Sensory Circuits

How to support your child accessing sensory circuits in lock down FAQs

Aghhhhh My child has been doing sensory circuits every day at school. What are they?

Don't panic Sensory Circuits are a simple programme of motor-based activities which can support children to be ready and able to engage in learning activities. You don't need to be an expert to support your child to complete sensory circuits but sometimes it's helpful to have a little knowledge to help you to understand when different activities would be helpful.

Activities are split into three areas alerting, organising and calming

Alerting activities

These activities primarily stimulate the vestibular system in preparation for learning. These include spinning, bouncing, skipping and jumping activities.

Organising activities

These activities require multi-sensory processing and balance and demand the brain and the body to work together. The child needs to organise their body, plan their approach and do more than one thing at a time in a set sequential order. Activities such as climbing, hopping, balancing and throwing into a target may help to improve a child's focus, attention and engagement in the learning environment.

Calming activities

These activities give awareness of their body in space and increase the ability to self-regulate sensory input. The activities include heavy muscle work and deep pressure. They provide input to ensure that the children finish the session and return to learning as calm and well-regulated as possible.

Please see the end of this FAQ for ideas of activities for each section.

Do I need to be there when my child is doing sensory circuits?

This can depend on the age of your child and their motivation and ability to do the circuit. Sensory circuits were designed to be an adult led programme of sensory motor activities however this will change as good habits and skills are formed and as your child grows.

In general, younger children need to have more adult input than those in the older age group but you know your child and the activities they can achieve independently so can support as needed.

How long should Sensory Circuits take to deliver?

On average Sensory Circuits usually take between 15 and 20 minutes to complete but some children find it is longer and some children find it difficult to do for that long initially and can get distracted. This can often be the case when there has been a big change such as learning at home and we need to build up that time slowly again.

Some children need extra time spent on activities from a particular section for example in the morning they may need more time to help them to organise and additional activities from the organising section may be helpful. After lunch the mid-afternoon slump in energy may mean more activities from the alerting section would benefit.

But… don't make this a battle, activities need to be motivating to help to form good habits to help us to feel motivated and engaged ready for the day if all you can manage is a short walk round the block and a push up against the wall that's great.

My older child thinks the activities are too childish and refuses to do it. What can I do?

The original book that describes sensory circuits can seem to have a greater focus on activities which are better suited to younger children, that doesn't mean the principles of sensory circuits can't be used for all ages including adults. Think about when you get some fresh air in the morning if you walk to work or the station, or walking the dog around the park movement helps to set us up for the day and is a good healthy habit we all should continue.

At the end of this document are some ideas of activities which may suit our older children more, but don't be limited by these use the descriptions in the box and see what ideas you can come up with.

How can I make the Sensory Circuits fun?

Sensory Circuits work best when they are motivating and fun, you can change the routine or even do activities as part of a routine, go for a walk before school work challenge each other to race to the next lamppost, hop from one paving slab to the next without stepping on the line or tightrope walk along an imaginary line along the path.
For younger children using Simon says games, cosmic yoga on YouTube or go noodle can be a great option to make the activities fun and different.

Try having a kitchen disco followed by musical statues and then stretch it out and really wake up those senses.

I don't have much space; I can't do Sensory Circuits.

Some activities need more room than others, be inventive, they can be inside or outside, use walls or doors for wall pushups and jog on the spot. There are activities which can take place in the smallest spaces don't worry there's lots to choose from.

I don't have any equipment. What can I do?

Some of the activities require equipment but not everything, as we get older it's more important to be able to have good sensory habits and activities which we can access anywhere to help us to regulate our bodies and minds. The great outdoors is a brilliant resource for Sensory Circuits, having a jog around the park, find lines in nature to balance on, walk through a forest and balance on tree roots, wall pushes against a tree.

Playgrounds or outdoor gyms offer resources which could support a child to engage in activities that are alerting, organising and calming - please remember to consider health and safety and current COVID government guidance when you use these facilities.

I didn't find the answer I needed here. What can I do now?

Don't panic, there's always people to help. Get in touch with us at Open Arms Support contact M.cook@openarmsupport.co.uk or phone 01603 767498

Information and guidance on Sensory Circuits

All the activities suggested will support children's gross motor development as well as having a positive impact on their sensory processing development. When we think about gross motor skills we usually think of walking, running and jumping. But there is more to gross motor skills than the simple act of moving. Gross motor skills rely on effective sensory processing of several different skills and systems, especially input from the tactile, proprioceptive and vestibular systems. They also require an understanding of the properties of our physical world. Coordinated gross motor actions also need sufficient muscle tone, trunk control and muscle strength. If all of this is present, then production of "good" gross motor skills can occur with the addition of effective motor planning skills (praxis), creating the bridge between brain processing and motor control.
Based on the theories of sensory processing and sensory integration, and the practical considerations of providing structured sensory motor input within specific time limited sessions, the programme of activities has been divided into three sections. It is important to present the activities in this order and to finish the session with a calming activity. However, adjustments to the programme according to time constraints and individual need, by using more or less activities from each section can be made as appropriate. For example, a child may require several activities from the alerting section and then a final calming activity, or they may just need one alerting activity, several organising and several calming activities.

Alerting activities

The aim of the activities in the alerting section is to allow the fluid in the semi-circular canals in the ears to move about through jumping and head movement.

Run for fun

- Jog on the spot for an allotted time or jog around obstacles. Increase difficulty by increasing speed, jogging then running faster for 10 seconds and repeat, jog for 30 seconds and then jump on the spot.

Individual skipping or French skipping

- French skipping - one child jumps while two other children or adults stand at each end of the elasticated rope; the band is stretched around their legs at ankle height. Start by demonstrating and encouraging each child to complete just one jump, both feet together, into the middle of the rope area and one back out. Increase difficulty by increasing the number of basic jumps and/or the height of the jump by moving the position of the elastic higher up the calf of the holders' legs.

Jumping Jacks

- Jump from a crouched position with arms and legs out to the side and then return to the crouched position.
- Model this activity for the children. This is a bilateral activity that some children will find very challenging. They will need time and practice to perfect a jumping jack.

Hopscotch

- Create a course using tape on the hall floor or with hopscotch puzzle pieces.

- Initially model the activity for the children breaking it down into segments, so they can learn to hop and then jump. Increase difficulty by extending the length of the course or changing the size of the squares so they have to jump and hop further.

Giant steps

- Jumping from a higher place to a lower place e.g. from a bench onto a mat on the floor.
- Ensure that children taking part know the correct way to land on the crash mat (knees bent). Assist as required and supervise this activity at all times. Increase difficulty by extending the distance of the jump or trying different types of jump.

Step ups

- Stepping up and down on a solid bench or step-aerobics platform.
- Assist as required and encourage the child to alternate the lead leg.
- Increase difficulty by increasing the speed of the step-ups and including arm movements.

Big ball bouncing

- Bouncing seated on an exercise/fit ball.
- Position the ball in a small hoop to ensure that it stays within that space. When sitting on the ball, the child's hips and knees should be at 90 degrees and their feet firmly on the floor. Assist with postural stability as required. The balls should be inflated so that they are firm and offer minimal depression/change in shape when sat on.

Organising activities

The aim of the organising activities is to provide challenges involving multi-sensory processing, for example, moving and balancing, or throwing and balancing.

Logroll

- Laying straight with arms down by sides, roll along a line of gym mats, then commando crawl (on forearms as if under a net) back to the start point.
- Encourage the children to keep their body straight and their feet together and roll in a straight line along the mats. Increase the difficulty by extending the arms above the head and extending the distance of the roll. If a child cannot logroll, then they can crawl along the mats on hands and knees or crab walk.

Hand over hand pull

- In a seated position, children pull themselves along the floor using a hand-over-hand action along a long piece of rope attached to wall-bars.
- Initially, an adult can provide assistance with the hand-over-hand action. Increase the difficulty by increasing the length of the rope, number of repetitions or time against the clock.

Simon Says sequences

- Put together a series of actions e.g. hopping six times on one leg, jumping five times with both feet together and then clapping four times for the children to copy.
- Initially, keep it simple with just one action to copy at a time. Increase the difficulty by increasing the length of the sequence, doing actions where both hands are in different positions e.g. one on

the head and the other on the knee, or doing actions that involve both hands doing different things e.g. rubbing tummy and patting head.

Ribbon repetitions

- Using lengths of gymnastic ribbon, engage children in copying actions as demonstrated by an adult.
- Start with one ribbon and work on imitation – can the child copy what the adult does?
- Increase difficulty by increasing the complexity of the movements to be copied, changing body position to add variety and to challenge balance and co-ordination skills, and using a ribbon in each hand.

Big ball body balance

- Assist the child to position themselves with their tummy down on the exercise/fit ball. Walk the hands out as far as possible, without falling off, and back again to the start position.
- Increase difficulty by collecting a beanbag or ball and throwing it at a target during the middle stage of the exercise, when their body is fully extended on the gym ball.
- This activity needs to be done with control, slowly and consistently. Place a mat under the gym ball for comfort and safety.

Calming activities

The aim of the activities in the calming section is to provide heavy muscle work and/or deep pressure to the body. Some children require extra time in this section to ensure that they are calm and organised before returning to the classroom.

Press-ups

- Wall press-ups with extended arms, encouraging the children to repeat repetitions in a slow and controlled manner.
- Increase the difficulty by doing press-ups on the ground on all fours or with legs extended.

Wall bar hanging

- The child holds onto a wall-bar allowing their body to hang.
- Initially hang facing the bars and place a box under the child's feet so they can learn to hold on without taking their body weight.
- Increase the difficulty by increasing the amount of hanging time or facing the child away from the bars.

Push or pull

- Move a trolley or wheelbarrow, weighted with heavy objects, around a course of cones.
- Offer assistance as necessary and increase difficulty by increasing the length of the course and decreasing the distance between the cones.

Perfect planks

- The child lies prone (face down) on the mat, comes up onto their forearms and onto their toes, forming their body into a "plank" position.

- Start with helping the child to feel the correct position. Increase difficulty by increasing the duration of the hold, raising one leg and holding for a few seconds before lowering. Repeat with the other leg.

Mountain tunnel crawl

- Place the tunnel over the top of a pile of big blankets or cushions. Crawl through a tunnel, collect an item at the end, and return the item to a container at the start.
- Increase the difficulty by increasing the number of times they crawl through the tunnel or increasing the height of the "mountain".

Turtle shell

- With the child on all fours, place a pillowcase filled with about six beanbags or a large cushion, on their back. Encourage the child to crawl along a mat or pathway without dropping the turtle shell.
- Increase the difficulty by increasing the weight of the turtle shell or creating an obstacle course for the child to crawl through.

Ball squash

- The child lays prone (face down) on a mat. An adult rolls a large exercise/fit ball up and down the child, using maintained and consistent pressure.
- Do not allow the child to lie supine (face up), and let the child direct this activity within their tolerance levels.

Organising the activities

Initially, the session may just be one activity station from each section; alerting, organising and calming. When several activities are being used, set a time for each activity station. As a general formula, 2 to 3 minutes on each activity seems to be a good amount of time to keep the activities flowing, maintain the children's alertness and allow for the chosen activities to be completed within a 30 to 40-minute time frame. A whistle, a spoken command or a visual prompt may be used to move the children from one activity to the next. Remember that repetition is a wonderful learning tool and it is recommended to continue with the same activities each week until the children demonstrate improved skill and confidence. Even when progress is secure, it is useful to apply the 80:20 rule, so that the majority (approximately 80%) of the activities stay the same, whilst changing only a few (approximately 20%).

Sensory Circuits alternative ideas of activities for older children

	Example activity
Alerting activities These activities primarily stimulate the vestibular system in preparation for learning. These include spinning, bouncing, skipping and jumping activities.	• Running • Trampolining
Organising activities These activities require multi-sensory processing and balance and demand the brain and the body to work together. The child needs to organise their body, plan their approach and do more than one thing at a time in a set sequential order. Activities such as climbing, hopping, balancing and throwing into a target may help to improve a child's focus, attention and engagement in the learning environment.	• Darts – balancing on one leg to make it harder • Archery - from high kneeling or laying down to make it harder • 10 pin bowling • Clapping games increase speed • Cup game https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cup_game • Yoga -try sun salutation
Calming activities These activities give awareness of their body in space and increase the ability to self-regulate sensory input. The activities include heavy muscle work and deep pressure. They provide input to ensure that the children finish the session and return to the classroom as calm and well-regulated as possible.	• Planking • Press ups • Wall pushes • Chair push ups • Finger pulls • Self-squeeze