

Sensory and Motor Play Beyond School

Ideas from Laurie Kalb, Occupational Therapist

Sensory, Motor, and More Tips and Topics for Parents

Do you have one place for all your arts and crafts supplies, a Sensory Corner, place for messy play, kids cooking supplies and a list of child friendly places to go nearby and far? In this paper are some suggestions to keep home as

productive as school. Set up your home so you'll be ready, set, go! for those rainy days, play dates and weekend days when your child is raring to go—These suggestions are made by occupational therapist,

Laurie Kalb, with an eye toward developmentally appropriate activities for home and school!

Laurie J. Kalb, OT

Ideas for Home: Projects, Places and Play

Sensory Play Stations:

A great way to be ready for positive play is to create some **stocked places** in your home. Let's start with **sensory play**. Kids love to play with textures and to have **cozy spaces** to hide. A great, simple **hideout** is to cover a small table with a blanket, throw a soft set of bean bag chairs in side, add stuffed animals, mushy pillows or even a couch pillow inside this tent. Then, put in a flashlight or two and play back and forth games; Peek a boo, monster, I spy. Another awesome **sensory space** is the floor of any closet. (after 3 years of age) Line it with soft cushions or "eggcrate", put a few flashlights and books inside and call it the "Hideout."

A "**Sensory corner**" with tubs of textures that are used under your supervision is always a hit. If you prepare in advance for set up and clean up, you can avoid a total messy home disaster.

Fill large (18"x30"), 8-10" deep Rubbermaid containers with lids with **play sand, beans, packing peanuts, play dough and rice or macaroni**. Kids love to dig, hide things and play with these textures. You can keep one container empty and it can be filled with **water**. A shower curtain liner on the floor can catch the mess for easier clean up. Have small dish towels around to help them clean water spots on the floor. Don't forget to set time limits and make clean up part of the fun. Let the children explore their hands and bodies with glee. Don't forget to hide these sensory boxes when you can't supervise. With all these planned out messy experiences you will be the most popular play date around!!!

Bath Time Tips:

If you are having trouble getting your child into the **tub or even hair washing**, try foam soap in the bath time. A

hand-held shower sprayer and even swim goggles can help too. Add some large sponges and a few water toys. You may not be able to get them out of the tub.

Tools for Little Hands:

Small motor practice and development is critical for later school success. Some children avoid arts and crafts. Try having an **art tool box**. Include enough materials for 2-3 children so if you have a friend play you won't have fighting over materials. It is hard enough for your child to share their things. **Include the following things** and keep them in one area of your home: (and of course be aware of choking hazards with little objects)

Dot art, stickers, markers chubby and little crayons, my favorite-Crayola chubby colored pencils, a variety of small scissors, index cards, plain white ridges paper plates, brown paper bags, tissue paper, popsicle sticks, construction paper, wiggly eyes, pom poms, pipe cleaners and things you can string on pipe cleaners including *Fruit Loops* or *Cheerios*. Lots of play dough with plastic cookie cutters, plastic knives and things to hide in it is usually fun. If you have a Lego kid, bring some Legos to the sensory bins and hide the pieces, in beans or sand, cut away the moat from play dough, add popsicle stick towers to "play dough" mountains and expand their hand use beyond snapping Lego pieces together.

For practice **cutting with scissors** try having them make animal masks with plain grooved paper plates. **Cut the grooves** to make "hair" or fringe. The rigid plate usually is helpful in guiding little hands for more successful cutting practice. **Snipping straw or logs of play dough** (making French fries) is also a good way to get the children to control the scissor and

Special points of interest:

- *Sensory Station/Cozy Corner*
- *Tool Box for little hands*
- *Kitchen Collaboration*
- *Outings to promote Sensory and Motor Skills*

enjoy the practice. Remember "thumbs up" for positioning scissors. With snipped straw pieces, they can string them on pipe cleaners, making you a lovely bracelet!!!!

Cookin' With Kids:

Now to the kitchen: Opportunities to let your children participate in meal prep as well as table set up and clean up are there 3 times a day (at least). If you love to cook and have the patience, purchase the plastic and metal version of cooking tools for your child so they can either copy you or actually assist you in parts of meal prep. Even 2 year olds can help with mixing and throwing in the textured ingredients like chips, nuts and pouring sugar and flour. And certainly pressing/kneading the dough for challah and breads. Frozen Challah (defrosted) can be reshaped and braided for individualized loaves.

Keep a log of slice and bake sugar cookies on hand for easy decorating. Children love to sprinkle and press little foods into their cookie. And decorating cupcakes is equally rewarding. If you are mindful of healthy foods, use whole grain bread mixes and cream cheese icing. Or decorate rice cakes with raisins, cream cheese, and veggies. Sprinkles can go on top to finish off their decorated delights.

Using Big Movements and the Outdoors to Expand Play

pedals turn, is it usually not a strength issue, but rather a

Some children are better than others when it comes to keeping occupied, playing creatively and expanding their abilities. Others need more **support to try new things**, figure out how to try new things and enjoying indoor and outdoor experiences. Parents have a big role in providing opportunity and support to experiment with new places and experiences, promoting their child's sensory and motor growth.

In your house you can create simple **obstacle courses** by lining up different height chairs, pop up tunnels and gym mats, mini trampolines, etc. Then, you can have the kids climb over chairs, under tables, through tunnels and roll along mats, jump 10 times, etc, to help them with both motor skills, sequencing and stamina. The use of words like "over, under, through, behind, in front," is very helpful for future understanding of the world around them and their bodies in space.

Previewing real life experiences is a great way to build your child's confidence. If they are going to a birthday party or play date at a new location, a brief visit and tour **when it is not busy, prior to the actual event** is a great strategy for better success at the 'real event.'

Try to take your children to different playgrounds and parks on a regular basis. Let them explore the novel climbing, balancing and moving equipment. If they are reluctant to try things, and just want you to push them on a swing, try to negotiate—"one new thing" and then do the familiar thing they trust. When trying that "one new thing" you may need to combine physical assistance, words that explain the experience or actually doing it with them on your lap or holding their hands thru the experience.

Bike riding is particularly challenging for many children. When they can't make the

body organization challenge. The experience of propelling a bike is confusing for some. They may need a lot of help to teach their body *the illogical* — by pushing down on the pedal the bike will move forward.



Start on flat surfaces and give them a little push from behind to create momentum. Also, make sure they don't have to stretch too far to reach the pedals, as they will not be able to activate them if their leg is already extended. If they are scared or it is not working, continue with the "cozy coupe" or other walking toys until they are more comfortable with pedals. Until they are at least 4 1/2 keep them with training wheels. Their timing and judgment for braking and anticipating danger is not developed enough to be on riding toys unsupervised.

Productive Play-dates

Preschool play-dates are often challenging. To be successful, they require shared interests of the children, your child's ability to share you and his possessions, and the possibility that the "guest" will become discombobulated in your home. Be kind to yourself and your child. Keep the first play-date with a new friend short, controlled and discussed ahead of time with your child and maybe their teacher to make sure you are not setting yourself up for disaster. A good option might also be to meet with the other parent and the kids at

a restaurant or park and let them play for a short while before going home.

If the play-date is to be in your home, just as a schedule of the day works well in school, it can be helpful to have a schedule of events for the play date. Try to set a 1-1.5 hour time limit on the first date. If it is successful, you can make the next time longer.

The first 15 minutes might be a tour of the house, location of bathroom, location of toys and a pre-planned project that your child likes—such as baking

cupcakes. This keeps you in charge and will help focus the 2 friends. After the structured activity, you might allow free play or outside time, or pull out those messy boxes and let them go to town. Then, give them the 5 minute warning, 2 minute warning, Clean up, snack, and go home. If all goes well on trial one, the next date can be longer and less structured.

Is the play-date your biggest nightmare? Try planning ahead for a more positive experience for both you and your child!!

Outings-Ideas and Tips



Wightman's Farm on 202 in Harding is a great place to spend a fall afternoon

An excellent outing for nice weather is the Turtle Back Zoo. It provides opportunities for the children to see, learn and be entertained. But, after 5 or so trips there, other options are nice too. **Mayo Performing Arts Center, Morris and Montclair Museums, "Words" Book Store, Paper Mill Play House** all are known for great children's events.

Try seasonal trips. An especially wonderful place to go is **Wightmans Farm**

in Harding. They have an amazing array of sights, sounds and things for kids to enjoy. It fits into Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot so very well. Pumpkins, apple picking, hayrides, climbing opportunities on haystacks, corn kernel "sand box" and on and on. Very hectic on weekends, it is a great thing to do during the week, particularly on some of the days when school is closed in the fall. Check their hours of operation.

Supermarket shopping can be made to be a fun and educational outing. Don't try to buy the week's worth of groceries when you are using it as an outing. Give your child a short shopping list so they have to

find the foods and go on a treasure hunt in the market. You can even have them "check" off the items as they put them into the cart.

Family gatherings, like Passover or Hanukah can be very challenging. A fidget bag of "plagues" with bubble wrap "boils", squishy frogs and hail cotton balls are little ideas of things your child can fidget with throughout the Seder. Give them some spring veggies and dip before the Seder begins to help contain their hunger and finally, just remember to let them play rigorously before they have to sit.

How Much Handwriting? and other Preschool Lessons

Preschool has many responsibilities to promote your child's growth and maturation. The biggest job of being a child is learning how to play, how to self-soothe, how to look, listen and learn, and to develop readiness skills for later learning and independence.

There is a **range of ages and stages** when specific milestones should be achieved. If your child is slow in acquiring multiple skills that come naturally to his/her peers, a talk with the teacher or your pediatrician is recommended.

Parents do often express concern that their children are not writing, particularly the year before Kindergarten. There is a progression of fine motor skill development toward the goal of handwriting. Be patient...The outcome of handwriting and coloring within boundaries develops in later preschool. The following are some suggestions to allay your fears and to promote the pre-cursors to handwriting skills.

There is a range of ages when specific milestone skills should be achieved. If your child seems to be struggling, a talk with the teacher is recommended.

Remember the **tool box** mentioned on page one. From the time a baby is about 8 months old, they start using their "**pinchy fingers**" to pick up small things—often to feed themselves. From a young age you can promote "pinchy" fingers through activities such as placing raisins into small containers, pinching *Cheerios* or little pieces of food, and encouraging pointing and poking as the child is entering school at 18 months to 2 years old. **Poking** fingers into play doh, **pointing** at things they are requesting, and **pressing/pushing** are age appropriate. Around 2, dot art and large brushes with water, little chunks of chalk and introducing child sized eating utensils should be encouraged. **Creating tummy time** (playing on stomachs on the floor) and working with resistance upright on easels –or painting the outside of your house with water on brushes will also lead to increased upper body strength important for later precision fine motor control and writing. And remember all those sensory boxes. Manipulating objects and using textures in hands and body are helpful in promoting sensory and motor

foundation, strength and control needed for skilled hand use.

As far as actual handwriting lessons, the important things to remember are the following. Children should be encouraged to use **pinchy fingers**, along a writing tool **from 3 years old on**. A fist use of writing tool should be discouraged. Using smaller pieces of chalk or small crayons, pencils and crayons chunks will help the child who is having trouble moving toward mature pencil grasp. Pencil grips are rarely the answer without a trained eye such as an occupational therapist or experienced teacher supervising the proper grip to try. Working upright with small bits of chalk or crayon is often all the child will need to make quick changes in pinch patterns.

As far as actual handwriting, NJ curriculum encourages children to write their name before Kindergarten. Tracing letters is not really a lesson in learning letter forms. Using paper with little boxes for each letter, with a dot to show where to begin, is more useful. Letters should be practiced on paper with strong boundaries such as dark lines or boxes. "Handwriting without Tears" has good basic writing, tool use, and directionality lessons that are age appropriate.

Directionality, pinch patterns, eye hand coordination and regard of boundaries are the most important areas to focus on to promote pencil control while your child is in preschool.

If you have greater concern or would like more information and suggestions, speak with your teacher, or pediatrician. If things are not progressing to your satisfaction, a quick consult with an occupational therapist may be helpful in getting your child on the right track!!!!

Become a Detective: Sensory or Behavioral concerns?

Toddlers and Preschoolers

- Problems eating, sleeping or toilet training
- Refuses to go to anyone but me
- Irritable when being dressed; uncomfortable in clothes
- Rarely plays with toys
- Resists cuddling, arches away when held
- Cannot calm self
- Floppy or stiff body, motor delays
- Over-sensitive to touch, noises, smells, other people
- Difficulty making friends
- Clumsy; poor motor skills; weak
- In constant motion; in everyone else's face and space

- Frequent or long temper tantrums
- Easily distracted, fidgety, craves movement; aggressive
- Easily overwhelmed
- Difficulty with handwriting or motor activities
- Difficulty making friends
- Unaware of pain and/or other people

If many of these ring true, you may want to explore sensory processing issues in your child. Sometimes "bad behavior" or very active children can actually be expressing difficulty with sensory processing. Discuss this with your teacher or pediatrician. A visit to an occupational therapist trained in sensory processing difficulties may be beneficial to meeting your child's sensory needs.

Recipes for Slime, Play Doh and other cool kid stuff

"Google "slime and there are about 100 variations and suggestions for messy play dohs and slimes. Kids love them. Many of them will hold up for several days, so, have fun with your playful messes and know that you are doing good for your children. Here goes:

EASY SLIME RECIPE

- 2 Cups Water
- 1/2 Cup Cornstarch
- Food Coloring

Bring water to a boil in a medium saucepan. Add cornstarch, then food coloring while stirring constantly. Remove from heat and cool to room temperature. This makes a messy slime that goes from liquid to solid, and is great fun to play with.

NATURE'S PLAY DOUGH

- 1 cup flour
- 1/2 cup salt
- 1 cup water
- 2 tablespoons oil
- 2 tablespoons cream of tartar
- beet, spinach, and carrot juice

Mix flour, salt and oil, and slowly add the water. Cook over medium heat, stirring until dough becomes stiff. Turn out onto wax paper and let cool. Knead the playdough with your hands until of proper consistency. Use as is, or divide into balls and add a few drops of the vegetable juices to make green, pink, and orange.

Laurie J. Kalb, OT is the founder and director of Pediatric Potentials located at:

**154 S. Livingston Ave.
Livingston, N.J. 07039
973-535-5010**



www.pediatricpotentialsnj.com

Pediatric Potentials specializes in superior pediatric occupational and physical therapy for children of all ages. Their state-of-the-art facility has been in the same location for 19 years.