

## Sensory Awareness Activities – For Good Mind and Body

### Feeling overwhelmed by all the talk about place-based education?

Julie Johnston, Resource Teacher for the Spring Leaves Family Learning program at Pender Island School, suggests sensory awareness activities. Not only are they a super-easy way to get your students engaged outdoors, but they're also crucial for proper development of the mind and body.

*"It's such a gift to kids just to take them outside and let them be there and let them have some fun really being fully present."*

Every day, our neurological systems have to take in and process an incredible amount of sensory information. Learning to accurately use sensory input is critical to our maturation and the development of core, foundational skills.

Julie notes that:

*"Kids don't seem to look and observe very much. They don't seem to listen and hear very much until someone points these things out to them, until someone encourages them. I don't find that there are that many kids, for example, who are sky aware, who know where the sun comes up and sets and who knows what phase of the moon we're in at any given time."*

*"So sensory awareness is just literally games and activities that get kids seeing more, seeing better, seeing deeper, seeing wider, hearing, listening, discriminating – and then the senses of touch and smell – kids love doing smelly games ... I've been able to work sensory awareness into all kinds of games and awareness."*

Sensory awareness activities are more important than ever in today's classrooms with so many children being diagnosed with sensory integration issues. But sensory awareness is essential for everyone. It's not only children who get too hyped up or too tired (although for us adults, it seems to more often be the latter :).

Sensory activities are incredibly useful for managing everyone's energy levels throughout the day. The activities are creative and fun - they feel like play, all while building better neurological systems and essential skills.



### Sensory Awareness Activities Maximize:

- ✓ intellectual, social, and emotional development
- ✓ positive self-esteem
- ✓ a mind and body ready for learning
- ✓ excitement and enthusiasm for learning



Some activity ideas to get you started (or add to your collection):

### Feathery Race

Hold a feather or leaf race. No hands allowed! Students blow to move their feather or leaf to the finish line.

This can be used as a basis to explore adaptations. Students can also try blowing different objects and consider why some are easier to move than others. Douglas maples produce winged seeds that are also good for gravity races.

### Listening

Students sit quietly and listen to nature. This is a great activity for getting students calm and focused, although if they're too hyped up, you may want to start with an activity that burns off energy.

There are endless variations to listening activities:

- Students sit with eyes closed and put a finger up for every new sound they hear.
- Do one sit in an urban spot and another in a more natural spot and compare the different sounds you hear and how they make you feel.
- Combine with journal writing.

Generally, students quickly notice the obvious sounds and then if left longer begin to pick up on the more subtle sounds. Closing eyes often enhances their ability to hear more.

### Meet a Tree

A classic activity from an early pioneer of outdoor education, Joseph Cornell – this is a simple, yet very powerful experience.

One or two students escort a blindfolded student to a tree that he/she must get to know without the use of sight. The student is then led back to where they started. The blindfold removed and the student hunt for “their” tree.

Obviously, there are some safety issues to take into consideration with this activity and it may not be suitable for younger (or less mature) students for that reason. Make sure the student escorts know that it's their job to protect the blindfolded student from harm by keeping an eye out for rocks, holes in the ground and low hanging branches.

Remind them that it's particularly important to protect the face because they'll tend to watch the ground. Groups of three with a sighted student on either side of the blindfolded student may help the sighted students take the blindfolded student's perspective.

### Bat and Moth

Discuss the predator/prey relationship between bats and moths. How do bats locate food? They use echolocation. They emit high-pitched sounds. The sound waves bounce off objects and return to the bat's ears and bats are able to figure out what's around them.



### Tips for conducting sensory awareness activities:

1. Help students to make their own discoveries rather than “telling” them what they're observing.
2. You don't need to know the answers to all questions. Guide students to find answers for themselves or search for answers together.
3. Good questioning strategies get students thinking about their findings. We like to name things, but concepts are more important than just names and facts. Focus on why it is over what it is. Nothing in the world had a name until humans began sorting and classifying. Experience in the natural world will always be primary.

*Adapted from the Shenandoah National Park Education Program*



This game simulates a bat hunting for food. Choose one student to be the bat and blindfold him or her. Choose some students to be moths. The rest of the students create a circle by holding hands. The bat and moths fly inside the circle and it's the job of the students who are holding the circle to keep the moths and blindfolded bat safe.

Every time the bat says “bat”, the moths must say “moth”. The bat catches the moth by tagging it and then others get a chance to be the bat and moth.

You can slow down or speed up the game by varying the numbers of bats and moths.

### Cloud Gazing

Take students to an open area where they can see the sky and have them find comfortable spots to lie down. Ask them to observe the shapes and patterns of the clouds and notice what they bring to mind - animals, people, objects, and events. This can be the basis for a science lesson or students can compose a story based on what they see and imagine.

### Nature Bands

Give students time to explore the environment. Ask them to find a noisemaker during their explorations. When they return, have each student demonstrate their noisemaker to the rest of the class.

Break them into smaller “bands” and let them develop music using their nature instruments.

### Peppermint Trail

Spray several trees on with peppermint oil at the approximate head height of students. Students follow the trail by sniffing. (Won't work during winter.)

### Sensory Ramble

Students can use a notebook or sheet of paper to record their sensory discoveries as in the example below (for safety reasons, avoid using the sense of taste):

	SEE	HEAR	SMELL	TOUCH
<i>tree</i>	<i>Maple leaf shape leaves, dark green on top, grayish green underneath</i>	<i>Wispy sound in breeze</i>		<i>Smooth on smaller branches, rougher on larger branches</i>
	<i>Thick, very rough, furrowed bark</i>		<i>Needles have strong, good smell when crushed</i>	

### Healthy or Unhealthy? Study

What makes a healthy ecosystem? How can you tell if an ecosystem is stressed? This is a good activity for natural or semi-natural areas near urban areas. Looking at various environmental signals, such as animal tracks or droppings and plant varieties, students explore whether they think the ecosystem is healthy or not and why or why not.

### Forest Maze

Loads of fun, but requires more extensive set-up so you'll either need the help of some enthusiastic parent helpers – or get your students to set it up. You can divide the students into two groups and have each group create a maze for the other one or have a smaller group of students create a maze for the rest of the class.

Using rope create a maze through the trees. Hanging onto the rope, blindfolded students will need to find their way through the maze to the exit. Build in lots a dead ends to make it trickier.

### Sensory Walk Lesson

[http://hctfeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/SenseWalk\\_Lesson.pdf](http://hctfeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/SenseWalk_Lesson.pdf)

### Animal Signs Exploration (Upham Woods Outdoor Learning Center)

<http://fyi.uwex.edu/uphamwoods/files/2014/10/Animal-Signs-Lesson-Plan1.pdf>

