



A Shared Vision

Partners in Pediatric Blindness and Visual Impairment

Let's Make a Gardening Sensory Bin



So much learning goes naturally into gardening or just being outside. Even if your child can't see a flower, they can touch the petals, smell its fragrance, and listen to how it sounds swaying in the breeze. Gardening together is one way to help your child develop an understanding of the outside and how things grow.

However, some children with blindness or a visual impairment are easily overwhelmed by new textures or smells; others have limited mobility that makes getting outside more challenging. A gardening sensory bin makes nature more accessible and it's easy for families to assemble and experience together.

What Is a Sensory Bin?

A sensory bin is a storage tub, dish pan or other container filled with things you can touch, smell, listen to, or even taste with your child who is visually impaired.

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referrals@ASharedVision.org | www.ASharedVision.org

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To play with the bin, just pick up and experience the items. Talk about their color. Mention other things in your home or your yard that are the same color. Use other meaningful words to describe the object – its shape, texture, or the sound it makes – so your child will recognize the object in other ways besides visually. If your child eats by mouth, talk about the foods your child is eating and maybe one of them is in the sensory bin!

As you explore the bin together, take turns between letting your child explore quietly on their own and narrating to your child about what they're doing. "You found the shovel! The handle is smooth. Now, you're digging. You're holding a flower – it smells good. Can Mommy smell the flower? That rock is bumpy. Bang, bang, bang on the bowl – that's loud! You put the rock back in the bowl."

Don't forget to be sensitive to your child's body movements, vocalizations, and facial expressions. For some children, introducing new items can feel a bit overwhelming. For children who are hesitant to touch new objects, try introducing new items one at a time or at their feet first to allow them to "warm up" to the idea.

Duration

This activity will take five to 45 minutes depending on your child's interest and mood.

Suggested Materials

- Tub, dish pan or metal bowl
- Dried white beans, rice or potting soil
- Plastic shovel
- Rocks or large pebbles with interesting texture or colors
- Packet of seeds that makes noise when you shake it
- Pine cone that's not prickly
- Real flowers or vegetables that are found in a garden



Activity Steps

1. Position your child so they can look at the materials and touch them with their hands or feet. Caregiver should sit behind the child to support the child and use hand under hand to guide the child.
2. Cover the bottom of a tub or dish pan with dried white beans or rice. Make sure they don't go into your child's mouth because beans or rice can pose a choking hazard. If your child is more adventurous, you can try using potting soil, with close supervision.
3. Fill the pan with things you might associate with a garden – a plastic shovel, rocks or large pebbles with interesting texture or colors, a packet of seeds that makes noise when you shake it, a pine cone that's not prickly, a real flower or vegetable from the garden. What's important is that they are everyday things you find in a garden or your own yard. Don't put too much in the bin or it will be overwhelming to your child and hard to find single items to touch.
4. Give your child the opportunity to look at the objects in the bin.
5. Invite your child to touch the objects in the bin. Use hand under hand to start. Never force your child to touch anything in the bin if they seem resistant.
6. Talk about the color of the objects. Mention other things in your home or yard that are the same color. Use other meaningful words to describe the objects – its shape, texture, or the sound it makes, so your child will recognize the object in other ways besides visually. If your child eats by mouth, talk about the foods your child is eating and maybe one of them is in the sensory bin.
7. Give your child opportunities to make choices and communicate. Take turns between letting your child explore quietly on their own or talking to your child during the activity.
8. Be sensitive to your child's personality. If the child seems overwhelmed or hesitant to touch new objects, introduce new items one at a time or at their feet first, or just stop the activity.

Extension Activities

Once you've made one sensory bin, it's easy to get creative and come up with your own themes. Make sure the items you put in your bin don't pose a choking risk for your child. If the item fits inside a toilet paper tube, it's probably too small. You don't have to use a plastic bin either; a large stainless-steel bowl is wonderfully reflective and makes a great sound when your child drops a toy in it. Pinterest has many great ideas here:

<https://www.pinterest.com/officialperkins/tactile-sensory-activities-for-children-who-are-vi/?lp=true>.

Try some other gardening or outdoor activities together like growing a container garden, making a windchime, or going for a nature walk. See <https://www.asharedvision.org/lets-play.html> for more ideas.

