Experts agree that children learn and develop their minds during their early years, especially when they are encouraged to play with toys that attract their senses of sight, sound and touch.

What does that mean? Well, for starters, it means that playing with toys offers a learning experience, even if your child doesn’t realize it. It also means that choosing multi-sensory toys—the kinds of games and activities that dazzle the ears, eyes and fingertips—helps build up your child’s brain when he or she is very young, and even as he grows up.

What can playtime with multi-sensory toys teach children of all ability levels?

• Awareness of body movement and surroundings
• Creative self-expression through
making noises, flashing lights, etc.
- Ability to use more than one sense at a time
- Independence through self-directed play (many toys require little to no adult supervision when in use)
- Peer interaction (many toys allow for more than one player at a time)
- Stronger fine and gross motor skills
- Understanding of cause and effect

What toys are multi-sensory toys?

One of the most easily recognized types of multi-sensory toys is the musical toy because it is primarily designed to stimulate the ears, while also providing touchy-feely fun. That makes it a good time toy for children with or without hearing or visual impairments. Musical toys offer children the chance to listen to and distinguish between different types of sounds, and often the opportunity to make their own sounds too.

Music puzzles are one way to deliver maximum audio, visual and tactile stimulation in a single activity. When the pieces are placed into their slots properly, these puzzles reward players with a happy sound. Try to find music puzzles that offer additional learning benefits, such as identifying the alphabet, numbers or objects they see every day, like cars, trucks and animals.

Toy instruments and noisemakers are musically and visually stimulating, often with the added bonus of developing the striking motion skill. Like all musical toys, they require an action to create sound; but it is a precise striking, shaking or pressing motion that creates the desired bang, rattle, giggle or thump. Early development of the striking motion can have the long-term benefit of being able to master sports such as baseball, tennis and more.

To add more physical movement into the musical mix, try musical step-on pads or platforms, which reinforce balance skills each time your child steps up and is rewarded with a friendly sound. For young children ages 2 and up, try musical mats, which combine color, sound, and letter learning with musical and visual (flashing lights) fun. Some giant piano mats are even durable enough to be rolled over by children using wheelchairs.
A twirling toy with internal tunnels and beads is another great choice. As your child gives it a whirl, turn or shake, he’ll create a unique, interactive combination of sights and sounds with brightly colored beads cascading through its balconies and spinners. Rainsticks also allow him to see inside and learn how sounds are made (cause and effect), as pretty beads swirl to create a gentle rain-fall sound. While some music toys are loud and even silly, rainsticks are soothing to listen to when your desire is to relax your child.

Shopping for an audio sensitive child? Not every kid can enjoy a musical toy. For some, even gentle noises are too much to handle. As an alternative, try engaging the senses of sight and touch with building toys and tactile puzzles, which encourage creative self-expression, the use of imagination, and the development of fine motor skills.

For children with dexterity challenges, large, colorful blocks can be easy to handle, and they encourage color recognition and distinction. Choose blocks that are lightweight, durable, washable and non-toxic, making them fun for the fingers and the eyes. For additional soft fun on the larger scale, find giant foam shapes, which offer a hands-on way for younger children—and those with fine motor challenges—to discover shapes and colors.

And speaking of puzzles: there are many tactile puzzles available without sound, which still encourage your child’s development of visual and tactile senses. Choose puzzles with inviting themes such as: farm animals, facial expressions, and stars and planets. A puzzle with locks and latches can be a great interactive experience as kids open doors on the puzzle and discover what’s hiding underneath. Some puzzles even tackle the topic of basic skills such as buckling, lacing, zipping, buttoning and snapping… just like we do with our clothes everyday!

The textures of water and sand provide wonderful sensory stimulation for little hands. Outside or in, a sand and water table offers the tabletop experience of playing with sand or water for children in groups of up to four, making it a great choice for play dates. A sensory
station is a vibrantly colored table that encourages creativity with sand, water, clay or craft play, and may include a removable storage bin that fits into the work surface’s center, minimizing the risk of mess. But for truly mess-free sand play, try a no-mess sandbox, which allows kids to place their arms into tubes and reach into an enclosed sandy landscape. It’s all the fun of a traditional sandbox without the bugs and dirt.

**What about the other two senses?**

As your mother always told you, it’s not a good idea to play with your food. However, it is possible to smell some of your toys, and there are some great aromatic toys for kids of all ability levels on the market. Certain stuffed animals offer a heated, calming snuggle experience with the relaxing aroma of lavender. For kids able to write with pencils, make the switch to scented pencils and crayons. There are even scented guessing games available, which require players to scratch and sniff while moving their game pieces along a colorful board.

Try emphasizing one type of sensory experience at a time when you introduce multi-sensory toys to your child so as not to overwhelm him or her. If you introduce a musical puzzle, for instance, wait until they’re used to it before exploring the concept of visual learning with the same toy. That means focusing on sound first, sight later. And if you’re introducing a tactile toy, enjoy the way it makes fingers feel before pointing out its shape and color. Similarly, you want to be careful about clutter: don’t give your child too many toys at once as multiple types of sights, sounds, smells and textures in one location can also overwhelm.

In short, with the wonderful learning benefits of multi-sensory toys, a little goes a long way, making multi-sensory toys an affordable, smart choice for kids of all ability levels.

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