

TH Activity Plan – Sensory Bin

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ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will create a sensory bin using nature items that appeal to their senses - sight, touch, smell & hearing.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Assess & understand risk of trying & doing something new; learn about nature & its sensory elements

Physical: Practice vestibular sense of balance, muscle strengthening & development in an outdoor setting; improve hand-eye coordination

Psychological/Emotional: Confront fear of nature (biophobia), anxiety related to attachment disorder & emotional dysregulation

Sensory: Explore nature items as sensory experience; decrease sensory defensiveness; modulate responses to sensory inputs

Social: Explore nature with others; share items from nature with group

Materials

Lightweight bins, buckets or bags

Magnifying glasses

Gloves, wipes

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

- 1. Pre-Session Preparation:** Review outdoor area where nature items will be collected to ensure it is safe (see safety notes below). Gather bins, buckets or bags & other materials.
- Facilitator begins session by showing a sensory bin with items from nature that would be appropriate for children to collect. Prompts related to sensory elements like the smell of pine needles, the roughness of bark can guide participants before they collect items & suggest how they can experience nature using their senses. (During collection time, facilitator should also use prompts).
- Rules are outlined relating to boundaries for activity, no eating or tasting of items, use of gloves if desired, children always stay with an adult, stay within garden area. Ensure adults know the time limits for the activity.
- Distribute bins, buckets or bags to participants to begin search.
- Volunteers, parents or facilitator can supervise participants, assist where needed, introduce sensory items, use pruners to cut pine needles, small twigs & other items.
- Once the “hunt” is over, gather the group together, encourage each participant to show one of nature’s items, identifying what sense appealed to them (touch, smell, see, sound). Facilitator can engage group asking, “Who chose a pinecone? Who has something with a nice smell? Could you tell if this was a pinecone by just feeling it’s shape?”
- For participants working on sensory goals, facilitator can work one on one, discuss how to modulate sensory defensiveness, or remove gloves to touch sticky sap from trees where appropriate.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This TH activity is appropriate for most populations and can be particularly impactful, fun and therapeutic for children and youth. Adapted from an activity by A Shared Vision.org, it combines experiential learning, time outdoors, opportunities to take risks and make decisions, and it can be a

platform for therapeutic interventions. These can include working on sensory challenges—sensory defensiveness in all of the sense domains (touch, smell, hearing, sight, interoception, proprioception, vestibular sense). Other goals might focus on: sensory integration, expanding sensory tolerance, practice regulating and modulating responses to sensory inputs, increasing confidence in reacting to sensory inputs, and increasing tolerance for non-preferred tasks that involve sensory inputs like hands getting wet or sticky.

For children or adults with visual impairments, some of whom may be overwhelmed by new experiences, textures or smells, making a sensory bin, or, as an adaptation, experiencing a sensory bin, can address trepidation, easing fears by practicing touching and smelling nature items.

By using a sensory bin activity children and adults can explore sensory stimulation, an important element of TH. In addition to using senses, the activity may help with psychological or emotional goals related to experiences that bring joy, happiness, pleasure and enhance mood. Intellectual/cognitive goals might work towards assessing and understanding risks like trying and doing something new. Using nature, outdoor settings or items from nature can contribute to broader understanding of the world around us and the environment. Social therapeutic goals, working with a partner to create sensory bins, can provide opportunities to behave in appropriate, cooperative, supportive manner.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Review the outdoor area where the activity is to take place to eliminate safety issues, tripping hazards, and toxic plants (marked these as out of bounds). Gloves should be provided; children’s gloves are available to purchase online. Ensure rules are posted, such as no tasting or eating nature’s items! Small items may pose a choking hazard. Know Heimlich maneuver as a precaution and have first aid protocols in place for emergencies.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Once items have been gathered and shared with the group, several related activities can occur allowing for the integration of therapeutic interventions. These can include setting up a touching area in classroom or therapy room with open access for this engagement when participants/family want to touch items. Or a follow-up session using nature items for artwork—gluing items on paper or creating a wall mural, making mobiles, or plant pounding extracting natural dyes from flowers or leaves. Ideas for sensory bin activities geared for classroom and home schoolers are available online. These can be adapted for therapeutic horticulture.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Brulz, B. (2024). [50 sensory bin ideas for kids from craft supplies, the pantry, nature & more](#). Hands on as we Grow.
- Hatch-Rasmussen, C. (2024). [Sensory integration in autism spectrum disorders](#). Autism Research Institute.
- Reynandez, R. (2019). [Expand your classroom with nature-based sensory activities](#). Project Learning Tree.

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2024.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.