

CALMING SENSORY STRATEGIES

Children are still learning how to calm themselves down. Throughout childhood, they often need support from caregivers to help regulate their emotions and bodies. This is called co-regulation, and it's helpful for people of all ages.

Regulation is closely tied to sensory processing, or our ability to interpret and process information from our surroundings and from inside our own bodies. Some children may experience this input as overwhelming, unpredictable, or confusing, which can lead to dysregulation.

See the Sensory Processing and the Senses resource guide for more information.

Before You Begin: Check Basic Needs

Before using any calming sensory strategies, make sure the child's basic needs are met. Are they hungry or thirsty? Too hot or too cold? Tired? Lonely? Scared? Do they need to use the bathroom? Addressing these needs first can make a big difference in helping the child return to a calmer state.

Strategies to Support Children

The following strategies can support a child's regulation, especially calming big emotions. The intention is to bring their nervous system into a calmer and more regulated state.

Auditory

- Use a quiet voice or whisper when talking.
- Play music the child likes or finds calming. Listen to low-stimulation audiobooks.
- Hum or sing to the child (ideally slow, rhythmic songs).
- Give warnings when something loud is about to happen (e.g., turning on the vacuum cleaner).
- Try noise-cancelling headphones or complete silence.

Visual

- Turn off or dim the lights.
- Provide repetitive, slow visual input like a sensory light.
- Get down to the child's eye level, so they can be reassured by your facial expression and body language. Be aware that eye contact can be extremely challenging for some children when they are dysregulated. If this is the case, sit next to the child, not face-to-face.
- Use visual timers and schedules to support predictability for transitions and tasks.
- Provide eye contact, especially after big emotional moments. Eye contact is helpful when a child is ready for it and if it is not triggering.

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Strategies to Support Children Continued

Touch

- Gently trace shapes along the child's back or rub the child's back.
- Stroke or braid the child's hair.
- Run a washcloth under warm water and give it to the child to pat their face with. If warm water doesn't work, try ice packs.
- Fill a container with a sensory material like sand, water, playdough, dry rice, or beans, and let the child play with it.
- Provide fidget toys to play with.

Important: Only offer touch-based strategies if the child finds them soothing and agrees to them. Some children may be avoidant of touch, and that's okay! Warn the child when something or someone is going to touch them.

Vestibular (Sense of Movement, Direction, and Speed)

- Provide slow, repetitive, and rhythmic vestibular stimulation using a rocking chair, an exercise ball, a hammock, or simply rocking a child in your lap or arms.
- Play outside. Running, sliding, swinging, and spinning can be exciting and increase energy, but often lead to calmness afterwards.
- Proprioception (Stimulation to the Muscles and Joints)
- Apply deep pressure through bear hugs, squishes with a pillow, or by rolling the child in a blanket to provide a "burrito hug".
- Apply firm pressure to the child's hands, shoulders, or hips.
- Give daily "heavy work" activities like carrying groceries or laundry, shovelling snow, pushing a lawnmower or vacuum cleaner, squeezing playdough, or wall push-ups.
- Try "body socks".

Oral Sensory-Motor

Some children chew objects as a form of regulation. Offering safe alternatives can be helpful.

- Chewy snacks (e.g., bagels, fruit leather, beef jerky, gum)
- Non-edible chewy pendants or bracelets
- Sucking against resistance (e.g., sucking a thick smoothie through a straw)
- Blowing (e.g., blowing a feather or pompom across a table)

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Strategies to Support Children Continued

Breathing

- Deep breathing, especially with the help of a game (e.g., blowing out "finger candles")
- Blowing bubbles with big breaths
- Expanding out through the sides of the ribcage while deep breathing (the most effective diaphragmatic deep breathing)

Important: What's calming for one child may be distressing for another. Some children may seek sensory input frequently, while others may avoid it. Observe and respond accordingly. Get help to interpret this as needed.

Connection Breaks

A change of environment and a release of expectations can help calm a child. Providing a "retreat" space in your home or centre, with a beanbag chair or small tent where children know they can go when they are overwhelmed, can be helpful. If this is not an option, ensure that you are offering an "out" for children when they are overwhelmed, for example, by offering a less busy room or bringing them outside. This should not be framed or treated as a time-out or punishment. Stay present (but give some space if desired) and offer an alternate activity. Provide a calming, familiar, repetitive activity like reading a favourite book, colouring or drawing, threading beads, doing playdough, etc. Some children may benefit from scheduled breaks, not just reactive ones.

Supporting Yourself

Consider your own calm-down strategies. It is worthwhile to learn what strategies are effective for yourself. Children learn so much by observing, and they are sensitive to an adult's energy and mood. When you are calm, you can do a much better job of co-regulating and helping the children in your care to be calm. Adults need to take breaks to regulate, too.

Try looking into grounding activities, finding a physical outlet you enjoy, journaling, or trying out different sensory inputs to see which ones feel best for you.

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Need More Support?

Local Resources:

- Family Physicians, Pediatricians, or Nurse Practitioners
- Public Health Nurse
- Supported Child Development
- Counsellors (e.g., Child & Youth Mental Health)
- Art Therapists

Resources Available at the WKCCRR Library:

- Mindfulness Exploration Kit
- Anxiety, Yoga, & Mindfulness Book Pack
- Yoto Player & Audio Cards
- Sensory Lamps
- Outer Space Sensory