



Tips for Using Sensory Toys and Comfort Items

Many of our special LifeKids deal with issues that make it hard for them to pay attention or feel relaxed in stimulating environments. They may deal with a dysregulated sensory system which may manifest as fear, physical pain, irritability, and/or discomfort from the unusual noise, movement, smells, textures, and lighting of our rooms. Using calming sensory toys and comfort items can help bring a child out of their fight-or-flight state. They may also help a child to focus by offering their mind something relaxing to do while they listen.

What makes a good sensory toy?

Many everyday items make great sensory toys. Pay attention to which items help the child you work with to regulate and calm, and which ones stimulate them. When you find something that works, keep it with you each weekend so it's ready when you need it!

- **Anything squishy:**

- Items like gel-filled squeeze toys or stretchy silicone toys offer squeezing or stretching action. They give a good tactile sensory input to a child who needs something in their hands.
- Slow-rise squishies and silly putty are calming to squeeze. They're also less messy than most clays or doughs.

- **Anything with lights:**

- Some kids prefer toys with a constant light, while others might enjoy a blinking toy or one with lights that respond to a button or switch.
- Gently lighted toys can offer calming visual input. A child may enjoy waving the lights in front of their eyes to self-soothe.
- Lights are especially helpful if a child needs assistance integrating into a room like Konnect or Loop. Darkness can be completely disorienting to kids who have difficulty with spatial awareness. A small lantern or light can help a child see how their body relates to their surroundings. **Note:** If you bring your child off to the side or toward the back, a lighted toy can be very calming without being too much of a distraction to kids who don't need it.

- **Anything with heft:**

- A child may feel calm with a weighted pillow or small blanket on their lap or their shoulders.
- Place a few books or a weighted blanket in a backpack and put it on the child you're working with while you take a short walk together.
- Stuffed animals with weighted beads offer more soothing input than lightweight versions.
- A small metal car might be fun for a child to hold because they're heavier than other toy cars. The child can spin the wheels and get good input for their tactile senses.

- **Things with (or without) fragrance:**
 - Some toys are lightly scented. This can be calming for kids who enjoy that stimulation. It can help them to focus if they have a toy they enjoy smelling it.
 - But be careful about fragrances. Some kids can get overwhelmed with a scented toy. Watch for signs of sensory discomfort like head turning, dropping the item, drooling, or gagging.

- **Things to chew:**
 - If you notice your special LifeKid likes to put items in their mouth often, check with their parent to see if they have a chewable toy they can bring to LifeKids.
 - Silicone chewables are a great option (especially chewable necklaces) as they are difficult to choke on when worn around the neck and chewed.

- **Things that block out stimuli:**
 - It's easy to spot when a child is bothered by sudden noises as they will vocalize, flinch, or cover their ears. Stay alert to notice any less obvious cues that a child is bothered by the general noisy commotion of a typical room of children such as withdrawal, pushing people away, and other "shutting down" behaviors like refusal to move or strong defiance against participating.
 - Try headphones and see if they help the child you're working with. Noise-reducing headphones can lower the overall decibel level a child is exposed to while still allowing your voice to come through for communication.
 - Lightly tinted sunglasses can be helpful for kids who dislike fluorescent lighting or the more dramatic lighting some of our rooms have during worship. It can help a child take in lighting without becoming overwhelmed by it.

- **Things for fidgeting:**
 - A small pillow to bounce on or gently toss is relaxing, stimulating, and may help a child focus.
 - During quieter times, a small fidget like a spinner or cube toy can help a child listen.
 - A whiteboard and dry erase markers can be calming. Just scribbling or doodling can help a child to sit and focus. Erasing gives great calming sensory input, too.
 - See if small interlocking toys, like interlocking blocks, a plastic screw and bolt, or magnetic toys are what help the child you're working with to calm and focus.