

Sensory Engagement and Somatic Activities to Build Body Awareness and Teach Self-Regulation

Building A Sensory Toolkit

Buying materials to engage in sensorimotor activities can get REALLY expensive REALLY fast. Most of us build our toolboxes over time, using as many inexpensive materials as possible so we can save our money for the big ticket items that are going to be most valuable to you. There are tons of ways of building a sensory tool box that meets so many of your needs without spending much at all. Here are some ideas to get your started:

Shopping On The Cheap

- Dollar stores
- The dollar spot and cheap toy section at the big box stores and craft stores
- The pet toy aisle
- Flea markets
- Garage and yard sales
- Cake decorating stores
- Craigslist/Other Online Ads
- Creative Reuse Center (like this one: <http://austincreativereuse.org/>)
- Freecycle
- Local Resource Lists (like this one: <http://www.unitedwaysatx.org/groups/bexar-necessities-2/>)
- Library Book Sales and other book sales (<http://www.booksalefinder.com/>)
- Dumpster diving/big trash day (For the very brave!)

There may be places on this list you didn't think of and many that made you think "*I know, duh!*" But we forget to check these places and we forget to check them with our sideways eyes.

By *sideways eyes*, I mean look at all the different things something can be or be used for without pay attention to its original purpose. I recently picked up a package of heavy coasters that were being given away at a local event. The coasters, once covered with a new base paint will be great as small canvases, a deck of coping cards, or a new game...thanks Pabst Blue Ribbon!

I turned a handful of pressed wood spacers into adaptable wooden blocks with the help of chalkboard paint. They can be built with, or turned into puzzles by drawing on them, then mixing the pieces back up.

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If you are loading up for play therapy or sand tray therapy, you can find tons of miniature toys and figurines outside of the traditional avenues. Beyond the dollar spot, inexpensive toy aisle, have you been to a cake decorating store lately? TONS of cool stuff!

I am also always looking at containers themselves. If I am buying bottled water, I look for bottles that are sturdy and have a cool shape I can reuse later. The big plastic tubs that hold my dishwasher tabs and laundry soap tabs are great for holding Legos, figurines, kinetic sand and the like. Then sorting the different pieces into the different tubs can become an experiential activity itself ("Can you help me put all the big Legos in the orange tub and the little ones in the white tub?")

If you aren't already addicted to Pinterest, you can find great ideas and activities for creating cheap sensory materials and reusing stuff from around the house.

Shopping Tips

I am always looking for washability and durability. Whether buying items new or used, I want stuff I can easily keep clean. When the movie *Inside Out* showed up in theatres, I was frustrated because all the toys I found in the stores were plush and I knew they would be grubby within days at my office. I finally found a vinyl figure set with a vinyl play mat that kids love and can easily cleaned.

While I do have some stuffed animals in my front office, the items that will get the most use are all washable. My puppets can be machine washed and air dried, and the inner office has fluffy blankets instead of stuffed animals. They give the same comfort as a stuffed animal, but can be washed way easier than a teddy bear can. Bonus points, is that adults will use them for comfort as well just because they happen to be draped where they are sitting...and they would never pick up a teddy bear to cuddle!

Oral Exploration

Do keep in mind, if you are working with individuals that are likely to explore toys with their mouths, to use items you know are not toxic and are not a choking hazard. Many items that can be found inexpensively won't be toxin free. If you know you are working with someone who is likely to put the items in their mouths, consider items like ice chips, candy necklaces, cheerios or froot loops strung on a cord and turned into a necklace, or specific sensory chew toys...this is a time where you really want to invest in a quality product! Some of the items available on the market are covered in this blog post:

<http://tinyurl.com/ASDchewies>

Some Of The Sensory Items In My Tool Kit



Play-Doh (50 cents) and Farp! Slime (\$1).
Bubbles (\$1) and Pinwheel (Free At a Conference)
Rubik's Cube (\$1 at Goodwill)
Slinky (\$1)
Tamborine (Found In My Junk Drawer)

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Spikey Toy Ball (\$3.99)

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Squishy Stress Balls With Expressive Faces (\$1 each)

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Puppets (stolen from my kids when they outgrew them)



Sensory Basket Items: All things sourced from around the house (lots of cat toys!) to teach the felt sense exercises (have the individual hold an item in their hand with their eyes closed and feel and describe the item).

Cleaning The Grodies Without Toxins

You can skip the bleach and use a non-toxic germ basher instead.

- 2 cups of water
- 3 tablespoons of a non-toxic liquid soap
- 20-30 drops of tea tree oil
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Wash well or soak, then rinse well (tea tree oil does have a **STRONG** smell!)

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DIY Sensory Items

Sensory Bottles

You will need:

Clear plastic bottles (water bottles are perfect)

Water

Food coloring or dye

Glitter or confetti

Oil (baby oil is clear, the lighter the better)

Glue



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Fill the bottles halfway up with water and add a few drops of food coloring or dye. Add your glitter or confetti then top off the bottle with oil. Dollop glue in the lid before screwing the lid back on and let dry completely before you use it!

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Chalk Blocks

You will need:

Scrap wood and chalkboard paint

The cool thing about these is it allows you to create specific activities and exercises based on the needs of the individual you are working with. You can draw specific emotions words on them and have the sort, create pictures, etc. You can set them up to build or be in puzzle format.

There are plenty of chalk pens out there for individuals who don't like the feel of chalk on their hands (and I don't blame them).

I used the scrap wood spacers that came in a shipping container and sprayed mine with chalkboard paint. That was it!



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My handmade chalk blocks and my Goodwill Duplo blocks

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Aromatherapy On The Cheap

What You Will Need:

Cotton balls, essential oil, a small container with a tight lid.

Lots of essential oils have calming, soothing effects. Put a couple of drops on something like lavender on a cotton ball and drop it into a small jar with a lid for the individual to use as a self soothe strategy. It's especially great if you can help train their calm response by using it after a mediation or mindfulness session, then can use it throughout the week when feeling anxious to help reinforce the calm and bring back the mindfulness state!



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DIY Weighted Blanket

You will need:

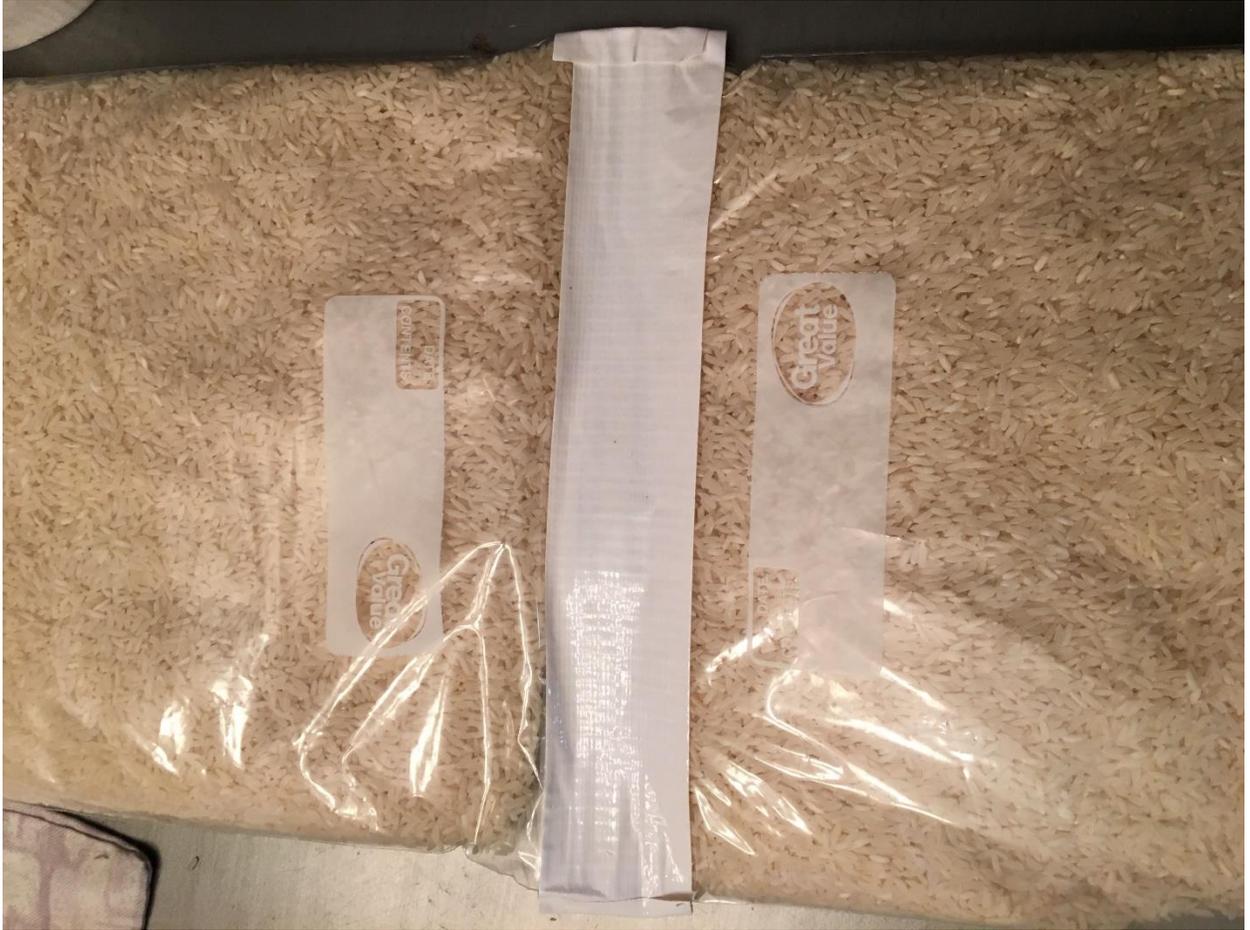
Gallon ziplock bags, uncooked rice or beans, duct tape, a pillow case, Velcro or other closures if the pillow case doesn't have a zipper.



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Fill bags with rice or beans, seal, then tape together with duct tape along the closure line (to prevent them opening and spilling). Slip inside a pillow case and seal shut.

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Emotions Connect Game

You will need:

A Connect Four Game, Emotions face stickers, and glue.

Stick the stickers inside the checkers pieces, adding a little glue to keep them securely in. The game is sensory because of the loud noise it makes inserting the pieces and the winner has to tell a story using all four emotions on their winning row of checkers which helps build an emotions vocabulary and expressive narrative skills. It can also be used to facilitate trauma narrative work in TF-CBT.



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