

Building the Eight Senses

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Vision

One of the best things you can do for your child's vision is to take them outside. Inside, you may only look at things that are a few feet away. Outdoors, we can look close at an ant, then at a tree, a cloud, then back down to a flower. If you stand in front of a baby as you push them on a swing, they gaze at you as you get further away, then come closer and closer. These shifts in focus build their eye muscles and reduce the chance they'll need glasses later in life. (Genetics also plays a part.) Different types of light – rosy skies at dawn, bright light of mid-day, twilight and looking at stars at night also help with eye and vision development.

Help your child learn to track motion. For a baby, hold a toy in front of them. As they look at the toy, move it to the left then the right, then up, then down so they follow it to the edge of their peripheral vision. For older children, rolling or throwing balls helps them track motion.

Hearing

Give them lots of different things to listen to. Take music classes or get musical instruments or discover instruments around you (drum on a pot with a spoon, tap on a glass with a fork, shake a box of mac and cheese.) Sing a lot! Read to them. When they notice any sounds in the environment, talk about them – “I heard that too. That was a firetruck.”

Watch for background noise. If your TV is constantly on or there is always background music playing, it can be hard for a child to focus on and learn from any one sound.

Taste

Breastmilk (human milk) changes flavor based on what the lactating parent eats, so exposes even young babies to a variety of tastes. As food is introduced, expose your child to a wide variety of tastes. There are five flavors: sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami, and there is the sensation of spicy hot. Children tend to greatly prefer sweet and usually aren't fans of sour and bitter. But encourage them to sample a wide variety of flavors, and give them the words to describe those flavors and what they like about them and don't like.

Smell

Let them experience a variety of smells. Go for walks in the woods, go to a flower garden or an herb garden. Have them in the kitchen as you cook (let them smell the spices and herbs when you open the containers) and when you gather to eat, talk about how the food smells. “When I peel the orange, you can smell it, can't you?” Try scented playdough, scented markers and stickers. Add scents to the bath water.

Note: In our culture, we have *lots* of artificial scents –soaps, detergents, perfumes, air fresheners and more. Many people have chemical sensitivity and get head-achey or dizzy from all this. Consider unscented cleaning products, choose air fresheners that neutralize or eliminate odors – not just cover them up, use a Hepa filter, open windows for fresh air often.

Touch

Let them experience a wide range of sensations: playing in dirt, sand, grass, mud. Petting animals and touching different fabrics or sandpaper or bubble wrap. You can rub their back, hold their hand, give hugs, tickle, give high-fives. Let them experience being hot or being cold. Explore things hands on and talk about what they are feeling. When you get them dressed, talk about how their socks are tight and stretchy, their shirt is loose and soft.

Some children are resistant to messy play or touching different textures. You can role model – show them how you touch those things. Give them tools to use with the item – a child who won't just put their hands in the mud might use a shovel to scoop it or a stick to stir it and then if their hands happen to get muddy, they then play in it. Or show them how it's OK to be messy when we're doing messy play and we can always wash our hand when we're done.

Vestibular system

This helps us to stay balanced, and tells us if we are moving slowly or quickly through space. This helps us stand, walk and sit up without falling over. Carry your baby in lots of positions. As they get older, encourage your child to crawl, walk, climb, run, ride, roll, jump and dance. Swing on a swing, spin on a merry-go-round. Put them on your lap and sing bounce songs.

Proprioception

This is how we know where our body parts are located in space without having to look at them. Also helps us figure out how much force to use – whether picking up a fragile glass or banging on a drum. Play blindfolded games, or play games in the dark. Do lots of movement games where they stretch out, or clap, or shake their shaker soft or loud, or wrestle and rough house so they learn how much is fun and what could accidentally hurt someone. Let your child move heavy things, or carry heavy things, and handle soft or fragile things.

Interoception

Senses of our internal bodily systems –being hungry or full, itches, and the need to urinate are not explained by the five senses and instead indicate other ways in which we perceive information. Responding to your child's cues that they are full or hungry, helping them to burp when they are gassy, changing their diaper when it is wet or dirty, and noticing and talking about these sensations help them learn to listen to and respect their body's cues.

Sensory Cup

Some children are sensory seeking and can take in all the sensory input they can get. Others are easily overwhelmed. Some children might love touch, vestibular and proprioception activities, but find different tastes or too much noise overwhelming. Be sensitive to your child's needs. Watch for disengagement cues (glazed eyes, turning away, pushing things away, muscle tension) that tell you their sensory cup is overflowing and they need a break.