

Preschool Education: Not just For Sand And Water Anymore!



Not Just For Sand & Water Anymore!

Your Ultimate Guide To Sensory Tables

By Christa J Koch

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Some call it a water table, other a sand table. I call it a sensory table. Whether you have a store bought table, one you made yourself or just an improvised table; the possibilities are endless. Children can benefit from many different materials that can be placed in the table. Some materials can be messy, other not so messy.

The beauty of a sensory table is that it is casual, laid back, and hands on learning. It is the ideal type of learning for preschoolers. You can follow your children's lead. Just provide the materials and let them go. A good mix of free play and planed lessons will make any sensory table successful.

We have compiled a list of items you can use in your sensory table to get you started. The materials list can be almost endless. Just use a bit of imagination. Many types of items and materials can make for a great learning experience. From recycled items, to store bought; you can change your table weekly and not run out of activities all school year.

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Sensory Benefits:

Children can not resist the opportunity to explore the world around them. A sensory table gives children the chance to explore, experiment, observe, and manipulate while increasing their fine and gross motor, hand eye coordination, math, science and communication skills. Since most sensory table activities are self directed, sensory play also helps build self esteem in young children.

Keep in mind that any material that stimulates several senses, especially the sense of touch is considered a sensory material. While sensory tables are self directed, you may have to encourage children use their senses. Encourage them to see, smell, hear, and feel. Avoid distracting them with questions while they are involved in sensory exploration. But always be available for them to come to you with questions.

Here are some of the areas that will benefit from a sensory table:

- Fine motor skills - (eye-hand coordination) Improving coordination skills through the manipulation of sensory materials – pouring, molding, lifting, carrying, sifting, sorting, etc.
- Creativity - (artistic skills) Imagination will be used to make personal creations. Uninterrupted play (by adults) allows creativity to flourish. The children can use the materials as they see fit and are able to enjoy the process and have no concern for the end product or result.
- Creativity in play - Similar to above, but also deciding how to use the materials.
- Emotional development - Tension releasing, soothing, failure proof, and confidence building.
- Self-esteem – The children build self-confidence and a positive self-image as they create, play and untimely accomplish what they had intended to do. The children can choose on their own what they plan to do and how to do it.
- Social skills - Sharing and cooperating. As children interact with each other, they learn to share and cooperate while building their vocabulary. They also learn effective ways to resolve conflicts among each other.
- Knowledge of science - Experimentation, evaporation, gravity, physics, construction, and engineering.

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- Knowledge of math - 1Correspondence, counting, and concepts like grouping, sequencing, weight, volume, and measurement.

A general rule with sensory tables is the messier the better. Don't be afraid to offer great sensory activities because they may cause a mess. As long as they are washable they are good! The learning experience and benefits from the messy project will out weight the few extra minutes of clean up.

Reference:

1 SENSORY MATERIALS: MORE THAN PLAYDOUGH by Jane Billman, Instructor, Child Development Laboratory

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Table Types:

There are many types of sensory tables that can be used. While I am a big fan of the large store bought one, I know not everyone or every program can afford one. If you have the money, by all means buy one.

Benefits of a store bought sensory table:

There are many benefits to a store bought sensory table.

1. The valve under the tub for easy liquid emptying.
2. Large enough to accommodate 6 children comfortably when placed in the center of a room. 4 children if against a wall.
3. Just the right height for preschoolers.
4. Less chance of spills because the tub is so large.
5. Easy to close using the lid it comes with. (I closed mine during art projects and used the top as a place to dry art projects.)
6. Boxes of supplies can be stored underneath. Depending on what brand of table you get, you can remove the tub. Put a piece of fabric underneath it that is long enough to touch the floor and act as a skirt, hiding what is underneath.
7. Easy to move. The one side of my sensory table had wheels. So you could pick up one side and move it anywhere, even when it was full.

Other things that can be used as a sensory table:

1. Dish Pan (This works great as an individual sensory tables.)
2. Any Rubbermaid type container. Make sure it is not too shallow to prevent spills.
3. Plastic baby bath
4. Blowup wadding pool. (I say blow up because the hard plastic kind are horrible to store.)

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5. If you are only using dry items a cardboard box works well.
6. Again if you are only using dry items you can use a wash basket.
7. New cat litter pan (Very important it be new!)
8. Any large bowl or pot (Plastic or metal. No Glass!)

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The Set Up:

Items To Collect:

Here is a list of items to collect and use along with your sensory materials:

- Baster
- Any type of small plastic container
- Margarine Tub
- Scoops
- Pitchers
- Strawberry baskets
- Spray bottle
- Luffa sponge
- Natural sponges
- Strainer
- Ice cube tray
- Plastic tubing
- Funnels
- Cookie cutters
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Eye droppers
- Aluminum pie plates
- Spoons
- Plastic squeeze bottles
- Tong and other kitchen utensils

Accessibility:

If you are using a container instead of a sensory table; be sure to place the container on a low table or the floor. Make sure is at an accessible height for the children.

Floor Protection:

Things you can use to protect the floor.

1. Shower Curtain
2. Old bed sheet
3. Garbage bags
4. Newspaper
5. Butcher paper
6. Throw Rug

No matter what type of sensory table you make or buy it is a good idea to place the table on a tiled floor. Of course for many that is not an option. Depending on the sensory material you put in the table you might want to protect your floor. For wet materials a plastic shower curtain works really well to protect the floor. They are sturdy and inexpensive. If you are using dry material an old sheet will do a great job protecting the floor. When the children are done you can just fold the sheet and take it outside to shake it out.

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The Clean Up:

Not Just Sensory, But Responsibility Too:

If you keep the sensory table area clean and organized, it will create a much better atmosphere for you and the children. Cleaning as you go along prevents a large clean task at the end of the play time.

Depending on the age of the children you are working with you can make them responsible for their actions. When I did the following I was teaching 4 & 5 year olds. Whoever was in the sensory area was responsible for clean up of that area. If anything fell out of the sensory table, the children knew they needed to stop and pick it up. I explained that the more that fell out the less they would have to play with. When we closed up center to move to the next part of our day the children all worked together clean up the floor. Depending on the material depended on the type of clean up.

If we used water or other type of wet material I took care of removing the shower curtain from underneath the table.

When we used something dry and large the children just need to pick up the items that "jumped" out.

For small dry material like corn or sand I kept a dust buster close by. The children love to use it to clean the sheet I had protecting the floor. I would then take the sheet to shake out what the dust buster missed. (Often I also used the dust buster to vacuum out the tub when I was changing sensory materials.) Whatever the dust buster did not get I would vacuum with the large vacuum. Most time a child would ask to help vacuum and we would vacuum together.

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Safety And Protection:

Keeping it safe:

There are several things to think about when you are allowing the children to play with sensory items.

1. If you have young children, make sure the items are not of choking size.
2. If you are using a wet material make sure that if the floor gets wet it is cleaned up with towels, a mop, etc... so no one slips.
3. As with anything you use with children; make sure there is nothing poisonous.
4. Be Aware Of Allergies!!!
5. When using a food or wet item be sure to clean it out daily. Bacteria, molds etc... can grow and make the children sick.
6. If you are using anything that could get into the eyes be sure to have the children wear safety glasses. Sawdust is a good example of this.
7. No matter what material you are using always have the children wash their hands after playing in the sensory table.
8. Ideally children with colds should not be in your care, but if a child has a cold try to limit their play in the sensory table. Some materials are hard to clean and this will spread germs quickly.

Protecting hands and clothes:

1. It is a good idea to always have plastic gloves available when working with the sensory table. Plastic gloves can be bought in a home improvement type store. I am not talking about latex glove like medical staff use. Plain plastic gloves are easier to use, cheaper, and safer (incase of powder or latex allergies). You may also have a child who wants to be included, but is afraid of getting messy.
2. Smocks are necessary when you use wet or messier materials in your sensory table. There are several types of smocks that you can use. Old adult sized t-shirts, store bought smocks, or a garbage bag with a slit made in the bag for a head and arms cut out. The garbage bag

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works great with shaving cream, water, and other wet materials.

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Storage:

Where do put everything I collected?:

This is the age old dilemma of teachers. Where do I put it all. Well I can't help you with that, but I can tell you some ways I have stored my sensory materials.

1. If you have a cat you have a great recourse at your disposal, depending on the cat litter you use. You can buy large quantities of cat litter in a plastic bucket. Wholesale clubs and some pets stores sell the littler in the buckets. I have about 100 of these buckets around our place. I use them to store everything. After pouring the litter into the litter box, I clean out the bucket and the lid. Then it is ready to fill. They have a metal handle and are very sturdy. They stack well and can be easily stored in basements, closets, garages, etc...
2. Garbage bags are good for storing larger soft items like cotton, leaves, etc...
3. Large Ziploc bags are great for storing dry items like sawdust, corn, etc...
4. If you have the money, Rubbermaid type containers with lids can be useful for material storage.

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Materials List:

By Catagory: [Food](#), [Enviormaental](#), [Recycled Items](#), [Water, Wet, and Messy](#), [Store Bought and Others](#)

Food:

Rice (plain)
Rice (colored, [see recipe](#).)
Pasta Noodles (plain)
Pasta Noodles (colored, [see recipe](#))
Rice and Black Beans (Great For Halloween)
White Lima Beans (With a marker draw two dots for the eyes and a O for the month to create a ghost on the lima bean. Great For Halloween)
Feed Corn
Feed Corn and Rocks (Let the children grind the corn with the rocks. **EYE PROTECTION!**)
Un-popped Popcorn
Un-popped Colored Popcorn (Bought in the store.)
Popped Popcorn
Dry Beans (all types)
Peanuts **ALLERGY ALERT!**
Pumpkin Seeds
Other Seeds
Cereal
Bananas And Mashers
Egg Shells
Cornmeal
Chow Mien Noodles
Clear Gelatin **SAFETY ALERT!** Can grow mold.
Coffee Beans
Coffee Grounds
Potato Flakes
Dry Oatmeal
Marshmallows
Cooked Spaghetti **SAFETY ALERT!** Can grow mold.
Frozen Vegetables **SAFETY ALERT!** Can grow mold.
Jell-O Filled Balloons
Pudding Filled Balloons
Corn Meal Filled Balloons
Salt
Salt (colored, [see recipe](#))
Pumpkin Goop **SAFETY ALERT!** Can grow mold

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Large Glitter (Some call it confetti. It come is all types of themes.) and Flour.
Play Cars and A Light Coating of Flour
Ziploc Bags Filled With Applesauce
Flour and Sifters

Environmental:

Leaves and Other Outdoor Finds (Have the children go on a nature walk with a brown paper bag and collect things to put in the sensory table)
Soil and Plastic Bugs
Soil and Rubber Worms (Rubber worms can be bought in the sporting goods/ Fishing department. Most do not come with hooks, but be sure to check first.)
Soil and Live Worms **GLOVE ALERT!**
Soil and Silk Flowers
Sand and Silk Flowers
Hay **ALLERGY ALERT!**
Rocks
Pebbles
Twigs
Sunflower Seeds (The kind you give the birds)
Bird Seeds
Fresh Flowers **ALLERGY ALERT!**
Pine Cones
Grass Seeds **ALLERGY ALERT!**
Grass Clippings **ALLERGY ALERT!**
Piece Of Grass Sod **ALLERGY ALERT!** Water and take care of the grass.
Cedar Chips **SAFETY ALERT!**
Sea Shells and Sand or Water
Sand (plain)
Sand (colored, [see recipe](#))
Sand and Sand Toys
Pine Needles And Pine Boughs

Recycled Items:

Packing Peanuts
Corks
Corks and Pipe cleaners
Wallpaper and Scissors
Wallpaper (for tearing)
Shredded Paper
Shredded Paper (black and orange) and Plastic Spiders (Great For Halloween!)
Shredded Paper and Plastic Snakes
Scraps Of Materials
Scraps Of Felt
Scraps Of Fun Foam
Scraps Of Paper
Scraps Of Paper, Scissors, Hole Punch

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Carpet Sample Pieces

Sand Paper Pieces

Mail (Ask the parent to bring in junk mail, paper and envelopes. Place in the sensory table. Supply stamps, stickers, and a few canvas bags for the complete post office.)

Sand Paper and Wood Scraps **SAFETY ALERT!** (Have the children wear thick gloves and eye protection.)

Sawdust **EYE PROTECTION!**

Shredded Newspaper

Crayons Pieces and Plastic Knives (Let the children make crayon shavings and save them to make crayons.)

Bean Bag Chair Filling

Beanie Baby Filling

Old Keys

Old CDs. (Free AOL and other internet company CDs work great.)

Paper Tubes (Cut into long pieces or leave whole)

Scrap Pieces of Bulletin Board Borders

Cut Up Pieces Of All Towel

Old Puzzle Pieces

Old Baseball Cards (Make sure they are worthless before you use them in the sensory table.)

Foam Meat Trays and Milk Caps (Float the meat tray in water, the throw milk cap into the meat trays.)

Water, Wet, and Messy:

Ice and Water

Bubble Mix ([see recipe](#))

Water and Corks

Ping Pong Balls, Water, and Aquarium Fish Net

Large Glitter (Some call it confetti. It come is all types of themes.) and Water

Colored Ice Cubes and Water

Colored Ice Cubes and Paper (When you freeze the ice cubes but in Popsicle sticks. The children can paint on their paper with the ice cube.)

Shaving Cream

Tray Of Ice (Take a cafeteria tray and fill it with water. Then place it in the freezer. Once it is frozen put the tray in your sensory table.)

Rubber Ducks And Water

Sink and Float Activities

Water And Plastic Fish

Dolls, Wash Cloth, and Soapy Water

Play Plastic Dishes, Sponge, and Soapy Water. (If possible, have a dish rack set up on a table close by.)

Snow **SAFETY ALERT!** (Give the children gloves or mittens to play with the snow.)

Colored Water

Water and Foam Letters (Good For a Chicka Chicka Boom Boom Lesson)

Boats and Water

Water and Plastic Frogs

Small Toy In Frozen Into Ice Cubes

Aluminum Foil, Garland, and Water (Line the bottom of the sensory table with aluminum foil. Fill

with water and add small pieces of Christmas garland.

Small Minnows In Water **SAFETY ALERT!**

Fun Foam Shapes and Water

Water Balloons

Fun Foam Circles and Water (Use a hole punch to cut circles from the fun foam.)

Dirt

Mud

Store Bought and Other:

Wrapping Paper and Scissors

Wrapping Paper, Scissors, Tape, Boxes, Bows, Ribbons

Straws (Whole)

Straw Pieces and Scoops

Straw Pieces and String

Cotton

Popsicle Sticks

Sponges From Hair Rollers

Present Bows (Great For Christmas)

Aquarium Rocks

Ping Pong Balls

Jumping Tent Colored Balls (Good for a carnival or circus theme.)

Golf Balls

Pom Poms

Pom Poms, Tongs, and Colored Cups

Feathers

Christmas Garland (Long or cut into pieces)

Colored Cellophane Squares

Plastic Easter Eggs

Plastic Easter Eggs and Easter Grass

Plastic Eggs and Small Animals That Hatch From Eggs

Easter Grass and Plastic Bugs

Large Beads

Play Dough and Cookie Cutters

Magnets

Small Blocks

Sponge Pieces (Water Optional)

Sponges, Whole (Water Optional)

Shaped Sponges (Water Optional)

Colored Items (Pick items that go along with your color theme and hide them in the same colored sand or plain sand. [see recipe.](#))

Sand and Foam Letters (I also had a small blow up palm tree. Chicka Chicka Boom Boom Lesson)

Yarn (Old Latch Hook Yarn)

Yarn, Long Pieces and Scissors

Stamps and Paper

Pillow Filling

Sand and Plastic Jewels (Hidden Treasure)

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Ribbon Pieces
Sand And Dog Bones
Milk Bone Dog Biscuit
Dog Or Cat Food
Fake Mice (Cat Toys)
Buttons
Jacks
Hats
Beaded Necklaces
Tissue Paper Pieces
Aluminum Foil
Artificial Christmas tree and Decorations
Christmas Tree Balls **SAFETY ALERT!** (Make sure there are plastic and hooks.)
Foam Squares (They sell foam squares at baseball card shows. They are normally use to take up spaces in card boxes. They are inexpensive, colorful and lots of fun in a sensory table.)
Colored Electrical Tape and Paper
Stuffed Toys
Silk Flowers Without Stems and Water
Hair Scrunches
Coins
Plastic Animals
Plastic People

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Recipes:

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Bubbles

Need: 1 cup water, 1/3 cup dish soap (Joy, Sunlight, etc.), 2 Tablespoons light corn syrup

Directions: Combine ingredients and enjoy. Try using different objects from your utensil drawer as a bubble wand.

[See More Bubble Recipes](http://www.preschooleducation.com/rbubble.shtml)

<http://www.preschooleducation.com/rbubble.shtml>

Colored Bubbles

Need: 1 cup granulated soap or soap powder, 1 quart warm water, liquid food coloring, plastic straws, pin

Directions: Dissolve soap in warm water, stir in food coloring. Fill the sensory table. Give each child a plastic straw to blow the bubbles. First poke a hole near the top of the straw with a pin so if they accidentally suck in most of the soap will go out the hole instead of in there mouth. Yuck!

Color Salt

Need: Salt, Ziploc Bag, Powdered Paint

Directions: Pour the salt in a Ziploc bag and then pour in a few table spoons of powdered paint. Mix. Add paint till you have the desired color.

Color Sand

Need: Sand, Ziploc Bag, Food Coloring

Directions: Pour sand into a Ziploc bag. Add a few drops of food coloring. Mix. Add food coloring till you have the desired color.

Pasta Dye

Need: 1/4 Cup Rubbing Alcohol, 1 tablespoon food coloring, 2 Cups Pasta, 1 quart Ziploc freezer bag, wax paper, trays

Directions: Pour alcohol and food coloring in bag mix together. Add pasta. Zip closed and mix all together. Let set for an hour, then turn over and let set for 30 mins. more. Pour out onto wax paper lined trays to dry. If not dark enough, repeat process.

Rice Dye

Need: 1/4 Cup Rubbing Alcohol, 1 tablespoon food coloring, 2 Cups Rice, 1 quart Ziploc freezer bag

Directions: Pour alcohol and food coloring in bag mix together. Add Rice. Zip closed and mix all together. Let set till you have the desired color. Pour out onto wax paper lined trays to dry. If not dark enough, repeat process.

Great Goop

Need: 2 cups water, 1/2 cup cornstarch, Food coloring

Directions: Boil water in saucepan. Add cornstarch stirring until smooth. Add food coloring and stir. Remove from heat and cool. Child can play with the goop on any plastic covered surface.

Whipped Snow

Need: 2 cups warm water, 1 cup pure laundry soap or flakes , Electric mixer

Directions: Put water and soap in large bowl and beat with mixer until very fluffy. Add food coloring if desired. This can be molded into shapes and left to dry.

Crayons

Need: Coffee Can, Crayon Shavings, Pan, Mold

Directions: Put pieces of old crayons of the same or similar colors in a coffee can and set it in a pan of water on the stove. Cook until melted. Pour the wax into a mold and allow to harden.

Clean Mud

Need: Toilet paper, 1-2 White Soap Bars, Water, Cheese Grater

Directions: Into your sensory table put torn up rolls of toilet paper, as much as you want. Peel the bars of white soap. Great them into the sensory table. Ivory works well. Add warm water. Dig in.

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