

REGULATION AND SENSORY INTEGRATION

Self-Regulation for Parents Who Are Fostering or Adopting

As parents who are fostering or adopting, one of our critical tasks is to help our children who have experienced trauma, loss, and separation learn self-regulating skills as an element in their healing and growth. When triggered, children who have experienced trauma, loss or separation can have behaviors that escalate and potentially make a stressful situation worse. It is important to understand that we cannot help children regulate if we are not first regulated ourselves.

What Does It Mean to Be Regulated?

Self-regulation involves observing and then managing your own feelings and reactions. As a parent you want to be able to attend to what is important in the moment – maintaining a calm presence and “taking care of business”; in this case, the business of being an effective parent. Sensory processing allows you to recognize what your body and your environment are telling you, understand the meaning or impact, and respond accordingly.

There are a number of strategies that you can use to self-regulate and the more you practice them, the more readily you will be able to access them in times of need. Some recommended ways to self-regulate include:

- Practicing mindfulness – this is a way of being in the moment, aware of your presence in space and time, and without judgment about yourself.
- Making time to engage in sensory input that is both satisfying and soothing. By caring for yourself in those moments, even for just a few minutes, you can find renewed perspective. A warm bath, soothing music, aromatherapy, a walk in nature, or engaging in an activity that you enjoy can all help you be at your best.
- Engage in the activities described below – both on your own when possible, and with your child. You both will benefit and practicing together will help build attachment and attunement!

How Can You Help A Child To Regulate?

The activities in this handout may help children to stay focused and organized throughout the day. Just as you may jiggle your knee or chew gum to stay awake or soak in a hot tub to unwind, children need to engage in stabilizing, focusing activities as well.

Everyone has a unique set of sensory needs. You can expect that an over-aroused or agitated child will need calming activities while a tired, lethargic, or under-aroused child needs stimulation. Work with the children you are caring for to determine the best “menu” of activities to meet their individualized needs. Having a practiced plan in place can be a very effective way to equip yourself and the children with effective strategies when difficult or triggering situations occur.

As you and the children you are caring for gain more experience in using these sensory activities and cues, you may find that they are not triggered as often, may be able to increase their attention span, may decrease difficult behaviors, and gain experiencing managing transitions. And remember, while many of the activities may seem like things you would typically do with younger children, they can be fun for all ages; especially for youth who lost opportunities to be children when they were young.

Proprioception

Proprioception is the body’s ability to sense itself, and is guided by receptors in the body (skin, muscles, joints) that connect with the brain through the nervous system so that even without sight, a person knows what his or her body is doing.

Children who are clumsy, uncoordinated, and sensory seeking are often experiencing proprioceptive dysfunction. The following are common signs of proprioceptive dysfunction:

- **Sensory seeking** (pushes, writes too hard, plays rough, bangs or shakes feet while sitting, chews, bites, and likes tight clothes)
- **Poor motor planning/control & body awareness** (difficulty going up and down stairs, bumps into people and objects frequently, difficulty riding a bike)
- **Poor postural control** (slumps, unable to stand on one foot, needs to rest head on desk while working)

Activities to Support Proprioceptive Input:

- **Jump!** Have the child jump on a mini-trampoline or rebounder or play hopscotch.
- **Push and pull.** Have the child vacuum, carry books from one room to another, help wash windows or a tabletop, and transfer wet laundry from the washing machine to the dryer.
- **Heavy lifting.** Without straining, shovel snow or lift free weights.
- **Push, pull, and carry.** Rake leaves, push heavy objects like firewood in a wheelbarrow, do push-ups against the wall, wear a heavy knapsack (not too heavy!) or pull a luggage cart-style backpack, or mow the lawn with a push mower.
- **Reassuring pressure.** Use a weighted vest or lap pad from a therapy catalog, or place light weights in the pockets of a fishing, athletic or regular type of vest.



Vestibular

Vestibular input (movement and balance, centered in the inner ear) is critical for brain development beginning in utero. It is how we calm infants and make them smile and giggle. We rock them, bounce them, swing them, and sway them. All of this movement is doing a whole lot more than putting them to sleep or making them smile. It is creating a foundation for the brain and development. This need for movement continues throughout life and is especially crucial in the developmental years, but it is necessary throughout our lives to support self-regulation.

Creating opportunities for experiencing missed childhood activities can be very beneficial and has the added benefit of providing time and space for you to play together – a wonderful healing and relationship-building strategy.

Activities to Support Vestibular Input:

- **Swing.** Encourage the child to swing on playground swings, trying various types of swings and movements, such as front to back and side to side.
- **Get upside down.** Have the child hang upside down from playground equipment, do somersaults, or do a headstand.
- **Swing and roll.** Encourage the child to use playground swings and roll down a grassy or snowy hill (which good proprioceptive input as well).
- **Spin.** Encourage the child to go on amusement park rides that spin.
- **Swing and spin.** Swing on a hammock, use playground swings or merry-go-round
- **Move that body!** Do cartwheels, swim (doing flip turns and somersaults in the water), do jumping jacks, and dance.

Tactile

The tactile sense detects light touch, deep pressure, texture, temperature, vibration, and pain. This includes both the skin covering your body and the skin lining the inside of your mouth. Oral tactile issues can contribute to picky eating and feeding difficulties.

Tactile dysfunction can be seen in several categories:

- Tactile defensiveness is when a child over reacts to harmless, light touches, and may become anxious, aggressive, or withdrawn. Messy activities, certain foods, haircuts or dental cleanings, and the way clothes “feel” can also trigger exaggerated reactions. For many, even the feeling of a tag inside a shirt can sensory overload.
- Hypo-responsiveness is a very low arousal level, resulting in an inability to be aware of touch. With this dysfunction, a child may not register pain or discomfort, understand others’ responses to pain or discomfort, or have an awareness of their body in relation to space or other people.

- Touch-seeking is a need for excessive amounts of touching. Some children will try to touch everything. Often children will rub or bite their skin, twirl hair (their own and others'), and chew on inedible objects like pencils, toys, and clothing.

Activities to Support Tactile Input:

- **Food and drink.** Provide the child with frozen foods (popsicles, frozen fruit or vegetables) and mixed temperature foods (hot fudge sundae, hot taco with cold toppings, etc.).
- **Get in touch with nature.** Encourage the child to walk barefoot in the grass (avoiding pesticide applications), sand, or dirt. Have the child garden and repot indoor plants.
- **Choice in clothing.** Encourage the child to shop with you, trying on everything to ensure that it feels right. Also a great way to spend positive time together!
- **Tactile hobbies.** Sculpt, sew, weave, crochet or knit. Create a scrapbook (which involves lots of pasting and working with different textures). Use sandpaper to smooth a woodworking project. Make things out of clay, and try using a potter's wheel.
- **"High fives"** throughout the day.
- **Drawing** in sand or salt.
- **Tactile box** to collect small items and different textures to match and sort.
- **Face and body paints**, temporary tattoos or stickers.

Auditory

Auditory input refers to both what we hear and how we listen, and is connected with the vestibular sense. In addition to various types of recorded and live music, there are some ways children can get calming and organizing auditory input.

Activities to Support Auditory Input:

- **Get outside and listen.** Go to the beach or sit still and listen to the rain, thunder, and so on. If you hear birds singing, try to identify what direction a bird is calling from.
- **Listen to natural sound recordings.** There are many recordings of rain falling, ocean waves, bird songs, and so on. Sometimes natural sound recordings also feature light instrumentation with flutes, keyboards, etc. Some children find they sleep better if they play such music.
- **Find calming, focusing music.** Listen to music specially engineered to promote calm, focus, energy, or creativity. Keep in mind, of course, that musical preference is very individual, so this will take some experimentation.
- **Encourage learning to make music.** Provide the child with musical instruments and encourage the child to play and even take lessons.
- **Create pleasant sounds.** Get a white noise machine, tabletop rocks-and-water fountain, or aquarium.



Visual

Visual input can often be overstimulating for a child with sensory issues. Think about ways you can simplify the visual field at home or school for a calming, organizing effect. Alternately, if the child seems “tuned out” and doesn’t respond easily to visual stimulation, add brightly colored objects to encourage visual attention.

Activities to Support Visual Input:

- **Avoid excess.** Hide clutter in bins or boxes or behind curtains or doors—a simple, solid-color curtain hung over a bookshelf instantly reduces visual clutter. In rooms where the child spends a lot of time, try to use solid colored rugs instead of patterned ones. Solid-colored walls in neutral or soft colors are less stimulating than patterned wallpaper in bold colors.
- **Seat the child separate from others.** Have the child sit at the front of a classroom where there is less distraction. The child may also need to sit away from the window or in the back of the room. Work with the teacher to see which seat placement works best.
- **Be color-sensitive.** Avoid toys, clothes, towels, etc., in colors that the child finds distressing.

Smell

Olfactory input (sense of smell) comes through the nose and goes straight to the most primitive, emotional part of the brain. Many times a smell can trigger a trauma reaction, so take note of and ask about smells that are distressing.

Activities to Support Smell Input:

- **Smell inventory.** When a child first moves into your home, invite the child to take a tour throughout your house and yard, using their nose to determine both comfort and discomfort. Do what you can to adjust any odors to increase their sense of belonging.
- **Scent memories.** Ask the child what smells from their past or present bring warm or happy feelings and memories. Bring those smells (apple kugel baking, pine tree, etc.) into your home naturally.
- **Smell stuff!** Explore scents with the child to find ones that work best to meet your goal (either to soothe or wake the child up). Everyone has different preferences, but vanilla, lavender, and rose scents are generally calming. Peppermint and citrus are usually alerting. For example, if the child needs help staying calm and loves vanilla. You can use high-quality vanilla soap and bath oils at bath time, vanilla candles or essential oils in an aromatherapy machine at bedtime, and vanilla body lotion. Avoid synthetic scents. Some children do not tolerate strong scents well. For them, use unscented laundry detergent and shampoos, and other unscented products.