How to Create Sensory Spaces

When you're upset, you probably know how to work through your emotions, but children often don't have the skills to identify what they need. To help them work through their emotions, you could try and create a quiet area and an active area that could help them work through their emotions before they become overwhelmed. Create a space that is filled with things that allow them to find emotional release in a safe way.

Quiet Areas – give a child the opportunity to retreat for a break when they feel stressed, overwhelmed, or just need to chill.

Active Areas – can give a child a space where they can engage in big body play/movement for when they feel overwhelmed, agitated and need to let off steam. This area could include pillows, a punch bag, movement balls etc.

It is always useful if you know a child who would perhaps benefit from having access to a quiet or active area, to know what works best for them in times of emotional dysregulation. Usually the best source of this information is the child's parents/carers and also the child themselves if they are able to communicate their needs. During crisis is not the time to attempt to find out from the child what items they would like to use to help calm them, so a little information gathering beforehand could make the difference to your quiet/active area being a successful emotional support tool.

How to create a quiet area

Pop-up tents, preferably black or dark coloured make great, mobile quiet areas where children can feel safe and use as a chill out calming space. Equally, if you have a less busy corner of a room or area where blankets can be draped to make a den, or a large (very!) cardboard box these will also serve purpose.

Here are a few things you may want to include in your quiet area:

- Pillows and blankets
- Beanbag
- Sensory textured stuffed animals or toys
- Noise-cancelling headphones or earmuffs
- Fiddle toys
- Mindfulness items such as sensory bottles; empty drinks bottles filled with oil, water, food colouring, glitter, small toys.
- Colour changing items.

How to create an active area

Active spaces designate an area where a child can engage in big body play and heavy work when they feel agitated, overwhelmed and just need to move!

If you are going to provide an active area as well as a quiet area you may want to have them in separate areas.

Here are a few things your child's active area might include:

- Bean bags and buckets or cardboard boxes for throwing targets
- Bubble wrap or water bottles for stomping
- Newspaper or scrap papers to shred
- Pillows for yelling into, hitting or throwing.
- A mini punch bag
- A pacing area, possibly defined with tape or chalk on the ground.
- Exercise ball

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N.B. Whatever you decide to provide for your children as a support mechanism remember that they probably won't automatically understand what the area is for and how to use it. You may want to include some simple visual pictures that show what you do in the area. An effective way to show any child how to successfully engage with any activity of course is for an adult to 'model' the activity by first doing it themselves! As with all learning experiences, we are more receptive to new experiences when we are calm and happy, so show your children how to use the calm area when they are engaged and receptive.

All sensory items that you include will of course need to be safe for ALL the children that you are supporting. So for instance if you have a child that likes to explore items orally you would need to consider choke hazards and toxic substances.