

Sensory Play Promotes Early Learning Experiences in Babies

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What is Sensory Play?

Sensory play is any activity that allows babies to safely explore using any combination of their senses in creative and spontaneous ways. By providing a variety of baby-friendly, open-ended, every-day materials, infants and young toddlers have the opportunity to discover how their senses work through imagination-based play and experimentation. Sensory experiences can be great, messy fun and the possibilities are endless! Recent research even suggests that sensory play actually plays an important role in the development of babies' brains and bodies. But how?

It Stimulates Brain Growth and Cognitive Development

For babies, everything they encounter is a brand new experience and an opportunity for learning! Because of this, babies rely on their senses to help them understand the world around them. Sensory exploration promotes critical thinking by giving babies the opportunity to use their senses in new and meaningful ways. By offering them a variety of materials to see, touch, smell, hear, and even taste, babies will use their natural curiosity to explore these items to see what they do. Language development is supported when adults talk to their young ones to describe what they are experiencing. Babies are introduced to math concepts when they have the opportunity to investigate materials by filling, pouring, sorting, scooping, and the like. Further, scientific concepts are presented as babies discover the special properties of materials (such as wet vs. dry, light vs. heavy, movement vs. stillness) plus the cause and effect relationship materials have when they are combined, shaken, thrown, rolled, or squished!

It Increases Fine Motor and Gross Motor Skills

Babies can increase their coordination, dexterity, and muscle strength through sensory play exploration. First of all, they increase fine motor skills when they have the opportunity to manipulate materials in a variety of ways. For example, squishing play dough improves hand strength, picking up smaller objects encourages the use of the pincer grasp (between the thumb and index finger), and finger painting promotes pre-literacy skills. Meanwhile, rolling, pushing, or throwing objects fosters large muscle growth; crawling or walking over and through different materials helps to develop an awareness of their bodies in space; and picking up an object to smell, taste, or hear it supports hand-eye coordination. In essence, every time babies interact with materials they are working to build their physical abilities.

It Fosters Positive Social Interaction and Cooperation

When babies explore sensory experiences together, they are given the opportunity to interact with one another and to develop a new social-emotional awareness about themselves in a positive and supportive environment. They will be naturally curious about what the other children are doing with the materials and will take time to observe their peers, which helps them learn about different perspectives and might even inspire them to use the materials in a new way. And while babies are in the beginning stages of language development, even infants and young toddlers will increase their communication skills by expressing themselves to their peers while playing and exploring together. Sensory activities also promote a community of cooperation as babies work together to manipulate materials and share their ideas with each other. Last but not least, these types of experiences help babies learn to navigate challenging social situations, such as taking turns, sharing materials, and dealing with frustrations.

It Promotes Creativity and Self Discovery

By providing open-ended sensory activities and a variety of materials to explore, infants and young toddlers not only get to try out new experiences, but they also discover themselves in the process by figuring out new and interesting ways to use their bodies. For example, if a baby is presented with a small bin filled with flour, she might start out by tentatively putting her hand in it to see how it feels. It will not take long for her to try out other ways to explore the flour....she might poke it, pat it, sprinkle it, taste it, rub it on her arms, or stomp in it! The possibilities are never-ending and when she is given the time and space to discover this on her own she feels safe to expand her own creativity. What's more, when babies try out new and different ways to interact with materials, they build self-confidence and independence by making decisions and they develop a positive self-image by discovering the many amazing ways they can use their minds and bodies!