

3. General Calming, Organizing, and Alerting Techniques

The following list provides methods that can help calm, organize, or alert the nervous system. The list must be only used as a general guideline, as activities that calm one child may be alerting to another. These strategies can be incorporated into a sensory diet, or they may help deal with a specific situation.

Calming Techniques

Sensory soothing or calming experiences can help any child who is anxious, but they are particularly useful for children who are sensory defensive. They help to relax the nervous system and can reduce exaggerated responses to sensory input.

- Warm or tepid bath
- Deep-pressure massage; backrub using comfort touch
- Joint compressions
- Stretches
- Snuggling in a sleeping bag, beanbag chair, or large pillows
- Blanket wrap (neutral warmth) or swaddling for a younger child
- Firm pressure and skin-to-skin contact
- Slow rocking or swaying—rocking chair, in adult's lap or arms, on tummy in a head-to-heel direction (rhythmic motion)
- Slow swinging back and forth in a blanket
- Lycra/spandex clothing
- Neoprene vest
- Weighted vest or collar
- Lap “snake” (instructions for making a lap snake are in chapter 9)
- Lavender, vanilla, banana, or other soothing smells
- Sucking
- Hideout, fort, or quiet corner
- Fidget toys
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- White noise or quiet music with a steady beat
- Bear hugs (child faces away from you)
- Hugging a teddy bear, giving self-hugs
- Finger hugs and tugs
- Reduced noise and light levels (turn off the TV, radio, and lights)

Organizing Techniques

Organizing experiences can help a child who is either over- or under-active become focused and attentive.

- Sucking a pacifier or hard candy or using curly straws
- Vibration—use a vibrating pillow, battery vibrating wiggle pen, toy massager
- Proprioceptive activities (see list in chapter 8) especially hanging, pushing, pulling, or lifting heavy objects
- Chewing, blowing (see oral motor activity list in chapter 8)
- Swimming
- Adding rhythm to the activity

Alerting Techniques

Alerting experiences can help a child who is under-reactive to sensory input, passive, or lethargic become more focused and attentive. It is important to determine if the child is in a “shutdown” mode in response to sensory defensiveness. If this is the case, alerting strategies should not be used. Alerting activities need to be closely monitored to prevent over stimulation.

- Bright lighting and fresh, cool air
- Fast swinging
- Quick unpredictable movement (bouncing on a ball, lap, or mini-trampoline)
- Drinking ice water or carbonated drink
- Cold water play
- Running—tag games, hide ‘n seek, errands
- Sitting on a ball chair, water mat, or air pillow
- Misting cool water from spray bottle on face
- Loud, fast music and sudden noises
- Cause and effect toys with sounds and lights
- Strong odours (e.g., perfume, peppermint, etc.)
- Visually stimulating rooms

4. Strategies for Specific Problem Behaviours

In the following section, we will present some approaches to commonly seen behaviours. The purpose of certain behaviours may be to seek sensory input or avoid sensory input. Strategies for specific behaviours related to self-care routines (problems with food texture, hair cutting, etc.) are included in chapter 7.

Sensory-Seeking Behaviours

Many children with PDD crave sensory input and seem to have an insatiable need for certain types of stimulation. The motto for sensory input, “feed the need,” is