

A close-up photograph of a child's hand holding a blue pen over an open notebook. The child is wearing a grey, textured sweater. The background is softly blurred, showing a wooden desk and other papers. A green text box is overlaid at the top, and a white text box with red and green text is at the bottom.

# Sensory Play Ideas and Summer Activities For Kids With Autism

**Autism Parenting**  
Magazine

# Sensory Play Ideas and Summer Activities For Kids With Autism

*Does your child with autism become overstimulated or bored easily? With the school year coming to an end, are you looking for sensory play ideas for your child? This guide will provide a variety of ideas for fun sensory play activities for children with autism.*



## How do sensory issues affect children with autism?

For many children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families, a secondary diagnosis of **Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)** is something that must be factored into daily activities.

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A [study](#) published in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, by Scott D. Tomcheck and Winnie Dunn examined “differences in sensory processing among age-matched children between ages 3 and 6 years with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and those who are typically developing.”

The study found that “Ninety-five percent of the sample of children with ASD demonstrated some degree of sensory processing dysfunction... These findings, considered with similar published studies, begin to confirm the prevalence and types of sensory processing impairments in autism.” (Tomchek & Dunn, 2007)

Children who struggle with SPD or sensory processing issues may become bored easily, struggle to regulate their emotions, become overstimulated, or experience hyper- or hypo-sensitivity in relation to specific sense(s).

By incorporating sensory play into your child’s summertime routine, he/she is more likely to retain the skills learned during the school year as well as increase his/her chances of adapting well to school routines in the autumn.

Consistency is key in all children, so speaking to your child’s teacher about sensory activities he/she especially enjoyed at school and carrying them over into the summer could be helpful during this time of transition.

But to keep things fresh, here are five ideas for sensory play activities for children with autism to enjoy this summer.

## 1. Engage a child’s visual perception skills

Parents who grew up in the 1970s (or during their resurgence in the 1990s) will likely remember the mesmerizing effects of lava lamps. Now imagine being able to control multidimensional color and congealing motion of the lamps without worrying about heat or toxic materials.

With four ingredients your child can create his/her own “**Lava Lamp in a Bag**” that will likely keep him/her entertained and engaged for hours.

- Fill a large freezer-sized, resealable sandwich bag about a quarter of the way full with baby oil.
- Next, add a few drops of liquid food coloring in your child’s preferred color.
- Right before you give the bag to your child, add a couple drops of water.
- You may want to tape the bag shut to prevent leaks.
- Your child can lay the bag flat and manipulate the droplets and splotches to form patterns or create movement.
- Alternatively, he/she can shake the bag and watch the oil, water, and color separate and reform into new and interesting formations.

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This “**Lava Lamp in a Bag**” can be an excellent form of visual therapy for children. Visual therapy is defined as “[The] process of retraining the visual perceptual system, so it functions with optimal efficiency. The process follows a sequence of steps aimed at improving the visual system.” (**Brockett**)

The act of tracking the “lava” both with the eyes and making hand-eye connections while moving the lava around in the bag can help strengthen the visual perceptual system in a fun and engaging way.

## 2. Strengthen the sense of smell through sensory play

Sensory play activities that engage the olfactory system can be particularly soothing to anxious children. If your child has a favorite scent, feel free to substitute it for the lavender used in this example. For a more energizing scent, you may consider using coffee beans or grounds or orange zest.

**For this sensory activity, you will need:**

- several cups of *uncooked rice*,
- a *bag or container*,
- *lavender essential oil*,
- *purple food coloring*,
- and *lavender stalks* (optional).

**Method:**

- Place your uncooked rice in a bag or container that you do not mind being dyed.
- Add several drops of purple liquid food coloring.
- Mix the rice thoroughly until it is dyed light purple.
- Next, add about 4 drops of lavender essential oil per cup of rice and mix.

If you have access to *lavender stalks*, you can add the dried flowers into your mixture. Your child can run his/her fingers through the rice in a large tub, or you can place the rice into a sock or other fabric pouch to add “squish.”

*Aromatherapy* can be incredibly effective for helping children with autism through transitional periods and managing stress. (**Articles, 2016**) For a comprehensive look at the best essential oils and their benefits specifically for children with autism, check out this [guide and free PDF](#).

## 3. Create a soundscape to aid auditory processing disorder

In many parts of the world, summer is synonymous with the occasional downpour. Kim Staten from [Life Over C's](#) has created a dry sensory bottle that mimics a summer rainstorm.

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To make Kim's **rainstorm sensory bottle**, you will need:

- *two clear plastic cups*
- *toothpicks*
- *cotton balls*
- *glue to secure the cups (she recommends hot glue)*
- *rice*
- *glitter and blue liquid food coloring are optional*

This more visual take on the rainstick engages not only your child's sense of hearing but also his/her visual sense and motor skills. Giving your child a visual and auditory representation of a rainstorm might help him/her strengthen auditory connections between sounds and sources.

According to *Tomcheck and Dunn's study*, auditory processing difficulties are one of the most common sensory issues children with autism experience and several other studies support these findings:

"Differences in auditory processing are one of the more commonly reported sensory processing impairments with the full range of atypical responding noted. In one retrospective chart review of developmental patterns in 200 cases with autism, *Greenspan and Weider (1997)* reported that 100% of the participants demonstrated difficulties with auditory responding.

Several authors have reported auditory hypersensitivity (*Bettison, 1994; Dahlgren & Gillberg, 1989; Gillberg & Coleman, 1996; Rimland & Edelson, 1995; Vicker, 1993*). Furthermore, *Dahlgren and Gillberg (1989)* found that sensitivity to auditory stimuli in infancy was a powerful discriminator between children with and without autism." (**Tomcheck & Dunn, 2007**)

## Method:

- To begin, you may choose to dye the rice blue to mimic raindrops.
- You can then fill both cups with cotton balls and toothpicks and pour the rice over the top. The more toothpicks you add, the more the bottle will sound like actual rainfall.
- Next, add a sprinkle of glitter to the cups if you so choose.
- Finally, glue the cups together at the brims—be sure the seal is tight, so no rice or glitter falls through the cracks.
- When the assembly is complete, you can show your child how to turn the bottle upside down to recreate the sound of rain. (**Staten, 2018**)

## 4. Turn sensory activities for autism into something yummy to eat

Engaging your child's sense of taste can be as easy as a trip to the pantry. Depending on what you have on hand, you can either pull dry items of different *shapes, colors, or flavors*. Lay your chosen items out on parchment paper, in no particular order, and allow your child to sort them either by **color** (*colored cereal or dried berries*), by **shape** (*circular cereal, tortilla chips, square crackers*), or by **flavor** (*sour lemon, sweet orange, spicy pepper*).

Be sure whichever items you chose for your child you are okay with them tasting to explore the sense of taste while working on organizational skills or pattern forming. For parents of children who are picky eaters, a game like this one may be a helpful way to introduce new foods in a unique way.

A [study](#) published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* highlights the need for “an interdisciplinary approach to managing atypical eating patterns in children with ASD.”

Whether your child has a flavor or texture aversions, creating a game out of unfamiliar foods can be a lower pressure way to explore new foods (or enjoy old favorites).

## 5. Create a tactile treat to address a sensory disorder

Nicolette Roux of [Powerful Mothering](#) has created a handful of tactile sensory doughs, but this [fizzy cloud dough](#) adds something extra to playtime.

**To create this non-stick dough akin to kinetic sand, you will need:**

- *all-purpose flour*
- *vegetable oil (2 cups of flour per ¼ cup of vegetable oil)*
- *optionally you can mix in powdered food coloring.*

After mixing your ingredients together, it is ready for your child to squish, mold, and sift. **More options:**

- When your child gets bored with the dough, simply add vinegar, and it will fizz as the vinegar reacts with the baking soda.
- Use a dropper for more controlled fizzing or pour the vinegar directly on for a more monumental fizz. **(Roux, 2014)**

Tactile sensory play can be an excellent way to help your child overcome his/her aversions or fears. If your child struggles with a sensory aversion to sand like Leslie Burby's daughter did, check out her [article](#) on how she helped her daughter become comfortable touching the sand and eventually vacationing at the beach.

She writes, “*The process I used was simple. Just think–baby steps. Babies do not walk overnight and neither will a severe sensory aversion.*” (Burby, 2014)

## Choosing the best sensory activities for your child

Finding the best sensory activities for your child may take some trial and error. Carryover activities from the school year can be an excellent starting place as your child makes the adjustment to a new summer routine. Including siblings or other family members in sensory play can be helpful in maintaining social and integrative play skills your child worked on in the classroom.

If you are struggling to find summer project ideas, your child’s occupational therapist, teacher, or pediatrician may be able to help find fun activities that also help your child reach his/her sensory integration goals. While all of the sensory play ideas listed above are “taste-safe” please supervise your child to prevent choking.

### Resources:

**Articles, A. P. (2018, April 26).** Best Essential Oils for Autism and ADHD – The Ultimate Guide. Retrieved from <https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/essential-oils-for-autism-adhd-add/>

**Brockett, S. (n.d.).** Visual Therapy for ASD. Retrieved from <https://www.autism.com/vision>

**Burby, L. (2018, April 16).** Tactile Play with the use of sand. Retrieved from <https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/tactile-play-sand/>

**Cermak, S. A., Curtin, C., & Bandini, L. G. (2010, February).** Food selectivity and sensory sensitivity in children with autism spectrum disorders. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3601920/>

**Roux, N. (2014, July 12).** Fizzy Cloud Dough Experiment (Taste Safe). Retrieved from <https://www.powerfulmothering.com/fizzy-cloud-dough-experiment/>

**Staten, K. (2018, April 26).** Create a Rainstorm Sensory Bottle! Retrieved from <https://lifeovercs.com/rainstorm-sensory-bottles-for-kids/>

**Tomchek, S. D., & Dunn, W. (2007, March 01).** Sensory Processing in Children With and Without Autism: A Comparative Study Using the Short Sensory Profile. Retrieved from <https://ajot.aota.org/Article.aspx?articleid=1866937>

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