

Maintaining Optimal Levels of Alertness Using Sensory Input

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Various types of sensory input assist all individuals in maintaining an optimal state of alertness/arousal. Obtaining an optimal level of alertness is important to achieving success in all aspects of one's life, including learning.

The following activities and strategies are given to provide ideas for obtaining and/or maintaining optimal levels of alertness. These activities and strategies are divided into three general categories: **alerting**, **calming**, and **organizing**. **Organizing** activities and strategies can be both **alerting** and **calming** and, therefore, may be used to achieve either effect. It is important to note that these examples are generalizations, and, therefore, may not hold true for all individuals. For example, "bear hugs" for most people are calming, but, for some individuals, "bear hugs," may be threatening and, therefore, may not accomplish the intended purpose.

Thus, when using these activities and strategies, it is important to look for the desired response, as well as for any undesired responses. Discontinue a particular activity/strategy that yields an undesired response. Also, different degrees or amounts of activities/strategies will be needed to obtain and maintain desired levels of alertness.

It is important to note that these ideas may be applied to all individuals, from children on up. They do not apply only to individuals with special needs. As we better understand our own responses to these activities, we may be better able to understand others as well.

ORGANIZING Activities and Strategies

- pushing and pulling activities; e.g. pushing a loaded cart
- lifting and carrying heavy objects
- wrestling
- biking
- moving furniture; e.g. putting chairs up
- football
- tug-of-war
- carrying and passing out books
- hiking
- climbing
- wheelbarrow walking
- trampoline
- hanging by one's arms
- lifting weights
- pushing hands together
- standing and pushing against a desk, counter, or wall with hands and arms
- stretching
- manipulating stiff putty
- lying under heavy quilts or pillows (no more than 20 minutes)
- tapping toes and feet

- tapping pens or pencils
- eating chewy foods; e.g. licorice, taffy, fruit leather, bagels, gum, Starbursts

CALMING Activities and Strategies

- deep touch pressure
 - deep massage
 - weighted blanket/vest
- neutral warmth (the body's heat retained)
 - slow brushing
 - bear hugs
 - mummy sleeping bag
 - being wrapped in blankets
- slow, rhythmic movement
 - rocking
 - swinging
- decreased physical activity
- sucking
 - thick shake with a straw
 - hard candy
- sweet flavors
 - popsicle
 - peanut butter

ALERTING Activities and Strategies

- light touch
 - quick brushing
 - koosh ball
- cold; e.g. pass around ice cubes
- fast, irregular movement
 - back scratch
 - light "tickles" with feathers
 - play tag
 - unpredictable rocking, bouncing, and swinging
- increased physical activity
- crunchy foods
 - pretzels
 - raw vegetable sticks
- sour, spicy or bitter flavors
 - crackers
 - popcorn

Resource Listing

A Parent's Guide to Understanding Sensory Integration, 1991 (14 pp.) published by Sensory Integration International, 1402 Cravens Ave., Torrance, CA 90501-2701 (213-533-8338)

SenseAbilities: Understanding Sensory Integration by Maryann Colby Trott, M.A., Marci K. Laurel, M.A., CCC-SLP, & Susan L. Windeck, M.S., OTR/L, 1993 (69 pp.) published by Therapy Skill Builders, 3830 E. Bellevue, P.O. Box 42050, Tucson, AZ 85733 (602-323-7500).

Sensory Integration: A Foundation for Development (Handbook for Parents), 1990 (10 pp.), Southpaw Enterprises, Inc., 800 W. Third St., Dayton, OH 45407-2805.

For children:

"The Hidden Senses" series: *Your Balance Sense* and *Your Muscle Sense* by Jane Koomar, M.S., OTR/L & Barbara Friedman, M.A., OTR/L, 1992, published by the American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc., 1383 Piccard Dr., P.O. Box 1725, Rockville, MD 20849-1725 (301-948-9626).

Audiotape: "The Alert Program" by Mary Sue Williams, OTR/L & Sherry Shellenberger, OTR/L with "Songs for Self-Regulation" by The Belle Curvians, available from Belle Curve Records, Inc., P.O. Box 18387, Boulder, CO 80308 (303-442-1676).