child to be the helper in tasks that involve the above
- Kid Burger: child (burger) lies on cushion then place cushions, blankets, rugs to represent different fillings and ketchup sauce, on top of child.
- Hop Scotch
- Skipping
- Ball sandwich : two children lean against each other back to back, with a gym ball placed in between them. They have to walk around the room and keep the ball in place. When they complete the circle they turn to face each other and place the ball between them. They then repeat the process.
- *Tug of War, **make sure no-one suddenly lets go.**

Deep Pressure Touch

- Jam roll: roll and wrap up in sleeping bag, slowly unroll child.
- Lying on gym ball and rocking back and forth.
- Child places gym ball on wall and leans back stays still or bounces against gym ball to receive constant consistent pressure.
- **NB Gym ball activities need to be supervised as children can tend to surge forwards on the balls and fall, or they lose their balance when attempting to sit on them.**

Alerting Sensations

- Movement: Spinning.
- Spinning sitting on a swing spinning helps the child to release emotions if operating in hyper-vigilant/freeze modes of behaviour.

NB Spinning may also make the child aggressive, if this occurs get the child to do activities which involves physical effort such as hanging from a bar. This activity will help to dampen the aggression.

What foods/physical movements have you found work for your child that you could use when they start to become dysregulated? Chat to your therapist about this, they have probably already been using these strategies to help your child in the therapy.

NOW: try to think what helps you to regulate, remember this is important to identify because as your child becomes dysregulated you will start to feel stressed and also start to have an elevated level of arousal. So, a bit like on an aeroplane where you are told to fit your oxygen mask before you fit your child's so that you care for yourself first so that you can help your distressed child, so you need to regulate yourself before you step in