



# Sensory Processing Service

Sensory Opportunities at the  
Play Park



Caring, Learning  
& Growing Together



[hnf-tr.humbersensoryprocessingservice@nhs.net](mailto:hnf-tr.humbersensoryprocessingservice@nhs.net)

# Sensory Opportunities at the Play Park Hanging

As Sensory Integration Therapists, play parks are something we highly recommend and use so often for children and families to be able to access opportunities to move and play to regulate – to have fun, and explore!

Some families find that nature offers its very own playground. Some families can make a playground in their own front room or garden. But what is it about parks which are so good for our children?

It is important to add, that when providing your child with these opportunities, your child's play should be led by **them**. If your child's play is restricted or limited (for example, if they avoid certain pieces of equipment in the play park), this may indicate a sensory processing difference or may be for another reason. However, never pressure a child to engage with something they don't feel comfortable with!

At its simplest, a park provides a place to play, to have fun, to explore, and to be curious. Shared joy and pleasure releases endorphins and 'feel good' hormones – this helps our mood, our motivation, and ultimately our health. They are a great way for us to get outdoors, and combine social opportunities with play.

See if you notice any of the things below that your child is drawn to. For lots of this equipment, play parks now have wheelchair or otherwise accessible versions too.



# Hanging

## Main Effects

- Calming and organising
- Helps to build strength
- Provides proprioception
- Helps with concentration and attention

## When

- If feeling agitated, restless, frustrated or giddy and hyper!
- To get a sense of mastery, strength and assertiveness

## Home alternatives

- Hanging from a strong tree branch in the garden
- Leaning against something (such as a door frame) whilst holding on and extending your arms above your head, but leaving your feet on the floor

Hanging from monkey bars or similar equipment is brilliant for developing core strength. To grip with our finger tips, we need good hand strength – for this we need good shoulder strength – for this we need good ‘core activation’ (the muscles in our trunk/ tummy and back area). Children get a sense of where their body is in space, and of the limits their bodies can move to. They will also begin to activate muscle groups needed for other tasks – to hold a knife and fork or a pen, you need the same muscles – this is why people look very confused when Occupational Therapists might recommend an hour a day at a play-park when the child is having difficulties with handwriting!



Caring, Learning  
& Growing Together



# Inversion (Hanging Upside Down)

## Main Effects

- Intense sensation
- Calming and organising (if it is self-directed and the child independently does this. Never force a child to do it!)

## When

- If becoming overwhelmed

## Home alternatives

- Hang your head back off the edge of the sofa or the bed, or lay your child in your lap and have them release their head off the edge of your legs

Hanging upside down stimulates our 'vestibular system'. This provides very intense sensory feedback, which can be grounding and organising. It's really important that this is self-directed as it can be really over-whelming and disorganising if someone were to 'put' you in this position, especially if you have sensory processing difficulties. It is important to try and include active movement after hanging, including pushing/ pulling (proprioception), so you don't feel off-kilter after having a period upside down. You should only do this for short periods where possible!



# Swinging

## Main Effects

- Calming, regular linear vestibular input
- Core stability – strengthening your tummy muscles to sit up
- Bilateral integration – using both sides of your body to hold on to the swing chain or the netting!
- Balance and learning where your middle point is!

## When

- Before or after school, and before needing to sit for focused periods of time, like before eating dinner or completing school work

## Home alternatives

- Straddling a peanut ball and rocking back and forth
- Using an outdoor swinging garden chair, hammock, or a rocking chair indoors

Swinging provides linear vestibular sensory input – linear means backwards and forwards, and vestibular is our ‘movement’ sense. For lots of children, this motion can help them to feel ‘calm alert’. Doing bigger, more unpredictable movements would make it more alerting than calming.



# Climbing & Problem Solving

## Main Effects

- Helps to activate and connect lots of different areas of the brain for slowing down, problem solving, reasoning
- Helps to get your body and mind working and synchronising together!
- Stimulates creativity and exploration

## Home alternatives

- Obstacle courses
- The floor is lava!
- Sofa cushion swamp

Climbing is a brilliant task which brings together your mind and your body. It requires you to focus attention, plan and execute your movements, adjust them if you've not got it quite right and set yourself something to achieve and feel successful with! Hopefully understanding a little more about why your child may enjoy or seek when at the park, will help to equip you more with finding alternatives and embedding them throughout their day.



Caring, Learning  
& Growing Together

