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Sensory play moves online to help children get through the pandemic

Multisensory learning specialists are translating their work to the digital domain

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For two-year-old Skye, who attends St Michael's House, and her mother Georgia, sensory play was a bonding experience.

Over the course of the past year, we have become acutely aware of our senses. Distance from loved ones has us longing for touch. Smell and taste are now noted for their importance in diagnosing Covid-19. We mute and unmute video calls.

Sensory experiences are important to all of us, but, for children, play that evokes the senses is a crucial aspect of their development. It allows them to explore and learn about their bodies and the world around them.

Sensory play does not have to be complicated. It might simply involve playing with food, digging worms in the garden, listening to birdsong or completing an obstacle course. However, for some children with complex medical needs, as [Audrey Fagan](#), a preschool teacher in the CRC school, explains, they may not have gone through the “typically developmental stages of exploration . . . putting their hands in food, messing around with messy spaghetti, because maybe they haven’t had the ability to feed themselves”.



Fagan recreates these experiences through sensory play and multisensory learning in her preschool class. This can range from pouring water into a tin can, tapping or brushing bodies, to full sensology workouts where they engage each of the senses: “We wake them up.” The most important thing is that it’s individualised to the needs and likes of the child: “When you see that happy engagement with the child, you know you’re doing the right thing . . . When you are happy, you learn.”

Audrey notes that, in the past year, with social distancing, school and service closures, it has been challenging to translate this sensory experience to the digital world.

Mairead Naughton, an early-intervention specialist at St Michael’s House, agrees: “It was so difficult for families. We immediately heard about, within three weeks I’d say, sleep disturbances and restlessness during the day.”

Creativity

Despite the challenges, the specialists took to the task with great energy and creativity. Between WhatsApp, Zoom, Facebook Live, phone calls, letters and activity packs, they ensured they maintained contact with the children and their families.

At St Michael's House they have developed online multisensory stories which Naughton adopted in her teaching, using a mirroring approach with parents at home. On one side of the screen Naughton tells a story and on the other side parents mirror Naughton's actions with their child at home. Using simple props, such as a fan, water spray, sound recordings or pieces of food they are able to recreate sensory experiences.

Naughton says the multisensory experience was particularly important this year as many children have barely been outside their door the past 12 months – “So to be walking on the grass or to be outside at the beach, that's all foreign to a lot of kids.”

They aim to make the multisensory stories fun and include humour where they can. Naughton says: “You start talking about going to granny and grandad's and end up with dinosaurs on the moon” and there are usually lots of hugs involved.

Bonding experience

For two-year-old Skye, who attends St Michael's House, and her mum Georgia, sensory play was a bonding experience. “I have a licence to be silly and we laugh a lot together,” says Georgia. “It has brought out her personality. By using sound recordings Skye can ask for ‘more’ and make choices and she just loves showing off that new skill.”

Props are easily accessible – Naughton posts props to family homes, though most will be found already in the family home. Sensory toys are also available to purchase online – Marie Brennan from the early-intervention social enterprise Sensational Kids says sales of sensory toys through their shop have “exploded” since the start of the pandemic.

Naughton says planning and preparation are crucial. “One size fits nobody and what works for you this month might not work for you next month, so it’s a lot of flux and change,” she says. “We really asked parents what worked for them and we tried to adapt. We’re very conscious of the pressure the families are under because they have to home school all their other children too.”



Skye.

Parents have been fundamental to the digital transition. [Jess Kennedy](#), who had been utilising online platforms in her work as an occupational therapist through her website [myotandme.com](#) prior to Covid-19, says: “It was just trying to find other ways of empowering the parents to be a therapist at home.”

However, [Beth Carr](#), mother of five-year-old Luke who attends Fagan’s preschool class, says that being the “therapist at home” can be difficult. Carr too has found the digital transition hard and says Luke regressed during the first lockdown when it came to some skills. She explains that sensory play is important for Luke, who is cautious of different textures. Luke is afraid of the dark, and this can cause him to panic when he is dressing, when his eyes are covered by his clothing. This is something she and Luke have worked on with Fagan using play tents and fairy lights.

Carr is emphatic that Fagan is an “amazing” teacher. Fagan sent packs and props to her home. One week they did “The tiger who came to tea” and Fagan sent each family tiger masks and tails and a link to a [YouTube](#) dance to learn.

Digital etiquette

Fagan says that with the parents present you can feel a bit silly. “You think: ‘Oh gosh, they’re really seeing me here in the raw,’ but everyone understands.” The siblings join in too sometimes, which adds to the enjoyment, and they have learned the digital etiquette. “We all got very technically savvy – ‘Okay,’ they would say, ‘I think it’s time to mute you! My child is giving out. I don’t think I need to share that with everybody else.’”

Carr says keeping Luke's focus during the class is more difficult when the class occurs online. She says normally in a session he will focus but "at home he's like, 'Nah! Not doing that' and off he trots."

For many of the children the last year has been more about sustaining skills than developing them. "Some children need a lot more input through the senses than other children and that's what I can't do when I'm online," Fagan says. However, for other children, the calm home environment has afforded them the opportunity to progress other skills.

Kennedy agrees that while some families have felt very isolated, and others have felt very supported by professionals, they always try to meet the child where they are at and cater to their individual needs.

And it's not only the children missing the sensory experiences. The specialists are feeling it too.

"What's that 'touch hunger'? Naughton says. "If you meet a child and they go to give you a hug it's so hard [not to hug them]. It's a loss for everybody. We really look forward to seeing them again soon. Their play is our work and their work is our play."