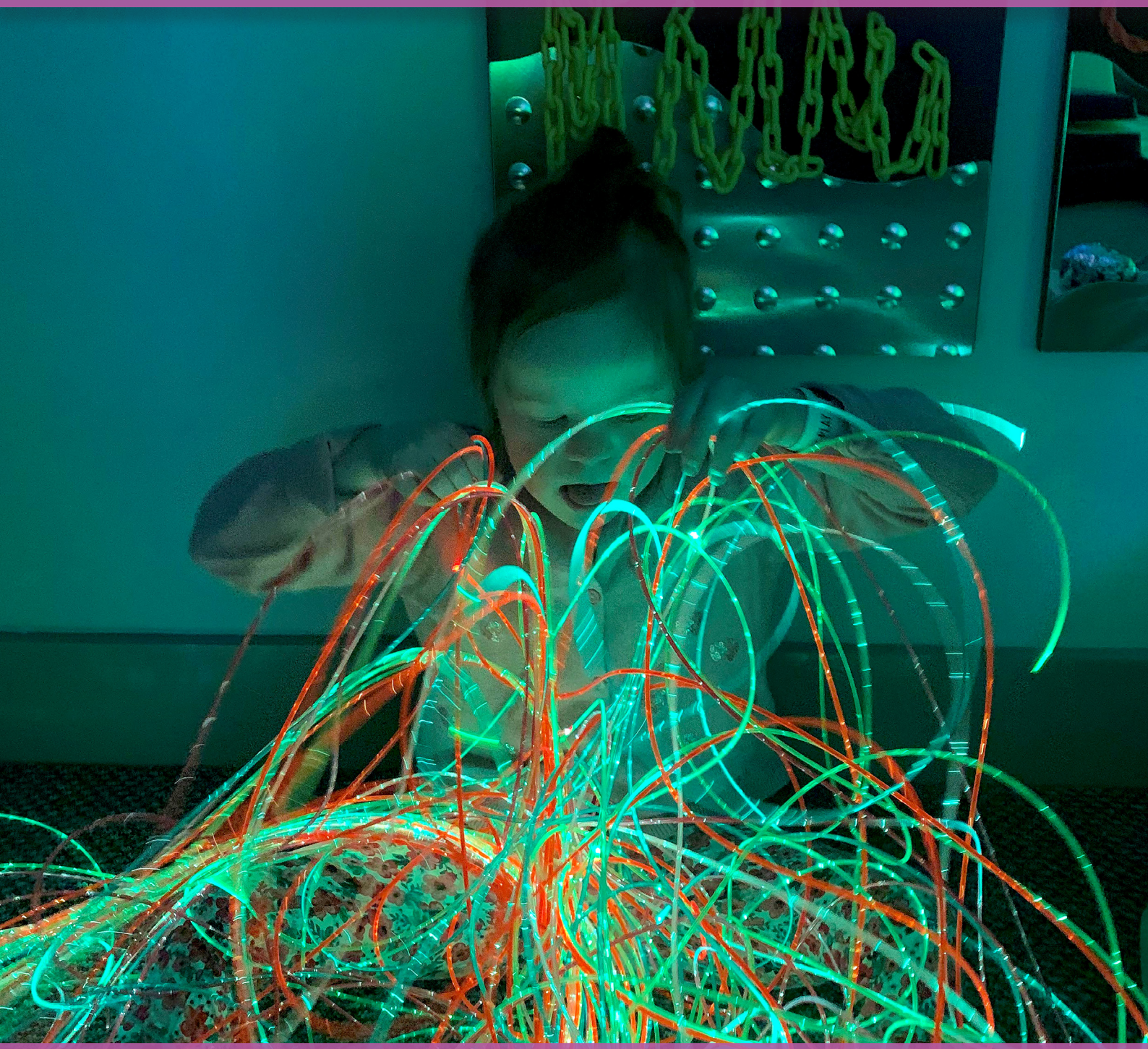
SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS THROUGH PLAY



PlayBoard NI - Leading the Play Agenda

www.playboard.org

Supporting children with additional needs through play

Play is incredibly valuable for all children, it allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity and physical, cognitive and emotional strength. For a child with an additional need, their specific need may sometimes make it difficult for them to fully enjoy the experience of independent play without help. These additional need/s may be caused by physical, learning, behavioural, sensory and complex challenges.

Children's needs vary, so as the parent or carer who understand your child's needs best; adapt play activities to meet individual abilities, likes and dislikes.

The right to play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). All children are morally and legally entitled to play, whatever their culture, impairment, gender, language, background, behaviour or need.

This briefing includes play ideas suitable for children with additional needs and is aimed primarily at parents/carers within the home environment. However, the ideas within could equally be used by practitioners and childcare providers to support children with additional needs through play.

- **Create time and space for play**
  Allow children time to play freely (in their own way) and if you can, let them play outdoors as much as possible. Free play will help children express their emotions and help them to make sense of what is going on around them in their daily lives. Playing outdoors allows children space and can be good for emotional health and well-being.

- **Create a routine for your child**
  A lack of routine and structure can make some children feel anxious, especially if they have additional needs. Try to create a routine together and be sure to make plenty of time for play each day.

- **Do things together**
  Playful activities can help children to express their feelings and anxieties. Make time during your day to play together for short periods. Practical, fun play activities which involve different senses are great for many children with additional needs.

- **Have fun**
  When planning play opportunities, remember that play should (as much as possible) be 'chosen freely, personally directed by the child and intrinsically motivated'. Support your child and try to give them a sense of freedom; enabling them to decide what and how to play as much as possible (dependant on ability and need). Have fun!

Play ideas

Many play activities can be modified or adapted to cater for children with additional needs and by providing lots of opportunities to play in different ways, you can help children identify with what they like and dislike best. All children's needs will differ so make sure that any activities that you choose are suitable to the age, stage and ability of the child. Parents and carers will know the child's likes and dislikes best so have fun together choosing what play activities will suit the child best.

Always be aware of choking – toys/loose parts intended for children under 36 months must not present a choking risk – a test can be carried out using a 'small parts cylinder' (toys or parts of toys/loose parts that can fit entirely inside the cylinder are identified as choking hazards).

Lava lamp bag or bottle

An excellent way to engage your child's visual perception skills.

You will need:

- 2 large freezer bags doubled or an empty plastic bottle
- Baby oil
- Food colouring
- Tape

Method:

1. Fill the bag or bottle a quarter full with baby oil
2. Add a few drops of liquid food colouring
3. Close and tape

Smell soother

Engaging the sense of smell can have a soothing effect for anxious children and aid the management of stress. Lavender is particularly good but you can use anything from around the house e.g. coffee beans or orange zest.

You will need:

- Several cups of uncooked rice
- A bag or container
- Lavender essential oil (or your substitute)
- Purple (or any) food colouring

Method:

1. Place the rice in container
2. Add several drops of food colouring
3. Mix thoroughly until rice is coloured
4. Add about 4 drops of lavender oil (or substitute) per cup of rice and mix

Your child can run his/her fingers through the rice in a large tub, or you can place the contents into a sock or other fabric pouch to add ‘squish’.

Sensory bottles

A sensory bottle is easy to make – it can provide some visual calm for your child when he/she shakes it or turns it around in their hands. Plus, it can be tailored to your child's interests to make it more appealing. Smaller bottles can be easier to handle.

You will need:

- A clean, empty plastic water bottle with the label removed
- Tape
- Warm water
- Glitter (or other objects)
- Food colouring
- Baby oil or cooking oil

Method:

1. Fill bottles with water, add oil
2. Add glitter or small items like letters, pebbles, marbles
3. Seal the lid with tape to keep intact

Make food fun!

Allow your child the freedom to explore food without the pressure of eating (especially good for picky eaters). Evidence has shown that after a while, your child may decide to taste some of the foods they normally wouldn't eat. Remember to make it an optional 'eating' game that is full of fun.

You will need:

- A wide range of foods from your fridge or cupboard with different shapes and colours, e.g. dry items, fresh fruit, vegetables
- Sheet of paper or paper bag

Remember:

Consider allergies and choking risks dependent on your child's age/stage of development.

Method:

1. Lay your items out on paper and allow your child to sort them either by colour (coloured cereal, berries), shape (circular cereal, crisps, bread sticks, square crackers), or maybe eventually by flavour (sour lemon, sweet orange, spicy pepper)
2. Practice pattern forming or create pictures. Squish it if you like!
3. Put a variety of fruits and vegetables into a paper bag and ask your child to pull out the different textures (fuzzy - kiwi fruit, peach; smooth - tomato, apple; bumpy - orange, mandarin; squashy - strawberries, watermelon; hard - apples, potatoes)

Homemade fizzy dough

Tactile sensory play can help overcome aversions or fears and is a great activity for children. Fizzy dough is a fun variation on other sensory doughs. It feels cold to the touch and fizzes when it comes into contact with vinegar!

You will need:

- 1/2 cup flour
- 1/2 cup baking soda
- 2 tablespoons oil
- Oil based food colouring (gel/liquid works too but is not as vibrant)
- Vinegar

Method:

1. Mix the oil and about 5 drops of colour in a bowl
2. Add the flour, mix, then add the baking soda
3. Use your fingers to get the oil perfectly distributed

To make the fizz fill a squirter bottle with vinegar and let the kids at it!

You can make rainbow dough by adding different colours or add essence to make scented dough. Be creative! Add pasta or rice to make patterns in the dough or add cutters to make shapes.

Ribbon wands

Great fun for children regardless of their abilities and very easy to make too.

You will need:

- Plastic or wooden wand or stick (anything safe and smooth from around the house or garden)
- Ribbons or material strips
- Rubber bands

Method:

1. Twist rubber bands around one end of the stick or wand - close to the end
2. Attach ribbons or any cut material to the plastic or wooden stick/wand
3. Twist more elastic bands to stop the ribbons falling off the wand
4. If you don’t have elastic bands just tie some ribbon on tightly

Homemade music

Lots of children love to make noise and it can be a great stress buster too (for children and adults alike)!

You will need:

- Pots, pans and plastic containers can be used as drums or get an empty cylinder (like a baby food container) and cover the open end with paper, plastic or tape and secure with elastic bands
- Wooden spoons, spatulas and sticks can be used as beaters for drums
- Old CDs can be made into cymbals – just add ribbon and tape
- Add dried rice, buttons or beads to small containers or plastic bottles to make sensory shakers

Physical activity and games

Physical activity is important for emotional well-being; it alerts the nervous system, increases focus, and releases stress chemicals. Some children with a Learning Disability or ASD may rely on physical movement to regulate. They may also have physical needs that require regular stretching. Exercise can be fun, remember to consider your child's age, stage and ability.

Family dance sessions:
Let your child plan the play list, full of his/her favourite songs and add a 10-minute dance workout to your daily routine.

Circuits course for the whole family:
Whether it's outside in the garden or in a small living room, create work stations to focus on lifting and moving. Consider the needs and ability of your child. Use bubble wrap on the ground for wheelchairs to move back and forth over. Lift and drop sponges into containers. Consider the motor function of your child and use what you have around the house to create repetition so he/she can join you in a circuit of exercise.

Skittles:
Create skittles out of empty toilet roll or kitchen roll holders. Decorating them together makes it even more fun! This can be played on a table-top or on the floor. The ball can be thrown or rolled. If your child needs assistance to roll - cut old piping in half to create a shoot or create a V shape using a long piece of cardboard.

Snakes and ladders:
If you have space outside, draw your own snakes and ladders game with chalk. Make the squares wheelchair, walker or buggy sized.

Yoga:
Yoga can be a great relaxer for children. It can be done indoors or out, and again be adapted to suit children's ability. Children could try yoga based on a dinosaur theme, using their bodies to create dinosaurs.

Five important exercises for children with autism

Bear crawls:

Can help develop body awareness, improve coordination and builds strength in the trunk and upper body. Start by kneeling on all fours, with hands under shoulders and knees under hips. Extend legs until slightly bent. Spread your fingers wide to have optimal contact with the floor. Walk using your feet and hands across the floor approximately 10-20 feet. Maintain this position and walk backward in the same fashion.

Medicine ball slams:

Can increase core strength and balance and help improve coordination. It may also have therapeutic benefits. Begin in a standing position, holding a medicine ball in both hands. Raise the ball up overhead with straight arms. Slam the ball down to the ground with as much force as possible. Bend at the knees to pick up the ball and repeat the movement 20 times.

Star jumps:

Jumping tasks are great full-body exercises that help improve cardiovascular endurance, strengthen legs and the core, and increase body awareness. Begin in a squatting position with knees bent, feet flat on the floor, and arms tucked in toward the chest. Quickly jump up from squatting, extending arms and legs wide into an X. On landing, return to starting position with arms and legs tucked in. Repeat as many as you can.

Arm circles:

Arm circles are a great upper-body exercise that helps increase flexibility and strength in the shoulders and back and can be done anywhere with no equipment. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart, arms by your side. Extend arms straight out to the side at shoulder height. Start making small circles with the hands, keeping the arms straight. Gradually make the circles bigger and bigger, creating the movement from the shoulders. Repeat 20 times, then repeat in other direction.

Mirror exercises:

Encourage the child to mimic what another person is doing, which can increase coordination, body awareness, and social skills. Stand to face a partner, hands by your side. Have your partner start making slow movements with their arms - try starting with circles and progressing to more complex patterns.

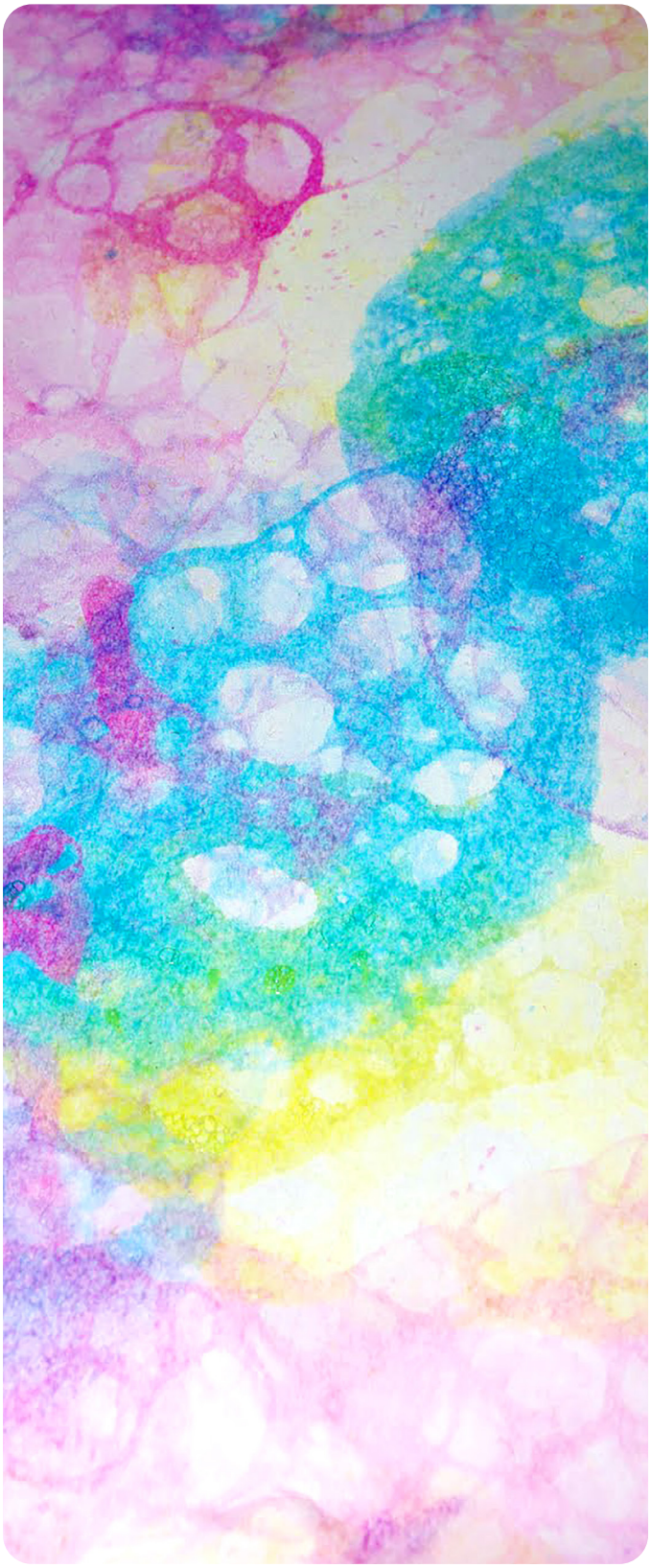
Other beneficial exercises can include:

Jumping jacks, crab-walks, balancing on one leg, touching your toes and reaching the sky, catching and throwing a ball, hoovering and mopping!

Source: Healthline Parenthood (https://www.healthline.com/health/exercises-for-kids-with-autism)

Arts and crafts

Many children love some form of arts and craft activity and most can be adapted to suit your child. Joshua (age 10) and his mum have given us some ideas of the arty things they love to do:



"Bubble art and spray paint art - this is just normal bubbles with children's paint in them. Blow the bubbles onto paper, old rolls of wallpaper etc. Then pop them. We also use bowls of paint and bubbles to put blobs onto paper using a straw. This can also be done with food colouring, water and a touch of cornflour if the children are likely to suck up the paint.

If you don't have bubbles you can still do blow paint art - just water down paint, spoon onto paper and blow with a straw to create patterns, and shapes. Add baby oil to the pictures to separate the colours.

Joshua enjoys seeing if he can find animals in the art when they dry. Then he adds details in sharpie to make them animals or characters etc.

Spray bottle art is great. We keep old washing up liquid bottles, wash them out and add watered down paints to them. Let them spray away, then afterwards use markers to make characters or animals out of the shapes you have made."

Using standard utensils can sometimes be difficult for many children. Getting a roll of Dycem to go under a page or sticking it down with white tac can help. Chubby paintbrushes or utensil holder straps can be found online relatively easily. Alternatively source some foam tubing or wrap pens and brushes in rubber bands to make them easier to grip.

Remember play is essential for children's health; it has substantial benefits for children's holistic development and emotional well-being. Play is particularly beneficial during times of anxiety, stress and adversity (such as Covid-19) as it provides a sense of control and independence; it helps children make sense of things they find hard to understand and it supports their coping and resilience.

Make time for play every day

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Creating Change Together

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