

Strategies for Helping Children Maintain an Appropriate State of Alertness Throughout the Day

The following is a list of strategies that can be used to help children maintain an optimal state of alertness throughout the day. They are divided into five sensory categories, and then further divided into “calming” or “alerting” strategies. However, some children’s nervous systems react differently to sensory input, so some items on the calming side may have an alerting affect on another child, or vice versa. In addition, some items are listed in both columns because they tend to have a regulating effect, whether the child needs to calm down or be more alert.

You may recognize that some children already use some of the strategies listed on this sheet. This may provide a better understanding of why some children do these potentially “annoying” things. You may have to experiment a little to find the right combination of sensory inputs for a child.

Put something in your mouth (Oral motor input)

CALMING

suck on a hard candy
“chew” on a straw
chew gum
eat cut up vegetables
drink hot cocoa or warm milk

ALERTING

suck on a tart/sour hard candy
crunch or suck on ice pieces
drink carbonated drink
eat a cold popsicle
eat a pickle
crunch on nuts/pretzels/chips
eat popcorn
eat cut up vegetables
eat chips with spicy dip
blow on whistles

Move (Vestibular/Proprioceptive Input)

CALMING

rock in rocking chair
tap toe, heel or foot
sit with legs crossed and bounce one
tap pencil/pen
rock own body slightly
wheel barrow walking
crab walking
carrying heavy objects; groceries, laundry
heavy cleaning work; scrubbing, pushing
Vacuum
chair or wall push-ups

ALERTING

rock in rocking chair
tap toe, heel or foot
Sit with legs crossed and bounce one
tap pencil/pen
shift or “squirm” in chair
run/jog
ride bike
dance
stretch/shake body parts

Touch (Tactile Input)

CALMING

twist own hair
warm bath
Receive a massage
drum fingers/ fingers on table

ALERTING

splash cool water on face

Fidgeting (squeezing, twisting, poking) with any of the following can be both alerting and calming depending in the child's needs at the time:

a straw
paper clips
pencil/pen
earring or necklace
squeeze toy
play dough

Look (Visual Input)

CALMING

dim lighting
rose/mauve colored room
looking at a favorite picture

ALERTING

bright sunlight

Listen (Auditory Input)

CALMING

classical music
working in a "quiet" room
singing to self

ALERTING

hard rock music
working in a "noisy" room

Adapted from "How Does Your Engine Run? A Leader's Guide to The Alert Program for Self-Regulation by Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger.