

Top Tips for helping kids to regulate their bodies

Every child, as they grow, learns ways to cope with the sights, sounds, smells, touches and tastes that they are exposed to in the world around them.



Childhood also exposes kids to new feelings and experiences. Some of these are exciting and fun, others are worrying and unpredictable.

If your child is particularly sensitive to their environment, he or she could be one of the thousands of children who are described as 'sensory defensive'.

Perhaps your child gets easily 'revved' up or frequently becomes emotionally upset, finding it hard to calm down again. Your child may be an extremely fussy child who dislikes certain textures, tastes or sounds. Or perhaps your child is constantly 'on the go' and doesn't seem to be able to sit still.

If this sounds like your child, Kids First's experienced Occupational Therapists have compiled this list of proven therapy ideas that you can put into place at home or even in the classroom. We hope they help!

Deep Pressure Ideas

Deep pressure helps many children to predict what is going on around them and to feel more certain and secure.

	Activity	How to do it so that it works!
1	Backpack	On the way to/from school; on outings i.e. supermarket; have 'toolkit' of a full water bottle, chewy toys, fidget toys inside. The small amount of weight your child carries will have a calming effect.
2	Steam-rollers	Use a fit ball or pillows to 'squish' your child. Use your facial and vocal expression to create anticipation. Have the child push you off him/her with their arms, or try and wriggle their way out.

3	Bear-hugs	Use firm pressure, but be mindful not to prolong the hug as this may give the sense of feeling restrained. Repeat if needed.
4	NB:	Beware of how you handle your child. Light touch/tickles can often send their level of arousal up.

'Heavy Work' Ideas

Giving children opportunities to use their muscles in resistance-style games can help their bodies to sit and attend for longer and improve postural stability.

	Activity	How to do it so that it works!
1	Tug-o-war	Emphasis must be placed on bending the arms and using the muscles in order to pull the rope/toy/theraband.
2	Carrying/Pushing	Give your child a carrying or pushing 'job' to help you out. Have them push the shopping trolley, carry groceries, carry a box of toys or books. These activities are especially helpful before times that the child is required to sit and attend.
3	Crawling	Animal walks on all fours are a great idea: 'what animal are we today?' Have them make the sound of the animal to keep them interested and recruit breath regulation. These are also good for transitions to minimise running.
4	Climbing	Any climbing where they have to use their arms against resistance e.g. equipment, trees is great 'heavy work'.
5	Weighted toys/balls	Games that involve weighted toys and balls are like instant heavy work. Try and minimise throwing, and emphasise rolling, carrying, pushing up slides etc. Also ensure that the children carry the objects in bent arms near their tummies instead of in straight, locked arms and over their heads.

Chewing/Sucking Ideas

Many children use their mouths to regulate their bodies. Providing them with safe ways to meet this need can help them to feel calmer.

	Activity	How to do it so that it works!
1	Chewy/crunchy food	Include chewy or crunchy foods for breakfast and in their lunch box at pre-school. E.g. dried fruit, apples, carrots, crackers.
2	Thick drink/thin straw	Give your child a thick drink like and Up & Go, smoothie or a milo and have them drink it through a thin straw, for breakfast and in their lunch box.
3	Chewy toys	Chewy tube or a chewy toy to be used in replacement of their fingers, clothes, mouthing objects and mum's shoulder!. These can be purchased online at www.sensorytools.net.au or www.senssmart.com.au in the 'oral motor' section.
4	Water bottle: sports/straw	Provide a water bottle with a sucking action or a drink with a straw.

Respiration Ideas

Like adults, children benefit from deep breathing activities that help them to slow their bodies down and think more clearly. Remember to encourage extended exhalations rather than saying 'take a deep breath'! Breath is a great 'speed-changer' but it does not last very long: Changing your child's breath is an effective way of dropping their level of arousal so they are regulated enough to engage with you in another activity.

	Activity	How to do it so that it works!
1	Bubble monster	Use a bucket or container with a small amount of water, liquid soap or bubble mixture and a chewy tube or straw to blow. Encourage slow exhalation and see if they can get the bubbles to the top of the container. The visual aspect of the bubbles is important, as it helps to draw the child's visual attention: a bubble monster is stationary, and the child watches the bubbles grow, so their visual attention is

		drawn in.
2	Exhalation competition	Encourage slow exhalation by counting off the seconds on your hand. Ensure they are attempting a personal best score only, to minimise competition.
3	Blow toys: sensorytools.net.au	A variety of blow toys such as whistles and pipes can be purchased at sensorytools.net.au in the 'respiration tools' section. Many of these toys do not make sound and have a visual aspect to them, so are suitable for all times of the day and are great at dropping levels of arousal and visual distraction.
4	Humming	Humming competitions may not sound exciting, but it's a great game to play in the car. Hum a note and see if your child can copy the note. Gradually going from a very high-pitched note to a low-pitched note has the potential to help you match your child's energy level and bring them down with you. Also play with volume, going from loud to quiet.
5	Exhalation Competition	This is another competition that doesn't sound too exciting but can be very effective: show the child that you are able to exhale for 10 seconds and count the seconds off on your fingers. Allow the child to keep a hand in front of your mouth to make sure you're still exhaling. Then challenge the child to see how long they can do it for. NB: Turning the game into a competition between children may have the opposite effect due to the emotional aspect of losing. However, if they can compete with themselves i.e. 'last time you got to 5. Can you get to 7 this time?' has the potential to keep them engaged and regulated.

Movement Ideas

Kids need to move and many children feel much more organised and stable when they have had the chance to engage in physical activity that helps them to feel organised and calm. Some children become regulated after linear (back and forth swinging) and others after spinning. Experiment with movement to find out what works for your child. Don't forget to always pair movement with heavy work activities, just in case the input is too intense for your child.

	Activity	How to do it so that it works!
1	Swinging/Spinning	Keep the swinging predictable: 'let's do 5 more swings: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 aaand stop!' This will help with transitioning out of the activity, as well as giving it an end point so it is predictable and organised.
2	Rolling	Don't just have the child roll for the sake of rolling: maybe he has to roll to the toy to rescue it because taking steps will be too noisy and wake up the monster! Maybe it's the Olympics and your child is in the final for the summersault section: they need to do four good ones and they win!
3	Fit ball	You can lie your child over the fit ball with their hands out in front near the ground. You can play a game in which the you roll the child forward and they have to push back off of the ground; You can play a crashing game in which you roll the ball sideways and the child has to hold on for as long as possible before crashing onto some big pillows.
4	Seated:	This is good as a movement break in class when time and resources are lacking: the child puts their chin on their chest, slides it all the way right, all the way left all the way back and around and then, looking forward, shake side to side. Keep this predictable: 'make 3 circles with your head and then 6 side-to-side shakes'. Increase the intensity by making them close their eyes. Use a chewy toy/something else in their mouths to increase the heavy work and keep them organised.

Equipment

Here are some sneaky bits and pieces that help support children through transitions.

	Tool	How to do it so that it works!
1	Time Timer	www.ebay.com.au : search 'time timer'. If there is 30 minutes until dinner time, put 27 minutes on the clock. Make sure that you keep referring the children to the red on the clock so they are aware of the time passing and dinner looming. Use the last few minutes that were not on the clock for supporting the transition if necessary. This is a great tool to use for any timed activity.
2	Visual schedules	One general schedule outlining the week can be supplemented by one more detailed schedule per day. Colour-code the days of the week on the week schedule with the single-day schedules. It can be helpful to show the child the schedule for the following day in the bed-time routine, so the child knows what to predict. Laminating these schedules and using white-board markers are a great way of showing the child when an activity is finished: give the child a small bit of control by allowing them to cross off the finished activity.
3	Transition toy	Always keep a small, comforting toy in your handbag for those dreaded times in Target that you know is going to be difficult to get out of: it may not stop a tantrum or a fight, but it may make it easier for the child to transition away from the problem-situation quickly.

This list was compiled by the Paediatric Occupational Therapy Team at Kids First Children's Services

If you are concerned about your child's learning, behaviour or social skills, an occupational therapist experienced in supporting children's sensory needs may be able to help.

Kids First Children's Services' paediatric Occupational Therapists have years of experience and our purpose built sensory gyms in Sydney's northern beaches give children space to learn in a fun environment.

Call us on (02) 9938 5419 to find out how Occupational Therapy can help your child