

Sensory Bins

the What
the How
& the Why



Sharla Kostelyk

Sensory Bins: the What, the How and the Why

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The Why

Early in life, learning takes place through engaging our senses. Babies begin to explore the world around them immediately after they are born.

Learning begins through taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell.

All children can benefit from further exploration and a purposeful approach to their sensory learning. Sensory bins are a wonderful way to achieve this right in your home or classroom. They are easy and inexpensive to create, can be stored and reused, and can benefit any child. Children from babies to as old as early teens enjoy playing and discovery through sensory tubs.

Sensory bins are something that can easily be incorporated into any routine and can be found in preschools, day cares, classrooms, homeschools, and play rooms everywhere! Children learn best by doing and sensory bins give them that chance.

These bins provide excellent opportunities for children to practice their fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination in such a way that they are not even aware that they are working on improving a skill.

They are also an excellent activity for language development in a very natural way. As an example, imagine trying to explain the concept of hot and cold to a child without them actually being able to experience them in a hands-on manner. The nature of sensory bins allows children to experience things in ways that they will remember and understand.

I'm going to be really honest and say that even though I understand the theory behind sensory bins, I don't really understand the appeal. It's just a bunch of stuff put together for what seems like no apparent reason, so I don't really get it. But I can tell you this...they work. I may not understand it, but my kids get hours of enjoyment out of them and since I started incorporating them into our home and classroom, they have improved their communication skills, become more coordinated, had marked improvement in their fine motor skills, and have been less agitated. We have different learning stations in our homeschool classroom and the sensory bin is by far the most popular one. I may not fully understand the importance of sensory bins, but it's hard to argue with the smiles on their faces!



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Sensory Bins and SPD

Some children have sensory issues and for those children, sensory bins are an effective form of therapy, helping them to better understand their bodies, their senses and the world around them.

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), also known as Sensory Integration Disorder or Sensory Integration Dysfunction (SID) is becoming increasingly common. It is not necessarily becoming more prevalent, but is becoming more recognized and therefore, diagnoses are on the rise.

Many factors put children at risk of SPD including:

- being on the autism spectrum
- having been institutionalized or hospitalized during critical periods of development (including extended hospital stays such as those common in premature babies and orphanage or group care living arrangements)
- having parents or siblings with SPD
- having FASD (fetal alcohol spectrum disorder), Fragile X, Down Syndrome, ADD/ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental disorders
- not receiving appropriate or enough stimulation to the senses during development
- being gifted
- being exposed to drugs prenatally
- other medical and environmental factors

Many children have varying degrees of SPD without their parents or other professionals even being aware of it.

Four of our seven children have SPD. This is higher than what would be represented in a typical household, however, five of our children are adopted and as is evident from the list above, adopted children are at much higher risk of developing SPD due to possible prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, neglect, or time spent in an orphanage. One of our sons has Aspergers, which is on the autism spectrum and he is also one of our four who have SPD. We have found our sensory work to be the most effective thing we have done to improve anxiety, behavior and learning in our home.

The What

What is a sensory bin? A sensory bin or sensory tub is simply an area designated for exploring through the senses. This does not have to take place just in an actual bin. There are many things from small portable containers to an entire garden or bathtub that can be transformed into a sensory bin. The only limits are your imagination!

Sensory bins are designed to encourage discovery and exploration through the senses, so when creating a bin, you want to keep in mind things that encourage: squeezing, pinching, tasting, smelling, organizing, exploring, scooping, creating, trying, pouring, spooning, grasping, pounding, measuring, stirring, manipulating materials, listening, imagining, separating, adding, trying, learning, guessing, touching, and having fun.

The actual play that takes place in a sensory bin should be completely child-directed. For younger children, you may want to provide ideas by demonstrating some things yourself such as scooping and pouring or burying and finding, but for the most part, sensory bins should be about discovery and imagination and should not have set rules (other than practical rules such as keeping the items in the container).

The contents of a sensory bin vary even more than the possible containers do. Typically, a sensory bin would have a base such as sand or water and then other items would be added into the base. You can tailor the contents of the bins to meet your child's needs and interests. As a teacher or home educator, you can also tailor the bins to go along with a particular theme, unit or learning opportunity.

When considering what to add to a sensory bin, think about all the senses, touch, sight, sound, smell, and even taste. Not every bin will incorporate every sense, but keeping this in mind is a great way to expand your own ideas and to make your bins as sensory rich as possible.

Almost anything can become the container for housing a sensory bin. On the following page are some ideas to help your imagination along.

Container ideas for sensory bins:

- plastic tubs
- empty margarine containers
- the sink
- the bathtub
- cookie sheet
- baskets
- muffin trays
- cake or loaf pan
- clay pots
- wooden box or crate
- plastic containers or bowls
- empty water bottles
- resealable plastic bags
- empty coffee canisters or peanut butter jars
- mason jars
- kiddie pool
- shoe box
- sand/water table
- garden
- small inflatable boat
- cooler
- pail or bucket
- sandbox
- empty diaper wipes container
- cups or mugs
- holiday tins
- cardboard box
- drawer

The How

Sensory bins are easy to assemble. Once you've chosen your container, you add a base and then add items to the base. It really is that simple. Most of my sensory bins take me 5 minutes to assemble because I already have a box where I keep bases for the bins and items to add. When making a themed bin, it can sometimes take longer as I may buy additional items to add.

Sensory bins do not have to be expensive to make. Many things can be found in your pantry and toy bin. There is a very good chance that you have the makings of a sensory bin in your house right now!

Before creating a bin, you may want to choose a theme and will want to know the age range and interests of the child or children who will be using it.

Things to keep in mind when creating a sensory bin:

- visually appealing
- diversity in textures
- incorporating as many senses as possible

You can add things to help with fine motor skills in allowing the kids to achieve practice in scooping, tweezing, grasping, pouring, manipulating, and moving.

You can also incorporate other learning opportunities such as matching, patterning, counting, letter and number recognition, and reinforcement of any concepts they have been working on.

There is no limit to the themes that a sensory bin can take on. Some really easy themes to use as a launching pad for your own ideas are colours, letters, seasons, holidays, shapes, books, countries, opposites, and animals. One thing we often do is to match up our sensory bin to what we are learning about in school such as magnets, dinosaurs, knights and castles, and zoo animals.

Think about words like squishy, bumpy, texturized, hard, soft, squeezable, tangible, edible, colourful, interesting, cold, warm, noisy, and tactile.

The main goal of a sensory bin should be to encourage sensory exploration, so don't get too caught up on how it looks. Once your child begins playing in it, things will quickly get moved around anyway. Keep it simple and let their imaginations do the work.

You will also see over time which types of items resonate best with your kids or students and be able to shape your future bins accordingly.

On the following pages, I have included ideas for what you can use as a base for your sensory tubs and also what kind of items you can add to them. These lists are not meant to be exhaustive but they may help you to get started. It may be helpful to print these lists for reference.

Base ideas for sensory bins

- water
- sand
- dirt
- mud
- snow
- dry beans (there are many varieties including some very interesting ones)
- cornmeal
- dry rice (this can be dyed any colour)
- dry pasta (this can also be dyed)
- confetti (easily make your own by saving your hole punch remains)
- foam pieces
- foam packing peanuts
- ice cubes
- Epsom salt
- aquarium rocks (be cautious...some brands stain hands blue!)
- water beads
- birdseed
- coffee beans or grounds
- dry lentils
- shredded paper
- popcorn kernels
- rocks
- cotton balls or cotton batting
- beads
- puzzle pieces
- pompoms
- pudding
- shaving cream
- tissue paper
- garland
- gelatin
- oatmeal
- salt (can be coloured using chalk)
- hamster shavings
- straw
- Easter grass
- instant snow
- moon dough / cloud dough
- marbles
- cereal
- cooked pasta
- potting soil
- bits of scrap paper
- corn starch or flour
- bubbles
- cream
- hair gel
- egg shells (these can be dyed using vinegar and food colouring)
- coloured water
- Kidfetti

Ideas for what can be included in a sensory tub

- polished stones
- seashells
- tongs
- scoops
- spoons
- sponges
- foam pieces
- leaves (real, silk or plastic)
- flower petals
- googly eyes
- sequins
- fabric
- tin foil
- magnets
- buttons
- feathers
- costume jewelry
- pine cones
- alphabet letters
- pipe cleaner
- plastic fruit or vegetables
- ribbon curls
- glass beads
- plastic coins
- small toy animals
- toy cars, construction vehicles
- styrofoam balls or cones
- small erasers
- cinnamon sticks
- mini magnifying glass
- bow
- nubby balls
- scented candles
- straw pieces
- small mirror
- wooden blocks
- action figures
- small figurines
- funnels
- small jars
- cookie cutters
- bath toys
- bells
- bubble wrap
- small instruments
- twigs
- game pieces
- felt pieces
- scrub brushes
- sandpaper
- spice jars
- stickers (scented ones)
- empty baby food jars
- corks
- shakers
- rocks
- colander
- play dough or moon dough
- candy
- sand toys
- clothespins
- nails, nuts & bolts
- dice
- marbles
- bean bags
- hair curlers
- water balloons
- Wiki sticks
- glow sticks
- [sensory balls](#)

Pictured below are just a few of the sensory bins that I have made over the years. You can view all of these along with more than 25 additional tubs including item summaries and any applicable instructions on [this page](#). You can also find many more ideas on my [Sensory Bins Pinterest Board](#).



Money Saving Tips

Sensory bins do not have to be expensive to make and there are many ways to make them for next to nothing.

Buy right after holidays such as Valentine's Day for deeply discounted prices. Check clearance bins. Dollar stores are excellent places to find containers, bases and items for sensory bins and all sorts of other sensory play as well. You will find that once you are on the lookout for items to be used in sensory bins, you will begin to think outside the box and find things in the most unusual places. I have even purchased items in the hardware store and pet store!

Another place that is a treasure trove for sensory items is bulk bin stores. Often items there such as dry beans, rice and pasta are considerably less expensive than they would be in a grocery store. I have been able to find unusual types of beans that have really interesting textures and colours at our local bulk bin outlet.

Use coupons or be on the lookout for sales to purchase the stackable plastic containers with lids to store your bins in. Buying multiple of the same type of container can save space and looks less cluttered.

The best way to save on items for your tubs is by searching through what you already have. Dig through your toy box, your kitchen utensil drawer, your closets, your pantry, your costume jewelry, your party supplies, your cupboards, and even your garage.

Save things like bubble wrap, foam packing pellets, cardboard boxes, tissue paper, styrofoam from take-out containers, scrap tin foil, extra buttons and keys, interesting wrapping paper, and corrugated cardboard from the bottom of pizza boxes.

Soon it will become second nature to be thinking about material for your upcoming sensory bins!

Storage

You can help contain the mess by putting the bin on a large plastic bag, shower curtain liner, or mat on a floor that can easily be swept, or you can place the sensory bin outside. Shower curtain liners can be purchased at the dollar store.



I store the bases for my sensory tubs in resealable plastic bags. This includes my coloured rice and pasta, dry beans, my go-to combination*, seasonal bases such as Easter grass, popcorn kernels, and cotton balls. When the kids are finished with a bin, I put the base back in its bag and can re-use it the next time. There are times when this isn't possible such as when the base gets wet or really dirty, but re-using bases saves time and money.

*My go-to combination is a mixture of dry lentils and dried garbanzo beans (chickpeas) as it gives the perfect base for something like a dinosaur, construction or animal bin.

I also store items that I may want to use in future sensory bins such as sponges, buttons, rocks, odds & ends, extra keys, small toys, scented foam stickers, scrub brushes, and anything I have purchased with a particular theme bin in mind. I store my bases and the additional items in a large plastic tote that is labelled “sensory bins”.

I usually make a new sensory bin every week and then disassemble it before making a new one. If a particularly popular bin is still being played with daily, it may be two or three weeks before I make a new one.

Many people choose to make several bins and keep them. If this is what you decide to do, store sensory bins in stackable containers with lids on them that can easily be stowed away and rotate them. Even having four basic bins along with one seasonal one that gets changed out and then rotating between these will keep kids interested.

Another suggestion is to make sensory bins and when your kids tire of them, trade them with another family or group of families for a fresh supply. This is also a good way to get fresh ideas as you see what others add to their bins.

Additional Tips

If you are short of ideas for bins or themes, let the kids make suggestions, Google “sensory”, come and see [our family’s most popular bins](#), or visit my [Sensory Bins Board on Pinterest](#).

To add the sensory element of smell, consider scented candles or adding scent to rice.

Pre-made sensory bins make wonderful gifts for kids or for families! You can make several in stackable containers and set the child up with hours of potential play and learning!

There are many ways to extend the sensory bin outside of the actual container such as making a sensory rich craft activity to go with the bin’s theme, making a fun snack to coordinate or even providing a hat, apron or dress-up costume to add to the fun. As an example, I provided a pirate hat for our Pirate sensory bin, a construction hat for our Construction bin and a shield and cape for the Knights and Castles bin. These all made the experience even more interactive and fun!

Cautions

These are some pointers to keep in mind when it comes to sensory bins:

-choking hazard - Sensory bins need to be created with the age of the children using them in mind. Many of the items commonly found in sensory bins are choking hazards for babies and toddlers. For children who are under the age of three, use items without small parts and items that are safe to be chewed on.

-water and a rice based sensory bin do not go well together - This is something that I have learned first-hand! While my own kids have been told not to add water into our sensory bins, there have been a few times when other children who were visiting have added water into our sensory tubs and when they had a rice base, particularly a coloured rice base, the result was a big mess! It also meant that I could not keep the rice to be used in a future bin. Learn from my experience!

-be prepared for a mess - My kids are getting older now and they are usually pretty good about keeping the items from the sensory bin inside the container but when there are toddlers visiting, I can prepare myself to be finding and sweeping up dried beans or pasta for days! When I create a liquid based bin, I usually do so in the summer and keep it out on the deck.

-avoid sharp objects - Similar to being aware of the potential for choking hazards, it is also wise not to put any sharp objects in the bins, particularly as the objects could become buried under the base in the bin and could poke or cut a child exploring in the bin.

-be conscious of allergies - Some children who have an allergy to nuts will also react to creams that are scented with oil from nuts. There are also children with allergies to environmental things such as grass and leaves. If that is the case, don't add anything to your bins that may cause a reaction.

Helpful Recipes

Gingerbread Play Dough Recipe

5 cups flour
1 cup salt
6 Tbsp. oil
2 1/2 tsp. alum
3 pkg. unsweetened orange Koolaid
3 1/2 cups boiling water
6 Tbsp. instant coffee
1 Tbsp. **each** of cinnamon, ginger, and cloves

Mix Koolaid, flour, spices, alum, and salt in a bowl. Pour in oil and mix until crumbly. Combine water and instant coffee and pour over dry ingredients. Mix well. Lasts well in an airtight container or resealable bag.

Chocolate Play Dough Recipe

1 1/2 cups flour
1 cup salt
1/2 cup cocoa
2 Tbsp. cream of tartar
2 Tbsp. vegetable oil
2 cups water

Add all ingredients to a saucepan and cook over medium-high heat, stirring constantly until it forms a ball and your arms are ready to fall off! Scoop it onto wax paper and allow it to cool. When cool enough, knead it and it is ready to play with. This dough keeps soft for months if stored in an airtight container or resealable bag.

Regular Play Dough Recipe

1 cup flour
1 cup water
1/4 cup salt
2 tsp. cream of tartar
1 Tbsp. vegetable oil
food coloring or food paste
optional: a few drops of essential oil for scent (I often use vanilla or lavender)
optional: glitter or sprinkles for texture

Put all the ingredients except essential oil into a pot and stir. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until it forms a ball. As soon as it goes into a ball, take it off the heat and dump it onto the counter on wax paper. When it is cool enough, add essential oil and/or glitter or sprinkles and knead it until it is nice and soft. Store in an airtight container or resealable bag.

Moon Dough Recipe

8 cups of flour
1 cup of baby oil

Mix together. That's it. Really.

If you want to get complicated, you can add colour using chalk pastels.

(This one can be a bit messy but is lots of fun. If you're concerned about mess, this can be a great outdoor summer sensory activity!)

Instructions for Colouring Rice or Pasta

This is so simple to do! All that is needed is:

rice or pasta
food colouring
rubbing alcohol

Put dry pasta or rice in a large resealable plastic bag. Put a few Tablespoons of rubbing alcohol into the bag. This is to help with the drying.

Drop in some food colouring (the amount of drops will vary depending on how dark you want the finished product to be. You can always add more so start with just a few drops).

Seal the bag and shake. When well mixed, spread the rice or pasta onto a cookie sheet to dry and then put back into a resealable bag to store. I keep a variety of dyed rice and dyed pasta in various shapes to use in sensory bins. Having them on hand makes things much easier.

You can also add scent to the rice by adding a few drops of essential oils into the bag before you shake it.

Rice dyed green can look like grass in a bug or Spring themed sensory bin!

About the Author



Sharla Kostelyk is first and foremost, a wife, the mother of 7 and daughter of a loving God. When she isn't writing or homeschooling, she is reading, pretending that she is competing on a cooking show, spending far too much time on Pinterest, or spending time with friends and family, sipping tea and eating chocolate.

Sharla is the author of [That These Two Will Live: an Adoption Memoir](#) and [Shield: A Framework of Self-Care for Foster and Adoptive Families](#).

She is an adoption advocate and the founder of [Adoption Magazine](#). She blogs about finding joy amidst the chaos at [The Chaos and The Clutter](#).

You can also find her on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Google+](#), and [Pinterest](#).