Little ones under 3

Pack 3: Sensory exploration

Five play ideas for babies (0–1) and toddlers (1–3), at home or at nursery.

How to use these cards

Each card has a toddler version and a simpler version for babies. Children develop at their own pace, so go by what your child is doing, not just their age. These are invitations, never tests.

Keeping it safe

Stay within arm's reach the whole time. Anything smaller than a 2p coin can choke a young child, so check every object against a real 2p if you're unsure.

A look, reach, point, sound, sign or walking away all count as answers. Stop or change the activity if your child seems overwhelmed, and offer more if they're seeking more.

I'm a parent navigating the SEND system, not a lawyer or a doctor. I share what works for us and translate the rules to save you time. Sources for these ideas are listed on the **Little ones under 3** page at little-wires.co.uk.

Idea 3.1

Treasure basket

Toddlers (1–3)

A low box of large, safe household objects to empty, fill, bang and carry. Add containers to put things in.

For babies (0–1)

Once sitting: a shallow basket of four to six large, different objects to mouth, hold and drop.

You'll need

Large wooden spoon, small metal bowl, clean natural sponge, large pine cone, silicone cupcake case, large lid with smooth edges.

Safety

Every item bigger than a 2p, no sharp edges, no peeling paint, nothing that comes apart. Wash regularly. Remove anything that breaks or sheds.

A look, reach, point, sound, sign or walking away all count as answers. Stop or change the activity if your child seems overwhelmed, and offer more if they're seeking more.

Idea 3.2

Scoop and pour with water

Toddlers (1–3)

A washing-up bowl or baking tray with a few centimetres of water. Large cups, a jug, a ladle and a big sponge to scoop, pour and squeeze.

For babies (0–1)

Sitting with support, a shallow tray of a little warm water to splash with their hands, or a sponge to squeeze at bath time.

You'll need

Washing-up bowl, jug, large cups, ladle, sponge, towel.

Safety

Only a few centimetres of water. Stay within arm's reach the whole time; babies can drown silently in very little water. Empty it straight after.

A look, reach, point, sound, sign or walking away all count as answers. Stop or change the activity if your child seems overwhelmed, and offer more if they're seeking more.

Idea 3.3

Tummy time with a face and a mirror

Toddlers (1–3)

Lie on your tummies together, on the floor or over a cushion, looking at a board book, a big photo of family faces or an unbreakable mirror.

For babies (0–1)

Supervised tummy time on your chest, over your lap or over a rolled towel, with your face at their eye level. From about 3 months, put a large soft toy or unbreakable baby mirror just in reach.

You'll need

Rolled towel, unbreakable baby mirror, large high-contrast picture cards, a soft toy made for babies (CE or UKCA marked).

Safety

Baby awake, on a firm flat surface, adult watching throughout. Stop when they're tired or upset.

A look, reach, point, sound, sign or walking away all count as answers. Stop or change the activity if your child seems overwhelmed, and offer more if they're seeking more.

Idea 3.4

Feely fabrics

Toddlers (1–3)

A box of fabric squares (velvet, towelling, cotton, something crinkly) to pull out, stroke, hide under or ignore.

For babies (0–1)

Lay two or three different fabric squares on the floor for the baby to touch with hands and feet.

You'll need

Offcuts or old clothes cut into squares about tea-towel size.

Safety

Squares, not long strips. No fraying threads, sequins, buttons or fluffy fabric that sheds. Watch for mouthing. Some children love textures and some avoid them: touching with one finger, poking with a spoon or just watching all count.

A look, reach, point, sound, sign or walking away all count as answers. Stop or change the activity if your child seems overwhelmed, and offer more if they're seeking more.

Idea 3.5

Kitchen band (loud or quiet)

Toddlers (1–3)

Bang a saucepan with a wooden spoon, or tap a cardboard box. Offer a quiet version too, like tapping a cushion.

For babies (0–1)

Make a sound and pause to see if the baby looks towards it. Let them bang a wooden spoon on a tray.

You'll need

Saucepan, wooden spoons, cardboard box, a large plastic tub with the lid taped down (adult-checked).

Safety

No homemade shakers filled with rice, pasta or beads. For children who dislike loud sounds, keep it quiet and let them leave.

A look, reach, point, sound, sign or walking away all count as answers. Stop or change the activity if your child seems overwhelmed, and offer more if they're seeking more.

Safety rules card

Keep this card with the sensory activities.

Every time

An adult stays within arm’s reach the whole time.

Only use objects bigger than a 2p coin. Check against a real 2p if you’re unsure.

Throw away anything that cracks, splits or sheds.

Never give under-3s

Buttons, coins, button batteries, magnets, balloons, water beads, marbles, beads, dried pasta, rice, lentils or oats, plastic bags or cling film, ribbons, strings or cords long enough to go round a neck, and homemade “sensory bags” of any kind.

Button batteries

If you think your child has swallowed a button battery, go to A&E straight away.

The 2p rule

Anything smaller than a 2p coin can choke a young child. Check every object, every time.

Worried? Talk to your health visitor or GP.

If something worries you, including your child losing skills they used to have, or how they move, communicate, play with others, hear or see, you don’t need to wait for a review.

More free guides and activities at **little-wires.co.uk**