

## Alerting and Calming Activities

These suggestions are meant to be guidelines and are not prescriptive in any way. Please talk to an occupational therapist that has experience with sensory integration techniques for further information.

These activities may be considered generally alerting or calming, but will have different effects on different individuals at different times. Some are both calming and alerting, and appear on both lists. Not only do we each have our own sensory preferences and tolerances, but responses can change depending on energy level, mood, blood sugar levels, other factors in the environment, etc.

Some children may respond to typically calming input by escalating their behaviour, whereas they seem to have a paradoxical response to typically exciting input. After spinning for 5 minutes straight on playground equipment, they calmly negotiate an exchange of toys with a sibling. Or after crashing into the sofa 100 times, they settle right into bed and don't show the usual nightly trouble falling asleep. Such children are 'sensory-seeking' and seem to need intense sensory input to really feel organized and "just right." Usually the most organizing input for them to get is from muscle work. Sometimes they will seem to become more and more intense while crashing, jumping, pushing, spinning, or whatever, but a few moments after they stop they seem to "settle" into a calm state. You need to be the detective (along with your child if he or she has good self-awareness). Experiment in safe and acceptable situations and then keep track of the results.

You must also take into consideration emotional, memory, or other associations that individuals may bring to a situation. There are aspects beyond the immediate sensory input involved in every activity. Sometimes we become so focused on looking at things through a sensory lens that we don't take into account personal, social, or other characteristics of an activity or interaction.

The activities or strategies suggested below are very basic. You may need to "dress them up" with play themes or personal interests of the child to engage him or her. Use creativity! There is a lot of room for imagination within most of these. Try to allow the child to lead, as far as seems safe and within the intentions of the activity. On the other hand, people, children included, do not always choose the activities that are going to be the most organizing for them. This is often true of children who tend to run on a "high engine speed;" sometimes it is fun to feel out of control. Sometimes sensory diet activities need to be presented not as optional and concrete guidelines need to be included to keep the activity helpful and not a chance for escalating out of control. Sensory and behavioural strategies CAN be used at the same time! It's not an either/or situation.

Of course, always keep safety in mind!

## Activities that are typically alerting, to "speed up"

### In general:

- rapidly changing/irregular inputs
- quick tempos
- music -- lower frequencies will elicit movement (drums), while higher frequencies can engage attention (flutes, singing, cymbals)
- cold temperatures (including foods)
- light, brushing touch
- fast movement, especially spinning/rotational
- sour or spicy flavours
- fast-moving, bright, unpredictable visuals
- using muscles for "heavy work" of pushing, pulling, against resistance (tends to be both alerting and organizing, so can help lower "too fast engines" and raise "too slow engines")

### Activities/Strategies:

Swinging quickly on playground swing, especially with sudden changes of direction

Spinning on a swing or other equipment (can quickly become over-stimulating - use caution!)

Rocking quickly in a rocking chair

Running, skipping, galloping for at least 1-2 minutes (any type of aerobic exercise, really)

Rapid rocking/bouncing side to side

Jumping in place (trampoline, jumping jacks, jumping rope, etc.)

Motor breaks during school - stand and stretch, run an errand for teacher, walk to bathroom, etc.

Push on wall as if to move wall

Lean on desk for "desk push-up"

Do "chair push-up" in sitting by lifting bottom off floor or chair, holding self up with arms

Weight-bearing through arms via wheelbarrow walk, crabwalk, bear-walk, etc.

Ride a bike up hills (pedal against resistance)

Pushing or pulling heavy furniture; putting chairs on desks & taking down

Climbing playground equipment; crossing monkey bars

Carrying a stack of books, laundry, groceries, or something else approx. 5% of body weight

Drinking grapefruit, cranberry or other tart juice - try partially freezing it

Popsicles or frozen grapes or orange sections. Try frozen pickle chunks!

Pretzels, carrots, apples, granola, and other crunchy foods

Drinking through a long, thin straw, or reg. straw w/thick liquids (stimulates deeper breathing)

Blowing bubbles, whistle or other blown instrument (harmonica)

Move cotton balls by blowing through a straw (race cotton balls or play "soccer" on table)

Play with "fidget toy" for hands, such as small juggling ball

Dancing to rock, jazz, rap, or fast kids music

Cold shower or cold water on face or arms

Strobe light effects, fireworks, sometimes computer or video games or T.V.

Brightly lit room (full spectrum or natural light)

Walls decorated with bright, contrasting colours

Safe crashing: jump or fall into pile of pillows or mats; pillow fighting

## Typically calming activities to "slow down"

### In general:

- slow, steady, rhythmic, repeated, predictable input
- slow and rhythmic music
- firm, steady, pressure touch or squeezing (think massage or a big hug)
- using muscles for "heavy work" (see note above under alerting activities)
- bland or sweet-tasting flavours
- slow-moving, dim, deep-colours for visuals
- neutral warmth
- slow linear movements forward-and-back or head-to-toe

### Activities and Strategies:

Rhythmic bouncing on a hippety-hop ball or seated on therapy ball

Steady, slow forward/back movement on swing or rocking chair

Rocking horse or see-saw; pushing off hard with legs

Listening to classical music, steady drums, or nature sounds (water, birds, waves)

Jumping on a trampoline, doing jumping jacks, or jumping rope

Riding a bike up hills (pedalling against resistance)

Pushing or pulling heavy furniture; putting chairs on desks & taking down

Carrying a stack of books, laundry, groceries, or something else approx. 5% of body weight

Carry backpack or "fanny pack" with some weight to it (not more than 5% of body weight)

Push on wall as if to move wall

Lean on desk for "desk push-up"

Hold self above chair seat, weight-bearing through arms, hands to side of seat for "chair push-up"

Weight-bearing through arms via wheelbarrow walk, crabwalk, bearwalk, etc.

Isometrics: push hands together, hook hands and pull apart, push knee against hand, etc.

Tug'o'war, push'o'war back to back

Push with feet against something (push'o'war with a pillow between 2 peoples' feet, no shoes)

Push or pull open and hold open heavy doors

Erase or wash chalkboards

Look at fish tank, snow globes, lava lamp, campfire, or other slow-moving visual

Dimly lit room, and sparsely-decorated walls ("cool" colours)

Eat chewy foods (send fruit roll-ups, bagels, dried fruit, cheese, gummy candy with lunch)

Chew on [Chewy Tubes](#) or [Chewelry](#) (avail. in some catalogs) or [Theratubing](#)

Wear spandex clothing, like bike shorts or long underwear (can wear either under regular clothes)

While in circle time or listening in seat, hold a [lap weight](#) (such as a large beanbag animal)

Use a heavy/[weighted blanket](#); read or work lying on floor with pillows stacked on top

Wrap or roll-up in blanket or rug

Crawl through a tunnel of about 3 yards of 18" cotton T-shirt ribbing (avail in fabric stores)

Have an adult roll a therapy ball over body while lying on mat or rug

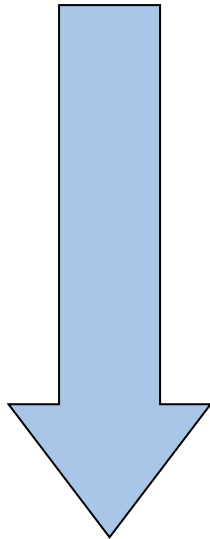
Squeeze stress ball or other resistive "fidget toy" (putty, beeswax, art erasers)

Put hands into container of beans or rice

Inflatable seat cushion ([Move'n'sit](#) or camping pillow) or sit on therapy ball for listening times

Safe crashing: jump or fall into pile of pillows or mats; pillow fighting

# Calming



# Shut Down!

## It's too much!

I'm really distracted; I can't do anything productive and may hit out

## I'm too excited!

I can't maintain my attention and I'm really distracted and may become upset

## I'm getting a bit excited!

I can still concentrate but may become more distractible and active

## Just Right!

I can maintain my concentration, attention and performance levels

## I'm getting a bit lethargic!

I'm finding it difficult to focus and appear passive

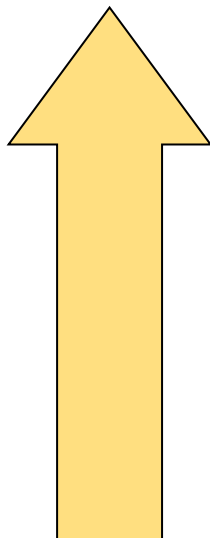
## I'm too inactive!

I can't maintain my concentration and attention on any tasks

## I'm too sluggish!

I don't notice the things that are going on around me. I'm tired and can't complete any tasks

Calm enough  
to concentrate,  
Alert enough to learn



# Alerting