

Meghan Gaynor

Modern Sensory Tools Today and Why We All Should Utilize Them

Keuka College

English 110 Staley

November 19, 2019

### **Modern Sensory Tools Today and Why We All Should Utilize Them**

We use our senses to interpret everything around us. These can tell us how great something tastes or how soft something is. But what happens when these senses don't work effectively or are simply not working at all? These are where sensory problems arise. Anywhere from five to sixteen percent of children are affected by sensory issues at the school-age that can quite possibly carry on into adulthood (Bunim, 2013). These issues can be greatly diminished or even eliminated with the help of sensory tools, toys, and activities that are typically demonstrated in occupational therapy processes and techniques. These toys and tools are used to stimulate one or some of those senses that we desperately rely on. For example, sight toys focus on bright colors to visually stimulate someone, touch toys use different textures to encourage exploration with your hands, and sound or noise-producing toys will encourage auditory engagement. Therefore, if a child struggles to be able to handle being messy, which is a strange concept to most, that child would most likely benefit from using touch toys to desensitize them to some unfamiliar textures. Some examples of specific toys and tools include weighted blankets and toys, lights, and noisemakers. This beneficial concept is unfamiliar to most people but is growing in popularity as weighted blankets are flying off the shelves in many stores. Other than that you typically don't exactly hear a lot of people talking about sensory helpers other than in therapy offices. The reality is, sensory tools and toys can be beneficial to the general public in multiple different settings and age groups, not just to those with special needs or disabilities in therapy offices. Sensory tools and toys can improve symptoms in school settings to help with attention in the classroom, to calm anxiety, and they can be used during any age and stage of life, not just for children.

There's always that one kid in your classes growing up. The kid who can't sit still and has to be upon his or her feet all the time. They can't manage to pay attention and most likely

these students require more of the teacher's attention. Teachers, especially in the school-age, are stretched thin. They are teaching but also making sure that all the kids are following directions with their work and that they are safe. Kids at this age that suffer from sensory problems often cause the attention of the teacher to constantly be directed towards them and away from teaching and other students. Sensory toys can help to quickly calm the student and keep them focused so that the teacher can return to the intended lesson. The sensory tool usage doesn't stop there; yes it's helping the child with sensory and attention problems, but sensory tools and activities can also help everyone within that classroom. We must "think also about those students who are kinesthetic learners, or those who benefit from support with regulating their bodies, emotional, or behavioral responses... Some types of sensory input can be calming for kids. It can help them regulate their internal discomfort, whether that discomfort is restlessness or some other type of agitation" (Jenkins, 2018). Teachers have now started using sensory tables that contain materials that help to develop those essential senses. It is common to find things like kinetic sand or shaving cream with toys inside to work on touch for not just a couple of kids with sensory processing issues, but for all kids to "encourage exploration with their hands" (Bunim, 2013). It is also very common to find alternative seating for those fidgety kids. This typically means little padded cushions that go on top of the seat of their chair that allow them to wiggle and adjust without them feeling like they need to get up out of their seats (Jessica, 2017). This helps everyone in the classroom by fine-tuning their sensory skills and keeping everyone on task including the teacher. As the integration of sensory tools becomes more popular hopefully we will all have less and less of an image of that one kid that can't seem to sit still and be more focused on the lesson at hand.

Almost 40% of Americans are more anxious than they were at this time last year, according to a new American Psychiatric Association (APA) poll. This poll also states that 14%

are already diagnosed with anxiety disorders. As these numbers are going up and up, what is next? Sensory tools and toys can help with these unnerving feelings. "Sensory modulation intervention aims to use calming sensory input to manage the hypersensitivity and physiological arousal associated with anxiety" (Wallis and Sutton, 2018). Sensory adjustments that are trying to target anxiety are focusing in on the physiological aspects and how to calm your body which will also hopefully make its way up to their mind. This can be beneficial to people of all ages and stages in their lives. Weighted blankets and aromatherapy are probably one of the most common sensory tools that can help to ease anxiety. The blanket contains weighted beads in order to create a heavy pressurized effect that calms you down and eases anxiety. This is a cheap alternative to therapy to help anyone with any varying levels of anxiousness. Aromatherapy helps to just calm you down and ease your mind. These materials can also be purchased by anyone to just feel comforted. An article written by Wallis and Sutton roughly described how these blankets and other tools do their job. Sensory toys and activities are voluntary actions that we can control and anxiety and stressors are involuntary. So, when we are playing or utilizing these sensory tools, it is our way of shifting our focus to what we can control in order to not focus on the things that we cannot (Wallis and Sutton, 2018). While this isn't medicine, this offers a safer and more natural alternative for people who are on the cusp of receiving a diagnosis or simply can't afford the medication. Other people with just small amounts of general anxiety can benefit from the comfort as well. Sensory tools also have no known side effects. These sensory tools that are being used in homes all around the world, not only in therapy offices hopefully should decrease and help to diminish the rising rate of anxiety that is affecting so much of our world.

Becoming and staying independent for as long as possible is a strongly upheld value of most people as they mature in age. We all secretly like to be independent and to do things for

ourselves and for most people they intend to do so for as long as possible. Sensory tools and activities can help someone remain independent for as long as possible. Yes, most cases of sensory problems take place in school-age children but sensory tools can also be used to help senior citizens. These sensory activities that take place in nursing homes and in regular homes of elderly people can decrease the rate at which senior citizen's diseases and their symptoms decline. As people get older their functional mobility (ability to move their body and body parts from one place to another) decreases as well as their ability to perform IADLs (instrumental activities of daily living) like food preparation and taking care of children and ADLs (activities of daily living) like hygiene activities and dressing themselves. As elderly people age they become less able to complete these activities independently and completing sensory activities and using sensory tools can slow that progression. Sensory activities, when completed, increase the probability that they will remain independent longer. It will help to increase functional mobility which is the ability to move from location to another to perform activities. Using these tools can uphold the values of people of all ages as well as using them within any stage of life.

Sensory tools and practices are being integrated more and more into our everyday life and they are benefitting people of all ages and different backgrounds and situations. They can positively affect teachers, students, people suffering from anxiety, and elderly people as they age. Overall, sensory tools, toys, and activities are very relevant in society now and are only gaining more popularity as people buy them. They are being used by many, not just in therapy offices, to help people with a variety of problems. These activities are helping to improve the usage of our senses that help us see the world as we know it.

### Works Cited

Pfeiffer, B. A., Koenig, K., Kinnealey, M., Sheppard, M., & Henderson, L. (2011). Effectiveness of sensory integration interventions in children with autism spectrum disorders: A pilot study. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65(1), 76-85.

News & Events. (2019, November 6). Retrieved November 13, 2019, from <https://researchautism.org/sensory-tools-in-the-classroom/>.

Arky, B. (2013). The debate over sensory processing.

Bell, B. (2019, October 24). Benefits of Sensory Rooms & Spaces for Special Needs. Retrieved from <https://enablingdevices.com/blog/benefits-sensory-rooms-special-needs/>.

What Are Sensory Toys?: Nurture Smart: The Most Advanced Cribs Mobile Ever Built. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://nurturesmart.org/what-are-sensory-toys/>.

Jenkins, C. (2018, January 31). Sensory Tools for All. Retrieved from <http://www.bethel.k12.or.us/specialservices/sensory-tools-for-all/>.

Raina, P., Wong, M., & Massfeller, H. (2004). The relationship between sensory impairment and functional independence among elderly. *BMC geriatrics*, 4(1), 3.

Calming Sensory Toys for Anxiety & Children with Special Needs. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://enablingdevices.com/product-tag/providing-calmness/?fwp\\_paged=2](https://enablingdevices.com/product-tag/providing-calmness/?fwp_paged=2).

Wallis, K., Sutton, D., & Bassett, S. (2018). Sensory modulation for people with anxiety in a community mental health setting. *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*, 34(2), 122-137

Bunim, J. (2013). Breakthrough study reveals biological basis for sensory processing disorders in kids. Diunduh dari <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2013/07/107316/breakthrough-study-revealsbiological-basis-sensory-processing-disorders-kidsi>.