

## Calming activities

### Home program

#### What is calming?

Children who feel overwhelmed by tasks or sensory input—too much to see and do—may find it hard to focus and succeed in everyday activities. Depending on their heredity, personality, motivation, and stage of growth, some children need help to relax and focus.

The term “calming” can refer to promoting:

- a relaxed state
- an organized nervous system (alert but not anxious)
- emotional well-being or stability

#### How can I help my child?

The following checked activities can decrease stress and help your child function better at home, at school, and in the community. **This home program should be used only under the guidance of an occupational therapist.**

It is helpful to:

- Choose a calming activity and use it before and after a stressful event. Letting your child help choose this activity can ease the stress even more.
- Get to know your child’s signs of stress. These might include a change in the amount of talk or eye contact, withdrawal, self-hurting or risk-taking, sweating, or self-stimulation.
- Finish all self-care and hygiene routines at least one hour before bedtime, leaving time for your child to calm down.

#### Pressure/touch activities

- Give a lotion massage using deep pressure touch.
- Roll child up in a blanket and rock, either in your lap or beside you. Make sure shoulders and feet are covered for warmth.
- Play “hot dog” or “squish”: sandwich child between pillows, or roll up in a blanket (with head out). Stop if child is uneasy.
- Have child lie or sit on a blanket, then drag it across the floor. If you have a partner, pick up the ends and swing gently.
- Wrap arms and legs in Ace® wraps (not too tight) and play mummy.
- Lie down to watch a movie or read a book; cover with a heavy blanket.
- Sit in an oversized beanbag chair for snugness around the head and body; try adding a heavy blanket too.
- A vibrating pillow calms some children.
- Give a warm bath, but be mindful of soap scents, which may be alerting. Try putting a towel in the dryer during the bath, then use it while still warm. Use firm pressure when drying with the towel.
- If your child is playing very actively, join in and play along, gradually slowing it down. For example, if play wrestling, let your child set the pace for a while, then gradually use firmer, steadier touch to calm things down.
- Play with resistive media such as Play-doh®, clay, sand, dry rice, or beans.
- Show child how to pet a quiet dog or cat with slow, even strokes. Calming the

animal may help the child feel the same way.

### **Visual activities**

- Keep lights dim or off, and use natural light from the windows.
- Move to a clutter-free room.
- Make a quiet corner: small spaces tend to be calming. For example, drape blankets over a card table and place pillows, blankets, stuffed animals, books, and quiet toys underneath. If this corner is always available, your child will learn to use it when feeling stressed.
- Approach child from the front; avoid surprises.
- Consider the colors in your child's bedroom: pastels, earth tones, and shades of blue and green are the most calming.
- Watch fish swimming in a tank.
- Watch fire in a fireplace.
- Play with oil and water toys.

### **Hearing activities**

- Sing a familiar tune quietly.
- Use music with a slow steady beat, such as lullabies or classical music.
- If your child is distracted by sounds such as the refrigerator, heater, or air conditioner turning on and off, use a white noise machine. Children's ears are often more sensitive than adults'.

### **Smell activities**

- Many scents are known to be calming. If you are interested in aromatherapy, ask your therapist about a referral to Children's Integrative Medicine program. Massage is also available, using aromatherapy oils.

### **Heavy work/play activities**

These activities require "heavy work," which is both calming and organizing. Heavy work stimulates receptors in the joints and muscles called proprioceptors (**proh-pree-oh-sep-tors**). They release chemicals that signal the brain to calm the body.

- Use climbing equipment at the park. Children who play actively until tired will slow down on their own.
- Ride a bike; include some uphill climbs.
- Try the "body pull" with another adult. One person holds the child's ankles or calves; the other holds securely under the arms. Say "Ready, set, pull," then both stretch child's body gently to a count of 3 and then relax. If child enjoys it, repeat as many times as your child wants.
- Eat something chewy while playing a quiet game or working with the hands. Try licorice, Gummi® bears, Starbursts®, beef jerky, bagels, fruit chews, caramels, or bubble gum.

### **Self-care activities**

- Make activities as routine as possible. If dressing is the task, make a small chair the "dressing chair." When seated in the chair, the child will know it is time for dressing.
- Keep a steady morning routine. For example: first wake your child up in the usual way, then go to the bathroom, then go to the kitchen for breakfast, then brush teeth.
- Use a picture schedule to teach daily routines. Take pictures of common activities—meals, car rides, outdoor play—and display them in order on a sheet of paper or in a photo album. Once your child learns the pattern, you may not need to refer to the schedule until a change is made.

Always position child securely – sitting in your lap or in a chair with feet firmly on the ground. You can steady your child with an arm around the shoulders when standing. Being in front of a mirror is often helpful, so your child knows what is happening.

On the toilet, your child needs secure positioning. A seat insert can help. Use a small bench as a step up to the seat, and as a footrest while sitting. Sometimes sitting backwards on the toilet gives a secure feeling. Ask your therapist about other systems available through catalogs.

For bath safety, use non-slip tub treads, or a bath chair or mat to sit on.

### **Products**

- Be mindful of scents that may be alerting or unpleasant. Use unscented products or a scent that is pleasant to your child.
- Check the textures and tastes of toothpastes.
- Liquid soap may be preferred to bar soap. Some children are calmed by body puffs, which are filled with soap and then rubbed on the skin.
- To speed hair washing, use a combined shampoo and conditioner.

### **Bathing**

- Wash less sensitive areas first—such as arms—even if they aren't dirty, just to prepare your child.
- Use firm pressure when washing. Move slowly and continuously, keeping steady contact in each area before moving on.
- Use a soft washcloth, holding edges so they don't drip or brush the skin. Or even use a body puff.

- Prepare child before you use a wash cloth on the face. Let child wet the face first.

### **School activities**

Have child wear a fanny pack or backpack with items to handle and play with, such as a Koosh® ball, grip ball, or Silly Putty®.

Have child keep a few chewing or sucking items such as gum, Starbursts®, hard candy, or rubber tubing in a fanny pack. Use only if appropriate for the school setting.

Provide frequent movement breaks (every 1½ to 2 hours). Have child be the “helper” or “runner”: passing out papers, running things to the office, cleaning chalkboards, pushing the library cart, and moving chairs. Stretch breaks, jumping jacks, or wall push-ups are good for the whole class.

Have child sit on an air-filled cushion to increase sitting tolerance and/or attention span.

Place child in a desk away from distractions such as aisles, doors, windows, sink, fans. Also consider the children nearby.

Use natural lighting if possible, install a dimmer switch for low lighting, or turn on just half the lights if possible.

Eliminate background noise and music. Or ask your therapist which types of music may be calming – such as “Mozart for Meditation” or “Earth Drums.”

Have child wear a weighted backpack or fanny pack. Ask your therapist about using a weighted vest at certain times of the day. It is most effective if worn for only 20 minutes at a time.

Use a picture or written schedule so there are no surprises in the day. Give some

warning before transitions: “We’re having lunch in about 10 minutes.”

### Household activities

These activities require “heavy work,” which is both calming and organizing.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> carrying laundry or groceries         | <input type="checkbox"/> mowing                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cleaning (sinks, tubs, floors)        | <input type="checkbox"/> raking                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gardening, pulling weeds              | <input type="checkbox"/> shoveling                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> kneading bread, stirring cookie dough | <input type="checkbox"/> sweeping                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mopping                               | <input type="checkbox"/> unloading and loading dishwasher |
| <input type="checkbox"/> moving furniture                      | <input type="checkbox"/> vacuuming                        |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> washing or waxing the car        |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> washing windows                  |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> watering plants                  |

### Bedtime activities

- Keep bedtime routines the same every night, and if needed, use pictures or a written schedule until your child learns it. If it changes, use a picture or written schedule again.
- Play quietly in the bedroom with items such as puzzles or books. Dim the light and have as little background noise as possible.
- When your child gets into bed, give a firm back rub before saying good night. (line space is needed between this two items.)
- Use items such as a weighted blanket, several lightweight blankets, a sleeping bag, pillows, or stuffed animals to cuddle.
- Place the bed against the wall so your child can move close to it for a boundary.
- Use room-darkening shades if your child is sensitive to light. If a night-light is needed, a colored bulb is less distracting.
- If your child is a light sleeper, use a white noise machine or a fan. Even

plumbing or furnace sounds can wake some children.

### Special instructions

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Questions?

This home program is to be used only under the guidance of an occupational therapist. If you have any problems with this home program, or any questions, please call your occupational therapist in the Developmental and Rehabilitation Services Department.

---

Therapist signature

---

Date

---

Phone

Children’s Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota  
Patient/Family Education  
2525 Chicago Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55404  
3/10 ©Copyright