
What is multi-sensory stimulation?

Sensory stimulation is a way to help your child become more aware of their world. This is done by arousing or stimulating the 5 senses: seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling and tasting. Using all 5 senses is why it is called “multi-sensory.” It is used for children who:

- Have had a severe (very bad) brain injury.
- Function at a very low level.

What are the guidelines for multi-sensory stimulation?

Your child’s therapist will talk with you about how to do sensory stimulation. Some guidelines are listed below.

Before the session:

- Check your child’s heart rate, breathing rate and blood pressure. If they are higher than normal, wait until your child calms down before starting.
- Turn off the TV, music, cell phone and other things that make noise. Shut the door to reduce noise from the outside hall. Limit the number of people in the room. Turn the lights down low.
- Make sure your child is as comfortable as possible.

To start the session:

- Tell your child who you are and what you are going to do.
- Choose stimuli that have meaning to your child. This could include the voice of a family member or friend, their favorite music or their favorite smell (like perfume).

During the session:

- Slowly stimulate 3 to 5 of your child’s senses. Do this 1 at a time. Take your time.
- Use a calm, reassuring tone of voice when you talk to your child.
- Explain to your child what you are going to do. Use short sentences. Give your child extra time to think about what you say.
- Only 1 person should talk at a time.
- Give your child extra time to respond.
- Praise your child when they respond. Let them know you saw their response.
- Keep sessions short. They should only last about 15 to 30 minutes.
- Make sure your child does not get too much stimulation. Signs of this may include:
 - Increased heart or breathing rate
 - Skin flushing and sweating
 - Gets upset or agitated
 - Muscles harden and contract

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Sensory stimulation, continued

After the session:

- Give your child time to rest.
- Quiet moments are important for healing. Make sure to include time in your child's day when it is very quiet with no TV, music, talking or other things that make noise.

What kind of response could my child have?

Look at how your child responds while you are stimulating 1 sense, such as when you show them a picture. Look at how your child responds a few seconds after you remove the stimulus. It might take your child a few seconds to respond.

Multi-sensory stimulation is NOT a cure for coma. It is a way for you and your child's therapists and doctors to check on your child's progress.

- **No response** – your child does not react in any way that you can notice.
- **Generalized response** – your child's response to sensory input may:
 - Be inconsistent. Sometimes they respond and sometimes they do not.
 - Not be purposeful. Their reactions are not related to the input.
 - Be the same for all of sensory input, such as increased heart rate.
- **Localized response** – your child's response to sensory input is specific to the input. Their response may:
 - Be inconsistent. Sometimes they respond and sometimes they do not.
 - Be delayed. Your child takes a few seconds to respond.
 - Be purposeful. For example: your child may turn their head toward a sound or focus on an object.

What are some ideas to use for stimulation?

Some ideas to use for stimulation are listed below.

Visual stimulation (what your child sees)

- Have your child look at an object or picture.
- Hold it at least 8 to 12 inches from the center of their face.
- Move it slowly to one side and then to the other side. Watch to see if your child's eyes follow it. This is called visual tracking.
- Examples include pictures, common objects, favorite toys, toys that light up, a mirror, and favorite magazines or books. Avoid flashing lights and strobe lights.

Auditory stimulation (what your child hears)

- Talk to your child in a calm voice.
- Allow 1 person to talk at a time.

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Sensory stimulation, continued

- Tell your child the date, time, place and the reason they are in the hospital, if appropriate.
- Use TV or music for short periods during the day.
- Examples include singing, toys that make sound, everyday sounds, such as cars driving by and doors opening and closing, or reading them a familiar book.
- Allow for quiet times during the day. Turn off the TV and music, and create a quiet place for your child to rest.

Tactile stimulation (what your child feels)

- Use lotion to massage your child's legs and arms.
- Use a mix of:
 - Textures, such as clothing, blankets, stuffed animals and lotion.
 - Temperatures, such as warm and cold cloths.
 - Pressure, such as firm and light touch. Think about using an electric massage device for massage or giving a mini massage.
- Hug and comfort your child like you do at home.
- Change your child's position often when they are lying in bed and sitting on a mat or in a chair.

Olfactory stimulation (what your child smells)

- Use lotions, perfume and shampoos.
- Use the stimuli for no more than 10 seconds at a time.
- If your child has a tracheostomy (a tube in the neck to help them breathe), they may not be able to smell right now.
- Avoid things that smell bad.

Gustatory and oral stimulation (what your child tastes)

- Right now, your child is at risk for aspiration (food and liquids getting in the airway and lungs). Do **NOT** give your child anything to eat or drink.
- Learn how to give your child mouth care each day. Ask your child's nurse or doctor how to safely brush your child's teeth.
- Stimulate your child's lips and the area around their mouth with a washcloth.

Ask your child's speech-language pathologist for more ideas to use with your child. Also ask if you have any questions about sensory stimulation.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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