

Sit and be focused!

Sensory strategies are sometimes recommended by Occupational Therapists to encourage a child to attend to a task longer than they typically would. The idea is that children have various sensory needs, which they are satisfying... but at inappropriate times like when they are supposed to be attending to a task. By giving them strategies to use that are more appropriate and acceptable to use during a task, they will still be getting the sensory input they crave while still engaging in an activity. You and I all use sensory strategies to help stay alert (and awake) during those long meetings at the office, or while waiting in line at the grocery store: we tap pens, shake our legs, shift our weight, look at things in our view. As Occupational Therapists, we like to give our children a “leg-up” and provide some sensory strategies to try now while there’re still young and have not yet developed more appropriate ones like us adults have (well... most of us).

Here are some of my favorite sensory ideas to try with children while seated:

Weighted Sweater: Find an old sweatshirt or sweater. Sew the ends of the sleeves shut. Fill the sleeves with some dried beans or rice (for weight) until the ends are filled up around 4 inches. You don’t want any more than 10% of your child’s body weight in beans/rice in the sleeves (combined). Slide the sweater body over the back of your child’s chair. When they are seated, sling the weighted arms over the child’s shoulders.

Fidget toys: These work best when the child does not need their hands for a task (e.g. when listening to someone speak, long road trips in the car, etc.). Grab a few small items like squishy balls, spiky balls, little figurines, pieces of material, paper clips, silly putty, or any small sensory toy and throw them in a bag. Keep this “fidget bag” handy wherever you go! You can either let your child choose one item at a time to use or give the entire bag to your child, depending on age and temperament. Feeling and manipulating these fidgets may occupy your child longer than you think. For seated activities they really help some children to focused and listen better!

Theraband chair legs: Theraband is that stretchy band used for exercise work-outs and can be purchased at most medical supply stores and exercise equipment sales centres. Tie a piece of Theraband to the 2 front legs of your child’s chair. When your child is sitting, they can push, kick, and stretch the Theraband with their feet. It’s like a fidget toy for the feet!

The sensory strip: Under the edge of the table or desk where your child is to be seated, place a strip of sticky-back Velcro. Most children prefer the soft fuzzy Velcro, but a few children prefer the rough, loop Velcro. Let your child decide which one they’d prefer. Then, when they are seated they always have easy access to a feely-fidget for a “quick” sensory fix to help them re-focus and attend to task. Your child may also be able to use one hand to feel and one hand to do the required task, if both hands are not needed.