

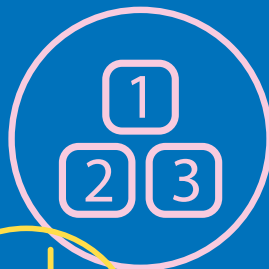
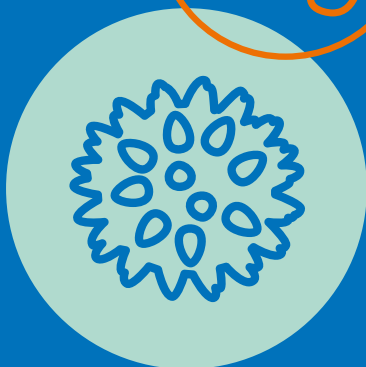
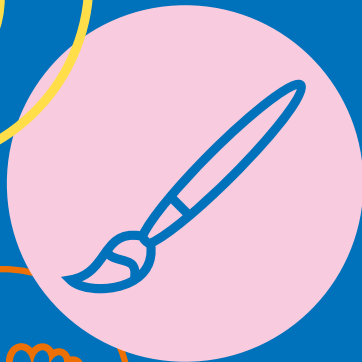
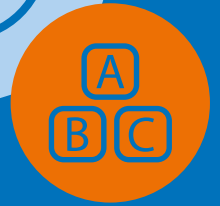


sense

connecting sight, sound and life

Making play inclusive

A toolkit for play settings





The Case for Play

In 2015, Sense undertook a Public Inquiry into the provision of play opportunities for children aged 0-5 with multiple needs in England and Wales. The Inquiry found that disabled children have significantly fewer opportunities to access play settings and activities than their non-disabled peers.

All children should have equal access to play, which is fundamental to childhood. This toolkit has been designed to help early years play providers and workers offer accessible play opportunities to children with multiple needs. It contains simple ideas, suggestions and practical tips on making play activities and settings more inclusive.

You can read more about the Play Inquiry on our website: www.sense.org.uk/play



Play: the legal context



It is important for play providers to be aware of their legal responsibilities in relation to play for disabled children.

- The Equality Act 2010 provides legal protection to disabled children and families seeking to access play services. Through the Act, providers of play facilities:
 - Must avoid treating a disabled child less favourably than they treat or would treat others because of their disability (direct discrimination).
 - Must avoid provisions, criteria or practices that, when applied to all children, put disabled children at a particular disadvantage and which cannot be justified as a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim (indirect discrimination).
 - Must make reasonable adjustments to allow disabled children to enjoy similar opportunities to that of children without disabilities. Providers should consider barriers that impede disabled children accessing the play facilities, and take action to reduce or remove those

barriers, prior to a disabled child using the facility. Reasonable adjustments relate to provisions, criteria and practices, and to providing auxiliary aids or adaptations to premises.

- Public bodies that provide play facilities must also comply with the public sector equality duty set out in the Equality Act 2010. The duty requires that a public authority must have due regard to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not when exercising their functions, such as making decisions or setting policies about how they provide play opportunities.¹
- The Children and Families Act 2014 outlines how support should be offered to children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Local authorities have a responsibility to identify children and young people with SEND, and where necessary to provide support to meet their special educational needs. For some children this provision will be specified within an Education, Health and Care

plan, and could include support with play at nursery, or the development of certain skills through play.

- All parents of three and four-year-olds are entitled to register for 15 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks of the year in England. Two-year-olds are entitled to free early education if they have an Education, Health and Care plan or receive Disability Living Allowance at any rate.
- Through the Childcare Act 2016, working parents of three and four-year-old children will have a legal entitlement to receive 30 hours a week of free childcare from September 2017. This will be a right for all children with working parents, including those with special educational needs and disabilities.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum is used to set standards for learning, development and care for all children attending schools and Ofsted registered early years providers. In order to deliver the curriculum successfully, early years educators and teachers are required to have an understanding of different approaches to education, including the role of play in supporting early learning and development.

Key principles for inclusive play

- Equality does not mean treating everyone the same; it is about making the adjustments that enable all children to take part.
- Every child is unique. It is important to take the time to get to know each child, prepare for and understand their needs, and know where to go for further advice.
- Give children time to respond, explore and play.
- A ‘can-do’ attitude is really important – always focus on what the child can do and understand what achievement is for each child.
- Manage risk effectively; don’t let it get in the way of play.
- Listen, discuss, plan and consult with parents.
- Where possible, treatments and therapeutic interventions should be delivered through play.

¹ The Equality and Human Rights Commission provides a range of guidance on its website about legal requirements in relation to discrimination, reasonable adjustment and the public sector equality duty: www.equalityhumanrights.com/en



Section 1: Top tips for accessible play



Manage risk – don't avoid it

Sometimes, concerns about risk, health and safety can limit a child's opportunities to play, especially if he or she has physical disabilities or medical needs.

While health and safety considerations are important, they should be adopted reasonably and proportionally. Fears about health and safety should not limit a child's opportunity to take part in activities or to engage in more challenging play. For all activities, including the ones suggested in this toolkit, we recommend undertaking proportional risk assessments.

Creating the right balance between protecting children from the most serious risks and allowing them to reap the benefits of play may not always be easy. Remember, it's not about removing risk altogether, but managing it. As the Health and Safety Executive argue:

'Play brings the world to life for children. It provides for an exploration and understanding of their abilities; helps them to learn and develop; and exposes them to the realities of the world in which they will live, which is a world not free from risk but rather one where risk is ever present. The opportunity for play develops a child's risk awareness and prepares them for their future lives.'²

"Fears about health and safety should not limit a child's opportunity to take part in activities."



² The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Statement provides some useful guidance on this topic. Also see their Myth Busters Challenge Panel, which has been set up to ensure that health, safety and risk are not misused to prevent children from playing in environments from which they develop and learn. Visit www.hse.gov.uk/contact/myth-busting.htm

Let the child lead



Allowing the child to lead play activities provides them with the opportunity to consolidate, develop and extend their learning at their own pace. They will be motivated to explore a project or express an idea in their own individual way.

Providing choice in terms of play activities develops communication skills, confidence, independence and a sense of self. This can be as simple as asking if they want the red or blue crayon or by offering more complex choices, such as the order to take turns in a game. When the child communicates their preference always praise them for it.

As a practitioner, this approach is useful for observing and learning a child's likes and dislikes. This can help you think about how to approach activities and the areas you feel they may benefit from more exposure to.

Use a **'hand under hand'** approach. This is where your hand performs the activity and the child's hand rests on top of yours. With this approach, if the child decides they want the activity to end, they can simply take their hand away at any time. This offers choice, control and a sense of freedom.

This approach is great for trying new play activities. A child may be hesitant to put their hand on an unknown object. However, they can still join you and have a safe space to experience the activity. This approach gives them time to feel the movement of your hand, understand it is safe, and feel comfortable trying it themselves.

Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits



Make it sensory



Senses are important for everyone as they enrich life and are vital to our cognitive development. Through taste, smell, touch, vision, and hearing we learn about the world around us and become more engaged with the activities that we try.

Children with physical and sensory disabilities may struggle to access information. Children who experience difficulties processing sensory information may choose to avoid certain experiences. Play helps to introduce new sensory stimuli in an accessible and entertaining way. With sensory activities it is important to let the child explore, and avoid instructing them on how to engage with materials.

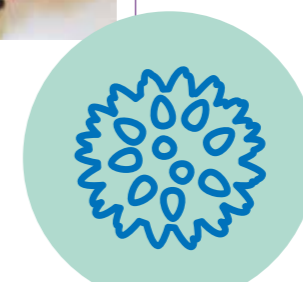
Sensory stories are a great way to provide sensory stimulation and develop communication in a fun way. Most importantly, however, they make stories fully accessible.

Any book can be broken down into workable parts. Each section should be a sentence or two long and accompanied by a sensory experience. For sensory items, try to use the real thing if possible and make sure you find an item to match the story, not the other way around.

It is necessary to tell the story a number of times with consistency. This repetition will promote cognitive development and develop an understanding of communication. It will also encourage anticipation and the expression of preferences.

It is worth considering whether published stories are relevant for the child – or whether creating a personalised story is more meaningful.

Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits



Focus on the process of play



The process of play is the medium through which children learn. It's important to be flexible and let the child lead. Allow them to take the play activity in the direction they choose even if this differs from the objective you had in mind.

Messy play is an activity where you can really focus on the process. It's a great way for the child to learn more about things by experiencing them. Messy play can be presented in a number of ways, such as on sensory trays, each with a different theme. Remember to use edible, clean materials, and be mindful of choking hazards and allergies.



Textures

It's useful to think about the hierarchy of textures. This can help you to make an activity suitable for a child's preferences and also to think about variety.

Easy textures: with these the child has more control over contact.

1. Dry textures that fall away from your hand: dried rice, dry sand, dry lentils, or cotton wool.
2. Dry textures that mostly fall away but some particles or bits may stick to the hand: play dough, sterile compost, clean mud, or chalk.

Difficult textures: with these the child has less control over contact.

1. Wet textures that stick to the hand but the child can easily break contact with (e.g. by lightly wiping): jelly, baked beans, wet sand, or sensitive shaving foam.
2. Wet textures that stick to the hand and the child has least control of when breaking contact (e.g. by repeatedly wiping): yoghurt, finger-paint, mud, Angel Delight, or ice cream.

Changing textures: you can demonstrate how textures change by starting with dried custard powder or dried shredded tissues and then adding water.

Hand movement

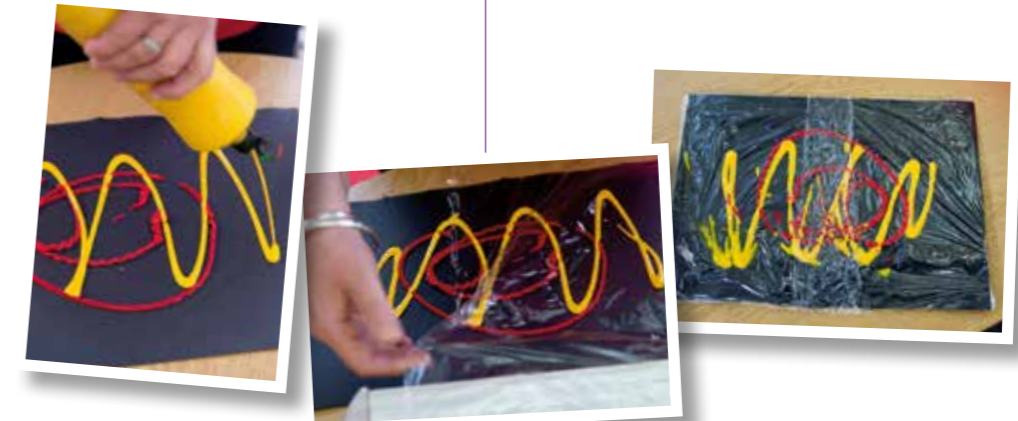
When undertaking this activity, be mindful of different movements you want to encourage. These can include:

- A palmer grasp (squeezing toys and play dough)
- Using thumb and fingers (building towers of bricks)
- Pincer grip (popping bubble wrap)
- Release (placing objects in containers)
- Rotary action (pouring from one container to another)
- Finger isolation (making fingerprints in play dough)
- Bilateral hand use (tearing paper)
- Hand and finger strength (manipulating play dough)
- Tracking (following lines of wool).

Adaptation

Not all children will be able to make these movements and some don't like to get messy. As an alternative, try paints in a clear plastic bag or on paper with cling film over the top. The child can play by pushing the paint around with their fingers and hands over the plastic or cling film. You might find that some children will slowly choose to get messy by picking off the cling film and trying to put their hand directly into the paint. The hand under hand approach is a great way to introduce children to new textures in a safe and supportive way.

Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits



Develop self-awareness



For children with multiple needs, developing an awareness of others, accurate self-perception, and understanding the impact of actions on others can be a challenge. For this reason, activities that help children to develop self-awareness are important.

“Play activities that help children to develop self-awareness are important.”

Resonance boards are made from a thin piece of plywood that is raised slightly from the floor by a wooden frame. They can be expensive to buy but easy to make if you have the time. They are an excellent resource that helps to develop a child’s self-awareness.

The special quality of the board is that any movement on its surface will produce amplified sound and matching vibrations. It encourages communication, large motor skills and mobility, fine motor manipulation, use of vision and hearing, tactile and visual search, turn-taking, anticipation, vocalisations and speech, problem solving, sequencing, cause and effect, rhythm – the list is endless!

Remember to start slowly and assess activities by putting your own ear on the board. You may want to spend time introducing the child to the board before including any toys.

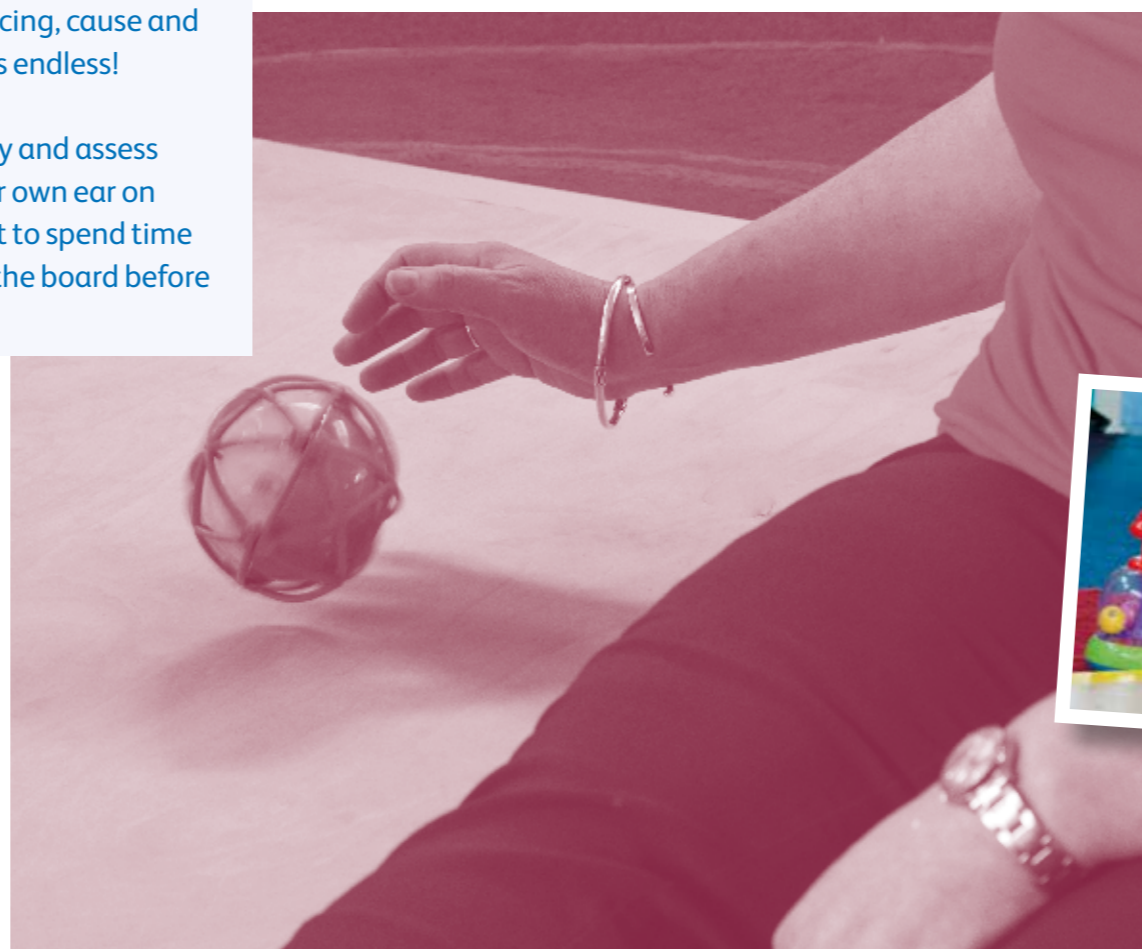
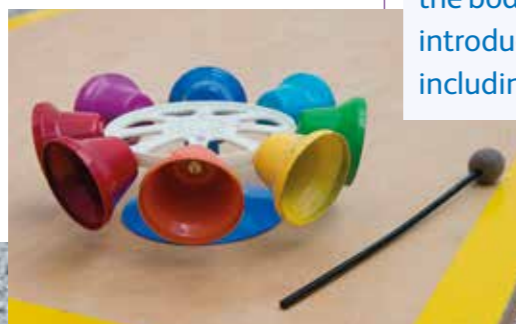
The child may not be used to being on a hard surface and therefore may notice parts of themselves they had not been aware of before. Make sure they are always in their preferred position, comfortable and safe.

The child can be placed alone on the board, or use it with another child or adult if it is strong enough. It is a very adaptable activity; standing and walking on the board barefoot can be fun, as well as sitting and lying down.

The use of toys and equipment on the board depends entirely upon safety considerations, personal preferences and availability. When selecting toys to use, it is good to think about those that will provide an instant response. Items such as portable speakers, wind-up music boxes, vibrating toys, spinning tops, stringed beads and bells are effective.

There are various different ways toys can be used on the board. Lengthy items such as stringed beads can be laid over the child’s limbs. Every time they move an arm or leg it makes a noise that will be amplified by the board. The child will start to develop awareness of their own movement. With portable speakers you can play music that will be amplified and accompanied by vibrations.

Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits



Encourage exploration

Children learn through exploration and experience. Much of this takes place through play, where children can be creative, take risks and make discoveries.

A **treasure basket** is a shallow sturdy basket containing a collection of everyday items. The idea is that children explore the basket and discover a variety of treasures. It brings exploration within reach of the child and gives them the opportunity to handle a range of items that they may not be able to experience unless they are brought to them.

Items in the treasure basket should vary in weight, size, texture, colour, taste, sound and temperature – for instance:

- Natural objects: pumice stone, lemon, natural loofah, feathers, shells
- Metal objects: spoons, keys, bells, small whisk
- Brushes: paintbrush, nail brush, pastry brush, toothbrush
- Textiles: velvet scrunches, silk, wool.

Remember to avoid plastic and typical soft toys as they do not offer much sensory feedback.



“Play lets children be creative, take risks and make discoveries.”



Think about how the child might interact with the objects. It's good to include things that rattle, fit inside each other, or that can be used to build and demolish.

A treasure basket can be adapted to suit each child's needs. For children who are not yet sitting, for instance, items can be suspended from a baby gym.

Memory baskets: the same concept can be used to encourage memory. By including items attached to a specific experience, the child can revisit and recollect.



Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits

Think about communication

Acknowledging and understanding how a child communicates, and building formal and informal communication methods into play, can make settings more inclusive and accessible. Learn about the communication methods of children in your setting and think about how these can be included in an activity. This is a great opportunity to support the child's social development by teaching them about difference and interaction with others.

Think about how to introduce easy, fun ways for families to communicate their child's needs to you. You could ask parents if they already have a 'Personal Passport', a small booklet that contains useful information and practical guidance about their child's needs and preferences.

Signing songs bring children together to sit and sing a song. The songs include basic vocabulary from British Sign Language or signing systems, such as Makaton, and can easily be adapted to include other forms of communication, such as tactile signing. Remember to consider the pace of the song and the wording, and recognise that it may only be key signs that you are trying to get across. Gestures are often a good way to introduce actions into songs so that everyone can join in.

Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits



Encourage children to play together



Play is a great way for children to connect, and there are lots of activities to encourage this. You can adapt activities to include turn-taking. For example, children can take turns to tap rhythms on a resonance board, use a Big Mack Switch, or roll tactile balls to each other. Try to make inclusion work both ways so that children can get involved in each other's favourite activities, as well as create new things together.

Den making is a great inclusive activity. Create a dedicated space within your classroom that is small enough to be suitable for a child with multiple needs but inviting enough to encourage other children to come and share the space. Children who might find it easier can help to build the den for their friend. Dens are also extremely adaptable. For example, you can make a den by attaching an umbrella to supported seating or wheelchairs.

Make a cardboard box den

You can build a den using a large cardboard box that is either lined with black paper or painted black. Punch holes in the top of the box and press some battery-operated fibre optic lights against the holes to create a starry sky effect. Use different tactile elements to create panels that slip into the sides and the back – these can be attached and moved around as required. You can add other elements, such as lights and torches, but remember not to overload the space with too much stimulus.

Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits





Go outdoors!

Our Play Inquiry found that outdoor play settings were particularly difficult to access for disabled children. Outdoor play is essential to the healthy physical, social and emotional development of all children. Having an awareness and connection with nature enhances appreciation and wellbeing. Children with more complex needs benefit greatly from exploring sights, smells, textures and sounds in natural environments.

The opportunity to play freely also develops confidence and self-esteem. For this reason, consider undertaking the play activities described in this toolkit in an outdoor setting as well. For example, messy play using sensory trays can be great outside.

It is important to spend time **relaxing**. On a warm day, lay the child down on a blanket, under a tree. They can look at the leaves, hear them rustle, and feel the breeze in the shade. Try hanging different coloured scarves or wind chimes on the branches.



Set up a selection of **sensory trays**, each with a different theme and items. For children who are less mobile or reluctant to explore, sensory trays can be a good way to introduce natural items. A tray containing natural items might include sterile compost or clean mud (made from toilet paper and brown paint), sticks, clean feathers, leaves and large stones. You can create open-ended play, with a number of trays for the child to come back to and choose from.

Sensory trays always require supervision. Be mindful of hygiene, sensitivities and choking hazards.

Watch the video at www.sense.org.uk/playtoolkits



Deliver therapies and treatments through play

Children with multiple needs often work with a large number of professionals, and may spend a lot of time receiving medical treatments and therapies. Our Play Inquiry found that this often gets in the way of play. For this reason, play professionals should always seek to deliver assessments, treatments and therapies through play.



- When assessing the child's needs and abilities play should be used as the medium through which this is delivered.
- Play is an effective medium to help children understand medical conditions and treatments. It should be used to help prepare children for medical procedures and to make the experience of receiving treatment less traumatic.
- Professionals delivering therapies should seek to 'package' them as play. Children are more likely to successfully engage in the therapy when they are having fun.

“Play professionals should always seek to deliver assessments, treatments and therapies through play.”



Ensure your play setting is accessible

The Play Inquiry found that the design of play settings can sometimes act as a barrier to children with multiple needs. For this reason, it is vital that mainstream settings make adjustments that ensure play is accessible for all children.

Play settings need to be physically accessible. This includes:

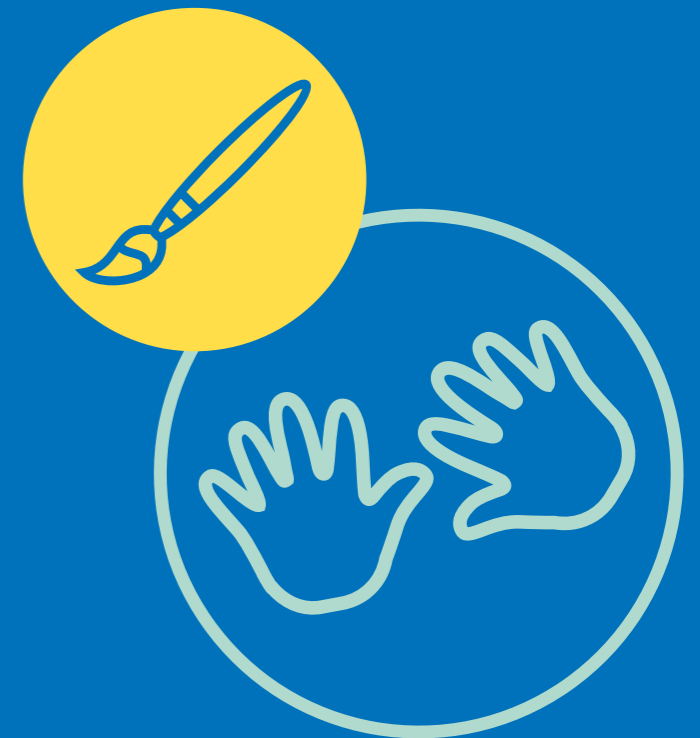
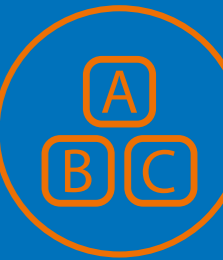
- Wheelchair accessibility and space for wheelchairs to move around inside buildings
- Accessible toilets that include full changing beds and tracking hoists
- Suitable seating and postural management equipment for children who struggle to support their own bodies
- Discrete spaces to carry out peg feeding or that meet any medical needs, such as suction or administering oxygen
- Suitable lighting and colour contrast
- Availability of a quiet room and play space
- Tactile signage.

Play activities, including those described in this toolkit, can be adapted to meet the needs and preferences of each child. For each play activity, always consider the positioning of the child and what's best for them. For example, if the child has a vision or hearing impairment, think about light contrasts and glare – are you facing a window, for example? For children who are sensitive to touch, it may be helpful to start by introducing activities with their feet. Remember, less is more – try to avoid sensory overload.



Section 2:

Top tips for supporting families





As well as offering fun and accessible activities to children with multiple needs, play settings also play a key role in supporting families.

Offer a warm welcome

Parents of disabled children told Sense that they are often worried about the reaction they will receive when they attend a new play setting for the first time. A number had experienced negative attitudes in the past, and for many families, poor initial reactions from other people determined whether they decided to continue attending a play setting.

Professionals can make a huge difference by offering a warm welcome to children and their parents when they first enter a setting. They can also play a key role in facilitating relationships between families by creating opportunities for parents to meet. This helps to address any potential lack of understanding about disability.

Promote inclusion and change attitudes

Settings should plan carefully prior to the admission of every child. This ensures that individual needs are met and that families are welcomed and understood by other parents, children and both professional staff and volunteers.

Play professionals can create a culture of inclusion in the setting. Practical ideas to achieve this include putting up posters that promote the idea of acceptance and inclusion, positively challenging disablist attitudes, and ensuring that there is a published play policy statement that stresses the importance of including every child.

“Play settings should plan carefully prior to the admission of every child.”

Make time to get to know families

It's important for play settings to have a family centred approach in which you get to know the families, build their trust in you as a professional, and find out what they want to get out of the sessions you are facilitating.

Be mindful that the child may have been on a difficult medical and developmental journey, and that this may impact on how their family relates to professionals. You are just the latest in a long line of people who have input into the child and family's life.

“Ensure that the opportunities provided by your play setting are flexible.”

Be flexible and accommodating

Show parents that you understand their needs by ensuring that the opportunities provided by your play setting are flexible. Factor in parents being late; if your session begins at 11, start with a 45 minute activity where people can drop in. If there are sessions that are specifically designed for disabled children, make sure there are options for timings, dates, groups and activities.

If possible, coordinate with other services involved with the child. Ensure they know you are supporting the family and that they are aware of the schedule of events you are planning. There is nothing more frustrating for a family than finding out there are several events they can go to but they are all on the same day. Families with disabled children do not always have opportunities to come together, so events that are inclusive of siblings can be very important.





Allow families to take a break

Taking a break from caring to rest and recharge is vitally important for families of children with multiple needs. Many parents provide round-the-clock care for their children, including through the night. Parents told us that there is often an expectation on parents to remain in the play setting to provide one-to-one support for their child. This means that they do not get a break and the child misses out on an opportunity to develop their independence and form relationships with peers. For this reason, not only is adequate support necessary, but so are spaces for parents to come and rest. Creating spaces where parents feel at home can make a huge difference. For example, it can be something as simple as a regular coffee morning.

“Taking a break from caring to rest and recharge is vitally important for families of children with multiple needs.”

Create opportunities for families to get to know one another

During the Inquiry, families told us that not being able to access their local play setting – and instead having to travel a long distance to the closest specialist provider – often left them feeling excluded from the local community. Play settings can help to create social networks and facilitate opportunities for families to meet and get to know each other.



Provide clear information

It needs to be easy for parents with disabled children to find mainstream play settings. Parents told us that they had limited time to research suitable activities for their child, in addition to their caring responsibilities. You can help by clearly identifying as an inclusive space, and explaining what this means. Make sure your play setting, with these details, is included in the Local Offer and advertise locally.

Within your play setting, you can provide useful information and signpost for families using leaflets, posters, details of websites and so on. Set up a table containing this information, including a notebook, so that parents can share information with each other. This can include play tips, as well as suggestions, reviews or comments on other local accessible play opportunities.

Get the right training and skills

It is important that professionals working in mainstream settings have the confidence, training and expertise to include children with multiple needs in play activities. This includes training in responding to medical needs, communicating with children with specialist communication requirements and personal care. We received evidence to suggest that many providers do not know where they can access training, and struggle to resource the training of staff. There was also a strong feeling that generic training does not include enough information about working with disabled children. To address this, we encourage mainstream providers to work in partnership with specialist settings and training providers.

Sense’s Children’s Specialist Services team has a wealth of experience and expertise. They are happy to support mainstream settings to ‘get it right’ for children with multi-sensory impairments. Sense offers a variety of training courses and provides assessments, both statutory and advisory, that cover many aspects of multi-sensory impairment, including specialist courses for intervenors and teachers.

Professionals can visit a local Sense Family Centre, which are available for hire, for one-off sessions or weekly school visits. For more information contact simon.philimore@sense.org.uk

Further information

Sense Children's Specialist Services (CSS) is a team of advisory teachers, children's therapists, and children and family support workers. They provide expert advice and information to children and young people who are deafblind or have sensory impairments, their families, carers, and to professionals who work with them. They also offer support in the home, at school, in the community or at Sense Family Centres.

For more information visit
www.sense.org.uk/content/childrens-specialist-services

For all queries, contact our Information and Advice Service via
www.sense.org.uk/content/information-and-advice-service

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About Sense

Sense is a national charity that supports people who are deafblind, have sensory impairments or complex needs, to enjoy more independent lives.

Our expertise in supporting individuals with communication needs benefits people of all ages, as well as their families and carers. We provide information and advice, offer a wide range of flexible services and campaign passionately for the rights of the people we serve.

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