

Activities for Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to maintain or change arousal/energy level and manage emotions to match the situation or activity (e.g. preparing for sleep, lower level vs. preparing to play soccer, higher level). Engaging in different types of sensory activities help us to learn more about our sensory system needs and how we respond to various stimuli. The more we learn about and use these systems the better equipped we are to self-regulate. Receptors located throughout the body take in information from the environment (and body) to make sense of, and interact with the world. Listed below are various activities or tools that may assist with self-regulation.

Visual

Vision is the ability of the eyes to focus and detect images. Visual perception is how the brain processes information – recognizing, differentiating and interpreting visual stimuli. The visual system is very important in learning to read, write, count and a lot of other skills that are important in life.

Calming

- Lava lamps
- Dim lighting, neutral colours
- Reduce visual distractions in the environment
- Less clutter, empty space (clear desk)

Alerting

- Bright colours, flashing lights
- Contrasting colours or patterns
- Being in busy, active areas, crowds, malls, birthday parties, playgrounds, water slides

Auditory

Hearing is the ability to perceive sound from the environment. It provides localization and differentiation of sound.

Calming

- Calm, soft, even toned voices
- Rhythmic sounds (slower, repetitive beats)
- White noise, fan, rain sound
- Ear defenders (to reduce noise)
- Eliminate background noise (TV, radio)

Alerting

- Loud, dramatic voices, screaming, crying
- Music with variation in beat and faster beats
- Unexpected sounds (alarms, sirens)

Smell

Smell is our ability to detect scent. This is a very old system and is closely linked to memories.

Calming

- Reduce odors and scents
- Use calming scents (lavender or vanilla)
- Smell from baking cookies, pies

Alerting

- Use strong scented products (perfumes, candles)
- Use alerting scents (lemon or citrus)

Taste

Taste refers to the ability to detect sweet, bitter, sour, salty, savory, and other flavours.

Calming

- bland/neutral flavours (rice, oatmeal, plain potatoes, plain bread)

Alerting

- strong flavours (lemon, peppermint, cinnamon hearts, spices, hot sauces)

Touch

Touch is the ability to perceive sensation through receptors in the skin. This system helps us recognize different characteristics (textures, temperatures, firmness, and wet/dry).

Calming

- Firm, sustained touch
- Soft blankets
- Warmth (room, bath, blanket)
- Warm drinks (tea, hot chocolate)
- Tight squishing/wrapping (blanket)

Alerting

- Light, soft touch
- Tickling, poking
- Unpredictable touch (shoulder tap, bump)
- Cold (ice packs, cold drinks)

Vestibular

The vestibular system perceives the position, movement and balance of our body in relation to gravity. It measures acceleration, body movements and head position. Examples of the vestibular system include recognizing movement in an elevator, knowing whether you are lying down or sitting up, and being able to walk along a balance beam. Receptors are located in the ear.

Calming

- Slow rhythmic movements (swings, rocking chair, car motion)
- Movement up and down, side to side, back and forth (bouncing on a ball, walking)
- Slow head movements

Alerting

- Stop and Go games, Tag, Hokey-Pokey, Dodgeball, crazy dancing, jumping on cushions
- Spinning (merry-go-round)
- Rolling (rolling down a hill)
- Chaotic/fast head movements

* The movement of the head is key in determining calming or alerting effects.

Proprioception (heavy work)

Proprioception is the sense of position of parts of the body and strength of effort needed in movement. This sense lets us know exactly where our body parts are, how we are positioned in space and to plan our movements. The receptors are located in the joints and muscles. Examples of using the proprioceptive system include gauging how much force is needed to crack an egg, bending your arm to reach and scratch your back, and learning to ride a bike (push, pull, carry and squeeze type of activities).

- Bear hugs, pillow sandwich, blanket tortilla
- Massage (deep squishes)
- Wiping the table, raking leaves
- Yoga, stretching
- Animal walks, hanging from bars
- Hitting a baseball
- Use of fidgets (squishing a ball, clicking pen, twirling hair)
- Play-doh
- Biting (chewelry)
- Crunchy foods (carrots, apples, crackers)
- Chewy foods (gum, dried fruit)
- Drinking from a straw

*Some of these activities may be alerting or calming depending on the child and how the activity is used. Please speak with an Occupational Therapist for individualized programming.