



Move, Balance, Breathe: The Magic of Sensory Circuits in Early Years

About the AUTHOR

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"The more information the brain can get, the more neural pathways are created to allow us to learn and remember"
(Greutman & Kostelyk, 2018)

Why are they climbing under the table again?

If you have ever found a child spinning in circles just before story time or bouncing endlessly while trying to focus on a task, you've already seen sensory needs at work. In early years, movement and learning are deeply connected. But what if we could harness that movement intentionally — not just to manage behaviour, but to enhance engagement and wellbeing?

In early childhood, learning does not begin with a pencil or a worksheet — it begins with the senses. Sensory circuits are short, structured physical activities designed to support children in becoming more alert, organised, and calm — the optimal state for learning and engagement.

As stated by Rhino UK, sensory circuits can benefit all children, as everyone has unique sensory processing needs. While they are especially beneficial for children with diagnosed needs like ADHD, autism, or sensory processing differences, they are also a great tool for the wider early years community to improve focus, attention, and readiness for learning.

What is a Sensory Circuit?

A sensory circuit is a structured sequence of physical activities designed to help children regulate their sensory input so they can engage in learning with focus and calm. Jane Horwood Occupational Paediatric Therapist developed them.

The circuit flows through three stages:

- ★ **Alerting:** wakes up the brain through dynamic movement (e.g. bouncing, skipping)
- ★ **Organising:** challenges coordination and control (e.g. balance beams, crawling)
- ★ **Calming:** soothes the body and supports regulation (e.g. deep breathing, massage)

Why Do They Work? The Evidence Behind the Moves

A study by Harland, Swarbrick and Haines reports that group sessions using sensory-integration techniques were perceived by therapists and teaching staff to lead to improved participation and engagement in both the sessions and subsequent learning/activities — including gains in confidence, communication and turn-taking skills.

Sensory circuits could help support self-regulation by preparing the child's brain and body to engage appropriately with their environment — a crucial precursor to learning.

Children who struggle with transitions, focus, or emotional control may benefit most. In my setting, we introduced a morning sensory circuit for a small group of 3- and 4-year-olds showing high activity levels or frequent dysregulation. Activities included a mini trampoline, balance beam, scooter board, and butterfly breathing. After two weeks, we observed improved transitions into group time, increased time on task, and fewer emotional outbursts mid-morning. Children even asked to do a sensory circuit if they felt they were becoming dysregulated.

Creating a Sensory Circuit

You do not need specialist equipment or a large space to run a sensory circuit. Here is how a simple setup might look:

★ Alerting Activities

These may help to wake up the brain and body:

- Jumping on a mini trampoline
- Skipping or stomping
- Bouncing on a space hopper
- Bunny hops or crab walks

★ Organising Activities

These require focus and coordination:

- Balancing on a beam or wobble board
- Crawling through a tunnel or under a table
- Throwing beanbags into a target
- Climbing or doing wall push-ups

★ Calming Activities

These can help to bring the nervous system back to a steady state:

- Deep pressure massage or weighted blankets
- Lying down with deep breathing exercises
- Quiet time with calming music or picture books

Remember, there is no one size fits all solution for any sensory support. You need to consider what the aim of your sensory circuit is, and monitor to see that it has the desired impact.

Making It Happen: Practical Tips from Our Setting

- ★ **Start small:** You do not need a gym. Use mats, a tunnel under a table, a line of tape as a balance beam, do it outdoors.
- ★ **Keep the sequence:** Always go from alerting → organising → calming.
- ★ **Personalise:** One child may need more calming input; another might benefit from extra movement.
- ★ **Build it into the routine:** Ours happens first thing, but others may benefit before lunch or after outdoor play.
- ★ **Make it fun:** You could even a circuit around the Gingerbread Man story. A playful example is the Gingerbread Man Circuit:
 - Jump like the Gingerbread Man (alerting)
 - Balance along a path (organising)
 - Relax - lie down on a soft mat and practise deep breathing exercises, mimicking the Gingerbread Man's rest (calming)

In a Nutshell

Sensory circuits are more than just movement breaks. They are targeted, evidence-informed strategies rooted in how children experience the world. With a little creativity, intention, and structure, they can transform everyday moments into powerful opportunities for regulation, connection, and learning.



Key Takeaway:

- Sensory circuits are a simple, cost-effective way to support regulation, focus, and wellbeing in early years settings — especially for children with additional sensory needs.
 - Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders
 - Those with Sensory Processing Disorder
 - Children who struggle with transitions, attention, or emotional regulation



Reflective Questions:

- Which children in your setting might benefit from a short sensory circuit?
- Where could you set one up – could you use outdoors?
- When would be the best time to enable children to do a sensory circuit?

References and Resources :

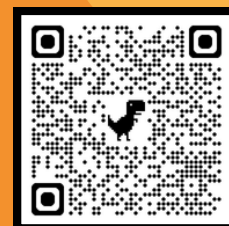
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