

Sensory Play with Household Items

Simple, low-cost games for autistic children and teens

No special equipment. Everything is already in your home.

Inside this guide

- How to use sensory play well, plus safety basics
- Games for touch, movement, sound, sight, smell, and calming down
- A quick-pick chart and a simple observation log

How to Use This Guide

Every person's sensory system is different. Some autistic people seek extra input (crashing, spinning, loud sounds) while others avoid it (textures, noise, bright lights), and many are both depending on the day. The goal of sensory play is **regulation, comfort, and fun**, not forcing tolerance.

Guiding principles

- **Follow their lead.** Offer, do not force. Stopping is always allowed.
- **Watch the signals.** Smiling, seeking more, and calm breathing mean yes. Covering ears or eyes, pulling away, or agitation mean pause.
- **Start small and predictable.** Show the materials first and say what will happen.
- **Let them explore in their own way.** There is no wrong way to play.
- **Use interests.** Hide toy trains in the rice bin, or make a 'dinosaur band' in the kitchen.
- **Build in exit ramps.** Keep a towel, a quiet corner, and a 'break' card or word available.
- **Pair with communication.** Offer choices, model words like 'more', 'stop', 'squeeze', and 'my turn', or use their AAC.

Safety first

- Always supervise, especially with small items (beans, beads, cotton balls) if a child mouths objects. Swap in large or edible materials as needed.
- Check for allergies (flour, food dyes, scents, nuts) and skin sensitivities before using foam, soap, or spices.
- Never use a swing, spin, or tight wrap that restricts breathing. Keep the face uncovered and pressure gentle and comfortable.
- Choose a clear floor space and remove sharp or breakable items.
- Keep water play on non-slip surfaces and clean up spills right away.
- Stop any activity that causes distress, pain, or dizziness.

Touch (Tactile) Games

For children who seek or avoid textures. Let them choose whether to touch with hands, tools, or gloves.

Rice, Pasta, and Bean Bin

You need: Large plastic tub or baking tray, dry rice, pasta, or oats, scoops, cups, small toys

How to play

- Fill the tub about 3 inches deep and hide small toys inside.
- Let them dig, pour, scoop, and bury hands.
- Add a spoon, funnel, or cup for pouring and measuring.

Try this: Use oats or large pasta for children who still mouth objects. Put a sheet under the bin for easy cleanup.

Mystery Bag

You need: Pillowcase or sock, 5 to 8 safe items (spoon, sponge, key ring, soft toy, wooden block, scrunchie)

How to play

- Place one item in the bag.
- Reach in and feel without looking.
- Guess, describe ('soft', 'bumpy', 'cold'), or pull it out to check.

Try this: For a low-pressure version, show the item first and let them find its match in the bag.

Cloud Dough

You need: 4 cups flour, 1/2 cup baby oil or cooking oil, large tray

How to play

- Mix flour and oil until it holds together when squeezed.
- Squish, mold, crumble, and press shapes with cups or spoons.
- Hide small toys inside to dig out.

Try this: Check for flour allergies. Use a scent-free oil if smells are bothersome.

Soapy Sponge Wash

You need: Bowl of warm water, dish soap, sponges, cups, washable plastic toys or dishes

How to play

- Add a small squirt of soap and let them make bubbles.
- Wash toys, dishes, or a 'car' (toy).
- Squeeze sponges and pour water between cups.

Try this: Warm water and a towel nearby help with transitions. Try bare hands, a washcloth, or a soft brush.

Texture Walk

You need: Towels, bath mat, foam or cardboard, a pillow, a piece of fabric

How to play

- Lay different textures in a path on the floor.
- Walk, crawl, or roll across each one.
- Talk about how each feels: 'soft', 'rough', 'squishy'.

Try this: Keep socks or shoes on if bare feet feel too intense. Start with 2 or 3 textures.

Shaving Foam Play

You need: Plain shaving foam or whipped cream, tray, cookie cutters or small toys

How to play

- Spray a small amount on the tray or a table.
- Draw, write letters, or smooth it flat and start again.
- Add toys to rescue from the foam.

Try this: Use unscented foam and check skin sensitivity first. Whipped cream is a safer option if mouthing is likely.

Heavy Work and Body Awareness (Proprioceptive) Games

Pushing, pulling, carrying, and squeezing give deep pressure to muscles and joints. Many people find this calming and organizing.

Laundry Basket Push

You need: Laundry basket, towels, books, or stuffed animals for weight

How to play

- Load the basket with towels or toys (not too heavy).
- Push it across the room, or pull it with a rope or towel.
- Deliver it to a 'destination' and unload.

Try this: Add a job: 'Deliver the clean laundry to the bedroom.' Heavy work with a purpose is very motivating.

Pillow Crash Pad

You need: Couch cushions, pillows, blankets, soft floor

How to play

- Pile cushions into a soft mound on the floor.
- Jump, flop, or roll into the pile.
- Take turns building a taller or wider pile.

Try this: Set simple rules like 'one person at a time' and 'land on the cushions'.

Towel Burrito

You need: Large towel or blanket

How to play

- Lay the towel on the floor and have them lie at one edge.
- Roll them up gently with head and face free.
- Offer a gentle squeeze if wanted, then unroll.

Try this: Ask 'more pressure or less?' and let them control it. Stop right away if they show discomfort.

Wall Push and Chair Push

You need: A sturdy wall and a solid chair or table

How to play

- Push against the wall with both hands, counting to 10.
- Try 'pushing the wall down' or 'holding the house up'.
- Sit on the chair and push down on the seat with both hands, lifting the body slightly.

Try this: Good quick reset before homework or during waiting.

Towel Tug of War

You need: Sturdy towel or rope

How to play

- Hold opposite ends.
- Pull gently back and forth, then 'ready, set, pull!' and let go together.
- Take turns being the 'strong one'.

Try this: Great for turn-taking and for practicing 'stop' and 'go'.

Bear and Animal Walks

You need: Open floor space

How to play

- Do bear walks (hands and feet), crab walks, frog jumps, or snake crawls.
- Follow a simple path around the room or through cushions.
- Let them pick the next animal.

Try this: Add a story: 'The bear is going to find honey.'

Grocery Helper

You need: Bags with cans, boxes, or bottles of water (safe weights)

How to play

- Carry bags from the car or store into the kitchen.
- Help put items on shelves, pushing heavier items and reaching up.
- Wipe a table with firm pressure.

Try this: Real jobs build skills and confidence. Use child-appropriate weights.

Movement and Balance (Vestibular) Games

Movement input can be energizing or calming, and can also make some children dizzy or anxious. Go slow, keep sessions short, and watch closely.

Pillow Obstacle Course

You need: Cushions, chairs, blankets, a tape line on the floor, a laundry basket

How to play

- Set a route: crawl under a blanket 'tunnel', step over pillows, balance along a tape line.
- End with a target like dropping a toy into the basket.
- Repeat with new steps.

Try this: Post a picture list of the steps so they know what comes next.

Balance and Freeze

You need: Pillows or folded towels, music

How to play

- Place cushions in a circle or line.
- Step from one to the next without touching the floor.
- Play music and freeze when it stops.

Try this: Hold hands or use a chair for support if needed.

Rocking Blanket Ride

You need: Thick blanket, smooth floor, a helper

How to play

- The child sits or lies on the blanket.
- The helper slowly pulls it a short distance along a smooth floor.
- Stop, check in, and repeat only if they love it.

Try this: Keep speeds gentle. Pull with steady, slow movement, and never on stairs or rough floors.

Log Roll and Slow Spin

You need: Soft mat or carpet, open space

How to play

- Lie down and roll like a log across the mat.
- Or spin slowly while standing, 3 turns, then stop and stand still.
- Reverse direction to balance.

Try this: Always stop and check if they feel dizzy or unwell.

Sound (Auditory) Games

For children who love sound or find it overwhelming. Offer earmuffs or noise-reducing headphones and control volume together.

Kitchen Band

You need: Pots, wooden spoons, plastic bowls, containers with rice or beans (sealed with tape), a whisk

How to play

- Set out instruments and try them all.
- Play loud, quiet, fast, and slow.
- Follow the leader: copy each other's rhythms.

Try this: Seal shakers tightly with tape and check them for safety.

Sound Matching Shakers

You need: Pairs of identical opaque containers filled with different items (rice, coins, beans, sand)

How to play

- Fill two containers with the same items to make a pair.
- Shake them, and find the matching sound.
- Make more pairs for a harder game.

Try this: Great for listening skills. Start with 3 pairs and very different sounds.

Sound Hunt

You need: Nothing, just listening

How to play

- Sit or walk quietly and listen for sounds: clock, fridge, birds, traffic.
- Point to where each sound comes from.
- Draw or tell what they hear.

Try this: Do this as a calming, mindful activity, not a test.

Loud and Quiet Game

You need: Drum, pot, or hands

How to play

- Tap slowly for 'quiet' and faster for 'loud'.
- Move with the sound: tiptoe for quiet, stomp for loud.
- Let them lead and change the volume.

Try this: This teaches control over sound and can help with voice volume.

Sight (Visual) Games

Visual play can be soothing and focusing. Keep lights adjustable, since bright or flickering lights bother some children.

Sensory Bottle

You need: Clear plastic bottle, water, clear glue or a little oil, glitter, beads, food coloring, strong glue for the lid

How to play

- Fill the bottle with water and add glue, glitter, and color.
- Seal the lid tightly with strong glue and tape.
- Shake and watch it swirl, or use it as a calming tool.

Try this: Make one together. It becomes a great 'calm-down' tool.

Flashlight Shadows and Tracing

You need: Flashlight, dark room, hands, toys, paper

How to play

- Dim the lights and shine the flashlight on the wall.
- Make shadows with hands or toys.
- Trace the light beam with a finger or a second light.

Try this: Cover the flashlight with colored cellophane for tinted light.

Color Hunt

You need: Paper bag or basket

How to play

- Choose a color.
- Find 5 things of that color around the house.
- Sort them into groups or line up like a rainbow.

Try this: Sort by other traits like size or shape for older children.

Water Ripple Watching

You need: Shallow dish of water, a dropper or spoon, a few drops of food coloring

How to play

- Drip water slowly into the dish.
- Watch ripples spread out.
- Add color drops and watch them swirl.

Try this: A quiet, calming choice at the end of the day.

Smell and Mouth (Olfactory and Oral) Games

Handle with care: smells can be intense, and oral input should always be safe and consented. Skip smell games for anyone who finds scents overwhelming.

Smell Jars

You need: Small jars or cups, cotton balls, safe scents (lemon, cinnamon, vanilla, mint, coffee), a blindfold or closed eyes

How to play

- Place a small amount in each jar and cover the top with cloth.
- Sniff gently from a distance and describe the scent.
- Guess or match it to the real item.

Try this: Never use essential oils or strong chemicals. Skip any scent that upsets them.

Blow It Across

You need: Straws, cotton balls, feathers, or paper pieces, table, masking tape 'finish line'

How to play

- Set a start and finish line.
- Blow objects across the table using breath or a straw.
- Race a partner or beat their own time.

Try this: Blowing is a calming breath practice. Never let a child suck up small items through a straw.

Crunchy, Chewy, and Cold Snack Play

You need: Safe snacks: carrot sticks, crackers, dried fruit, frozen fruit, pretzels, thick smoothies with a straw

How to play

- Offer 2 or 3 snacks with different textures.
- Let them chew, crunch, suck, or blend.
- Talk about how each feels: 'crunchy', 'chewy', 'cold'.

Try this: Chewy or crunchy foods can be calming. Watch for choking risks and allergies.

Calm-Down Corner and Games

Regulation tools to use before, during, or after sensory play, or any time things feel like too much.

Blanket Fort or Dark Tent

You need: Blankets, chairs, cushions, string lights or a flashlight

How to play

- Build a quiet cave with blankets and chairs.
- Add soft pillows and a favorite toy.
- Let the child use it whenever they need a break.

Try this: Make it their space. Ask what they want inside.

Belly Breathing with a Stuffed Animal

You need: Soft toy or small pillow

How to play

- Lie on the back with the toy on the belly.
- Breathe in slowly and watch it rise, breathe out and watch it fall.
- Rock the 'baby' to sleep.

Try this: Count in for 3 and out for 4. Keep it gentle and short.

Squeeze and Release

You need: Playdough, stress ball, rolled socks, or a lump of dough

How to play

- Squeeze tight and count to 5.
- Release and let the hand go floppy.
- Repeat with hands, then arms, then the whole body.

Try this: Practice when calm, so it is ready during hard moments.

Calm-Down Box

You need: Shoebox, fidget items, a sensory bottle, headphones, a soft cloth, a photo, a scented cloth if liked

How to play

- Choose items together.
- Keep the box in an easy-to-reach place.
- Practice using it when calm, and model using it yourself.

Try this: A picture card showing 'break' lets non-speaking children ask for the box.

Quick-Pick Chart

Match the activity to what the child seems to need.

The child seems...	Try this
Restless or seeking movement	Pillow crash pad, animal walks, obstacle course, laundry basket push
Anxious or overwhelmed	Blanket fort, towel burrito, belly breathing, sensory bottle
Needing focus before a task	Wall push, chair push, crunchy snack, heavy carrying job
Bored or under-stimulated	Kitchen band, rice bin, cloud dough, sound matching
Avoiding textures	Mystery bag with familiar items, tool play, water play with tools
Sensitive to noise	Sound hunt with headphones, water ripples, flashlight shadows
Winding down for bed	Sensory bottle, dim flashlight play, slow breathing, weighted lap pad (if used)

Ideas for building a daily routine

- Morning: heavy work or movement to get ready for the day.
- After school: a calming sensory break before demands begin.
- Before homework or tasks: a short 'organizing' activity like wall pushes.
- Evening: low-lights, quiet play, and calming tools.
- Offer 2 or 3 choices on a visual card so the child picks.

Observation Log

Notes help you spot patterns and share information with therapists and teachers. Copy or print this page.

Date	Activity	Response (happy, calm, upset, neutral)	Helped? Notes

A note on professional support

- This guide is for play and general support, and it does not replace an assessment or individualized plan.
- An occupational therapist (OT) can assess sensory needs and build a personalized 'sensory diet'.
- Seek help if sensory issues cause pain, injury, severe distress, sleep or eating problems, or limit daily life.