

Sensory environments for deafblind children and adults

Why are sensory experiences important for children with multi-sensory impairments?

Children with multi-sensory impairments (MSI) have to cope with a range of sensory difficulties – often including combined and vision impairments – which will affect how they develop and learn.

Given these difficulties, it is important that children with MSI receive help as early as possible – and are supported to develop their early play and sensory skills. They may not realise there are objects ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered and played with, and we need to bring this world closer to them.

One of the ways to do this is to create a ‘sensory environment’ for the child. These can range from specialist rooms that may be found in schools or day services, to an environment that has been set up for the child at home. As well as being pleasurable for the child these can help them to become more aware of different sights, sounds and textures, and to develop their understanding of cause and effect.

Adults with sensory impairments can also enjoy and benefit from the stimulation that multi-sensory environments offer.

How can sensory play help the development of a child with hearing and sight problems?

Sensory environments can

- maximise the use of a child’s residual hearing and sight
- help to develop their communication skills and build relationships with others
- increase their awareness of the surrounding world
- develop tactile play skills.

How do I start to make a sensory environment at home?

There are manufacturers who sell toys and other pieces of equipment that a child with multi-sensory impairments might enjoy. You can find details of some of these at the back of this factsheet. Sense also produces a factsheet called ‘Equipment catalogues and manufacturers.’

However, it can be quite easy to create a sensory environment in the home. You won't even need a lot of money to make an effective sensory environment, just a little imagination!

All you need is a room, or part of a room, for the child to play safely. Sometimes this needs to be darkened – perhaps so that a child can follow a torch with their eyes for example. Ideally you should use contrasting colours as much as possible – for example, by placing the toys or other items on a dark blue or black background. It is also helpful if this is quiet and free from other distractions.

It is important to remember to supervise the person while they are using the sensory environment.

What equipment can I use?

You can use anything which can stimulate a child's or adult's different senses - particularly touch, sight and hearing:

- **Coloured lights** can be quite exciting for children with limited vision. Torches or rope lights are ideal as a child can pick them up and hold them closer to see. Torches or lights with switches can also help a child to learn about cause and effect as they can see what happens when they flick the switch.
- **Activity arches**
These are frames from which you can hang various items. Many of these could be things you can find round the home, for example:
 - tinsel or wind chimes.
 - rattles
 - jingle bells and other musical instruments
 - silver paper glued to cardboard tubes.



Activity arch

Make sure that the child is sitting or lying near the activity arch so that they can reach out and touch the objects, so they can develop their tactile skills. There are also arches available that can fit over someone sitting in a wheelchair. By reaching out for one object, the child may discover another one. For example, they see the light reflected from the tinsel and reach out to it, but knock the wind chimes on the way, which also stimulates any residual hearing. It may also be useful to use additional lighting (such as a reading lamp) to shine onto a particular toy to help the child to see it.

It is also a good idea to change the environment slightly by altering the toys provided or by changing some of the textiles as the child's skills increase.

- For a child with limited mobility, a **BeActive Box** can encourage movement and exploration (see photo). These are available from Suffolk Playworks (cost £167 + VAT) or it is relatively easy to make these yourself.

A child who is placed in a BeActive Box is cut off from outside noise and can listen to the sounds that he or she makes when moving about, and touching the objects suspended in the box.

These should be things that have contrasting textures or make sounds. Beads, bells, metal and plastic spoons, crinkly paper, plastic plates and bunches of keys are all items which will feel interesting to a multi-sensory impaired child and encourage them to move about, discover and play.

Other ideas can include fluorescent toys, such as a slinky which is colourful, has movement and can be easily held; or ocean drums (the Early Learning Centre has a wave drum). Even survival blankets are great as they make sounds and reflect light.



BeActive box

- **A resonance board** is a small raised platform made of plywood attached to a wooden frame. This is a great environment for encouraging a child to attend to and explore sounds through play. Any movement on the surface will produce amplified sound and matching vibration that will be felt through the whole body.

The child can then explore a range of objects on the board – for example, shell rattles, wobbly sound makers, chain link and so forth. You should place items close to the child’s hands and feet. Movements may initially be accidental, but a child may soon begin to repeat actions more intentionally to re-start the interesting effect.

You can make a resonance board cheaply with a few materials – contact Sense’s Information Team for details.



Resonance board

Can I use things around the home?

There is no end of things around the home which you can use as sensory toys - but please remember to keep watch at all times. Here are some more ideas to try:

- If you have a metal colander in the kitchen cupboard, place beads or dried pasta in it to make sounds.
- Put beads on a metal tray, which will sound a bit like an ocean drum and will also create a visual stimulus.
- Put some rice in a balloon and blow it up to make a rattle. This is very good for developing early listening skills.

Messy play is another good way of encouraging tactile communication. You can use dry objects such as dry pasta, shredded paper, porridge oats or cotton wool – even baked beans or jelly!

Where can I buy sensory toys?

Try looking around high street shops for ideas. You can also pick up bargains in pound shops. Mathmos the light shop make very good mood lights which are more suitable for older children.

Things to remember

- Early stimulation is key – learn to make use of residual hearing and sight from as young as possible.
- Some children can only use one sense at a time initially, so do not do too much too quickly – try only one or a few things at a time.
- Children need time to respond and do things for themselves. Let the child feel for things without pushing them – you can use hand under hand guidance to feel things together.
- Observation is important so as not to miss any of the child's milestones such as increased babbling or increased use of visual or hearing skills.

Advice for professionals

For professionals who want to set up a multi sensory environment and would like to receive training the Richard Hirstwood website is very useful – www.multi-sensory-room.co.uk .

Useful resources

<http://www.specialneedstoys.com/UK/> - for activity arches

<http://www.playworks.co.uk/beactive.htm> - for the BeActive Box

<http://www.lilliworks.com/> - website of Dr Lilli Nielsen who was one the first people to use resonance boards

www.tacpac.co.uk – for touch and communication activities linking music with tactile experiences

www.earlysupport.org.uk – Information for Parents about multi-sensory impairment

<http://www.mathmos.com/erol.html#1X0> - lighting

<http://www.ikea.com>

www.spacekraft.co.uk

Contacting Sense

If you:

- would like to find out more about deafblindness, or the services for deafblind people in your area
- require information in alternative formats including braille, large print, audio or disk - or would like this factsheet to be translated into your first language - please contact Sense's Information Team.

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