

Sensory Play in Libraries

A Survey of Different Approaches

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Child psychologist Jean Piaget argued in the 1960s that children enter into a developmental stage of sensorimotor development between birth and two years old. In this stage, children learn to posit their bodies in their environment and rely on their senses to gain information about the world around them. The combination of sensory perceptions and motor skills creates the earliest form of intelligence.¹

This child development concept is heavily reflected in early literacy services in libraries, particularly those promoted by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and the Public Library Association (PLA). Indeed, popular programs like *Mother Goose on the Loose* and *Every Child Ready to Read* encourage the use of movement and sensory props, like scarves and bells, to support learning. Movement and sensory experiences are integrated with *Every Child Ready to Read*'s five early literacy skills: reading, writing, talking, singing, playing.

Sensorimotor development is also supported in unstructured, open playtime programs in libraries. There are many professional resources to support motor skills in early childhood services—collections of finger plays abound, along with many online videos of movements to popular songs and nursery rhymes. However, professional information and resource sharing on sensory play is scarce.

Library staff often rely on social media posts and blogs to cultivate ideas for sensory activities and programs. While these resources are a good start, they do not provide the optimal levels of precision or rigor to support a high level of excellence. Furthermore, they are not tailored to the unique mission of libraries, nor do they address the specific challenges faced by libraries in the form of funding and professional development.

This article reviews current sensory-centered programs in public libraries nationwide and presents a case study of three libraries within one library system increasing their sensory



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opportunities for young children. The authors intend to begin a conversation within the literature on the importance of sensory play, and they initiate a discourse on best practices. It is only through information sharing and professional dialogue that librarians will be able to reach the highest levels of practice.

Review of Existing Services

Since libraries began offering services for young children in the 1900s,² they have provided some level of sensory experiences through reading, music, and touch. However, the specific and intentional use of the word “sensory” spiked in the late 2000s as an increasing number of libraries began offering “sensory storytimes” for children. These storytimes draw upon sensory integration theories from the field of occupational therapy to provide enriched literacy experiences for sensory-seeking or sensory-challenged children, often on the autism spectrum. Author and librarian Barbara Klipper wrote one of the first books of its kind for librarians seeking to expand services to children on the autism spectrum. *Programming for Children and Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (ALA, 2014) offered a standard for librarians nationwide.

Another kind of sensory-centered program emerged around the same time—sensory playtimes for children of all abilities. While there is no clear way to pinpoint when exactly libraries began offering sensory playtimes, there are website entries from as far back as 2002 describing such library playtimes.

Many, if not most, libraries offer some kind of regular unstructured, informal playtimes for children. It makes sense that as libraries began to introduce sensory storytimes, they would also begin offering unique sensory activities for children in the form of play. Sensory playtime programs often last an hour and are made up of various stations that children are free to roam in and out of, often including stations with tactile items like shaving cream, sand, water, and food.

Finally, sensory activities are also integrated into regular programs. Librarian bloggers describe adding a sensory bin or activity at the end of storytime or into their regular playtime,³ intentionally purchasing sensory toys for their playtimes, and even integrating an easy sensory activity during outreach visits.⁴

These practices appear to have emerged from librarians’ own recognition of children’s need for sensory stimulation to support sensorimotor development, as opposed to receiving a mandate from library administration or professional organizations. Additionally, the increased information-sharing about sensory activities in libraries may also have sparked the initial inspiration for librarians to try the described activities at their branches.



Dry noodles are a common item used in sensory play.

Sensory Play Examples

The following is a description of how three branches within the Metropolitan Library System in Oklahoma City are supporting sensorimotor development.

The Edmond Library serves the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond, with a population of around ninety thousand. The library hosts Sensory Playtime once a month for children under thirty-six months of age. For the thirty to thirty-five children allowed in the room (preregistration is required, but walk-ins are permitted), there are ten to twelve stations they are free to explore with their caregiver for an hour.

The stations are labeled to inform caregivers of the processes and ingredients such as, for example, “Paint with Yogurt.” Caregivers are also encouraged to read the handouts that provide guidance for the program, reasons for sensory play, and ingredient lists for the centers. Greeting and interacting with the families as they come in and play also helps to explain the “how to” and “why” behind sensory play. From there, parents are encouraged to allow their children to explore the room however they choose, with the adult as their guide and protector for each experience. A bin with warm washcloths is available throughout the program for parents and children to clean up if necessary. A follow-up e-mail is sent to those who registered with some follow up information on sensory play and a request for feedback on the program.

The discovery, learning, and joy that takes place during sensory playtime cannot be quantified but should be experienced. It is beautiful, as a parent or librarian, to see these little ones figure out that their knees or feet can pop bubble wrap or that their hand can hold a big paintbrush and add color to

a giant canvas, or to watch them measure and pour cinnamon oats into pans to make “apple” pies. And no one is scolding them for getting messy; rather the child is seeing the parent giving their joyful consent for the experience, which encourages him or her to further exploration.

The Belle Isle Library serves the northern population of Oklahoma City. Staff began offering a monthly Sensory Playtime in September 2016, and it has since become a programming staple. Attendance began with approximately fifty participants and steadily grew to over one hundred, at which point staff began enforcing registration.

The program setup mirrors that of the Edmond library—ten to twelve open-ended stations are available and focus on sight and touch experiences. Certain stations became so well loved by children that they are now integrated into each playtime. This provides children with something to look forward to when they attend and contributes to program retention.

It is fascinating to see how the different age groups engage with the materials. Babies enjoy touching the shredded paper, and toddlers begin to integrate imaginative play, pretending the shredded paper is a blanket of snow. Staff take pictures throughout the program and then send them to parents in a follow-up e-mail. The pictures are stored in a private Flickr album that is only accessible to a person with the URL. The e-mail includes materials in the collection to support sensory play at home and a list of similar upcoming programs.

The Midwest City Library (MCL) is a regional library that hosts regular play and storytime sessions, averaging around twenty-five participants per session. MCL offers two sensory stations in early literacy programs—a play dough table and stand-alone sensory bin.

The first station contains dough and cutting accessories, such as cutters and rolling pins. Staff routinely make batches of dough that encompass a variety of sensory elements—colors, smells, glitter, flower petals, etc. A handout illustrating the benefits of Play-Doh in child development is posted nearby, along with prompts for questions and additional activities to facilitate conversations between caretaker and child and inspire home use of sensory activities.

The stand-alone bin is used for a rotating activity determined by setup and cleanup times, weather, holidays, etc. Because of back-to-back sessions of most programs, bin activities are kept simple during “stay and plays,” using items that make minimal mess and are simple to prepare, such as pom-poms with gripping tools, paper cutting, color sorting, tree leaves and herbs, etc.

Other times, MCL seeks out activities that are more involved and potentially messy. Because caretakers often express hesitation to engage in messy sensory activities at home, MCL provides children with activities that might be otherwise avoided, such as tapioca pearls in water, sand mixed with



Dinos in a kiddie pool? Why not?

shaving cream, paper from the confetti shredding machine, rice dyed with liquid watercolors, noodles dyed with food coloring, dig-and-find sand boxes, etc. The variety of these activities makes the sensory stations a playtime hotspot.

Barriers to Sensory Play

While most librarians might agree that such play stations are beneficial, there can be barriers.

- **Staff availability.** Setup and cleanup often require additional staff due to the size of the program.
- **Time.** Setup and cleanup can take up to an hour each, in addition to planning time.
- **Cost.** Many sensory activities include food and other consumable items, such as shaving cream. This means staff must purchase supplies for each iteration of the program.
- **Trial and error.** Some activities present significant unanticipated cleanup challenges, depending on the building layout. For example, dumping out pools of water is a labor-intensive task and only achievable with an outside door nearby. Staff must evaluate the feasibility of activities and work with the limitations unique to their physical space.

Suggested Best Practices

Based upon the authors’ experience with integrating sensory activities into library programs, the following practices are encouraged. These practices take into account the needs and experiences of patrons, while recognizing challenges faced by staff.

- Assess both the material and immaterial resources available, and plan accordingly.

- Accompany caregivers throughout programs by providing them with resources to reproduce activities at home and information on the developmental benefits of sensory play.
- Diversify exposure to sensory play throughout program offerings. Sensory play is a versatile activity that can be integrated into all kinds of programs.
- Develop a support network among staff for information and resource sharing. Sensory play can be an expensive and time-intensive endeavor; sharing among branches can reduce costs and planning time.
- Embrace repetition. While it may seem boring to have the same stations out every week, sensory play is open-ended and can yield an infinite amount of fodder for creativity and imagination.

References

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