

Calming and Regulating Activities for Pre-Schoolers



Calming Sensory Strategies for Pre-School

1. A quiet space and a way for the child to signal when he/she needs a break.

A quiet space can be as simple as a corner with a bean bag chair and some pillows, a small tent or canopy made from a sheet, or even a desk with a partition for some privacy. A quiet space is a great way to limit auditory, visual, and other input so a child can regroup and calm herself down.

Don't forget to provide children with a clear way of indicating when they need to use the quiet space - a symbol or a laminated card they can give to the teacher to request time in the quiet space are great options.

2. Calming Tactile (Touch) Input

There are many great ways to provide calming input through the tactile system. One simple tool that is easily used as a calming sensory break during the day is a tactile bin. Fill a shoebox-sized plastic container with sand, dry rice, dry pasta or dry beans and let children run their hands through it.

Applying deep pressure to the body with bear hugs, a weighted blanket/stuffed and weight animal or squishes with a pillow or beanbag chair provides full-body calming sensory input for children who might be overwhelmed or anxious at school.

3. Calming Oral Sensory Input

The oral system can be another great avenue for calming and self-regulation. For many children, chewing can provide calming oral sensory and proprioceptive input. Try oral sensory snacks like bagels and fruit leather or biltong/jerky (as appropriate for your individual setting and family choices).

Many children benefit from using chewy pendants, bracelets, or other jewellery items to provide this calming feedback.

Other great calming oral sensory activities include sucking against resistance (e.g. sucking a thick smoothie through a straw) and blowing (e.g. blowing on various whistles, or a feather/ pompom/ping pong ball across a table).

4. Calming Auditory (Sound) Input

One of the quickest ways to help children who are overstimulated and overwhelmed is to "quiet things down". Using a quiet voice to address children and get their attention rather than raising your voice over the noise is a great start. Being conscious of slamming/squeaking doors, dripping taps, plumbing, the radiator/air conditioner, clocks and echoing classrooms that may all have a distressing impact on a child. Having a way to monitor sound in the classroom, like a noise meter, is also a great idea.

Other auditory strategies include playing white noise while students are working (e.g. rain sounds, ocean sounds, or even using a fan) to help block out typical school sounds like chairs scraping the floor and children coming in and out of the room from the bathroom.

Quiet, calming music is another great option. These can be used either for the whole classroom or for individual students with headphones. Noise reducing headphones are also great for children who become overstimulated by sound in loud situations (e.g. lunchroom, assemblies, gym).

Where possible prepare children for planned loud familiar/unfamiliar noise, e.g. fire drills. For children who find bathroom hand-driers distressing, offer paper towels/degradable wet wipes etc.

5. Calming Visual Input

Some children become overwhelmed and overstimulated by visual input. The movement, light, and other distractions in a school setting can simply be too much.

There is usually enough natural light coming through the windows during the day for children to see and simply turning off or dimming the lights is a quick and easy way to decrease visual stimulation.

It's also important to try to limit other visual distractions in the learning environment for children who are easily overwhelmed. This means creating a clear, clutter-free workspace by storing supplies and materials off of tables and desks and limiting decorations and other things hanging on the walls. Some children may also benefit from visual dividers or working in a study carrel.

Other calming visual activities include repetitive visual input like watching fish in a fish tank or looking at sensory bottles and calm down jars filled with liquid and other objects (water, oil, water beads, glitter). Many children also respond positively to a visual schedule, which lets them know what's coming next throughout the day.

6. Calming Proprioceptive Input

A lot of children benefit from proprioception in the form of "heavy work". Heavy work means moving the body against heavy resistance. This provides stimulation to the muscles and joints that can be calming and organizing.

Heavy work activities include:

- squishing/squeezing play dough or a stress ball
- pulling against resistance bands
- pushing/moving chairs or desks, pulling/pushing wagons filled with blocks or sand, or even box (cardboard) car races
- climbing on soft play or jungle gyms
- holding a heavy door open,
- carrying books, building with large blocks,.
- sand pit play (filling and emptying buckets/building castles
- water tray play (filling and pouring with various containers)
- obstacle course using balance beams, old tyres, tunnels, stepping stones, old mattress, jumping squares etc.

Chewing also comes into play here. Chewing against resistance as described above is another great way to provide calming input to the proprioceptive system.

7. Calming Vestibular (Movement) Input

Many children find repetitive and rhythmic vestibular input, including rocking, swaying, or gentle swinging to be extremely calming. This kind of sensory input can be a great

and easy way to help a child reset when they are overstimulated, overwhelmed, or to help manage tantrums. Adding a rocking chair, having an exercise ball (e.g. peanut therapy ball) and simple games such as Row-Row Row Your Boat are practical ways to provide calming movement when children need it.

8. Yoga, Breathing, and Meditation

Using these tools in educational settings is becoming more and more mainstream. Moving slowly through a yoga sequence can provide calming stimulation to the vestibular system, the proprioceptive system, and the tactile system.

Including calming breathing techniques to children throughout the school day is another way to calm the entire nervous system.

9. Fine motor and Visual tasks that are Familiar, Quiet, and Repetitive

Completing familiar, repetitive tasks can be a very calming experience for many children. Arriving at school and completing one or two quiet, independent activities can be the perfect start to the day for children who become overwhelmed easily.

Easy ideas for calming fine motor tasks include:

- threading/lacing games
- simple posting games such as pom poms, marbles, coins etc. (always under supervision to prevent mouthing/choking)
- fine motor sorting tasks
- fine motor folding tasks
- cutting shapes out of play-doh
- searching for hidden objects on a page or book or in sensory bin etc.

10. Calming Combinations

When it comes to finding calming solutions for children, it's best to allow some time for experimentation and trial and error. And sometimes, the best solutions involve combining two or more strategies and using them together, for example:

- Dig/play in tactile bin while listening to white noise or quiet music on headphones
- Sitting or lying with a weighted blanket while looking at sensory bottles
- A chewy snack while working on a calming, independent fine motor task
- Rhythmic rocking or swaying with calming breathing technique

References: The Inspired Treehouse

Sensational Kids, Lucy Jane Miller

Too Loud Too Bright Too Fast Too Tight, Sharon Heller

Please call the Children's Occupational Therapy Department if you have any questions or require further assistance.

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