

Stimulating the sense of smell in young children



The sense of smell, the olfactory sense, is the most highly developed of the senses at birth. Babies in the womb are able to smell amniotic fluid, and by two weeks a newborn baby can distinguish between the scent of their own mothers breast milk and another mother's milk. Research shows that the smell of the milk they recognise makes them happy and contented, before they have even tasted it!

As sense of smell develops in a baby, they can associate good smells and aromas with good feelings. Soft fragrance can soothe and delight the baby. An infant's sense of smell develops as they continue to grow, and by the age of one, most babies can recognize the smells of other adults and children. Young children and babies are also very quick to distinguish odours that are unpleasant, due to this extreme sensitivity.

The olfactory bulb is part of the brain's limbic system, an area closely associated with memory and feeling, so sometimes it is called the "emotional brain". Therefore certain smells can conjure up memories and powerful responses almost instantaneously. Chlorine, for example, may relax the enthusiastic swimmer or equally trigger a specific pool-related memory, that could be unpleasant. This means that fragrance can have an instantaneous effect on our moods and emotions, and explains why different people have different 'favourite' scents.



With such a heightened sense it is important as practitioners working with young children that we pay attention to this and consider how it is provided for within the environment. The sense of touch is met through a range of textures that children can explore, and often music is available throughout the day to inspire the sense of hearing, but how often is this highly developed sense of smell paid attention to.

Some ideas:

Share your favourite smells with the children, and use language to highlight scents in the environment, drawing their attention to this sense such as 'Ooh, I think someone's making toast.' 'Can you smell the freshly cut grass?' 'This soap reminds me of my mummy!'

Find out what children's favourite smells are so you can personalise the environment to meet their needs. Young children will gain pleasure and comfort from certain smells, often those linked with a positive memory.



Make a collection of smelling pots, using empty pepper pots. Add cotton wool balls to each container, with a different essence, such as peppermint, vanilla, lavender, lemon or powders such as baby powder, cinnamon and coffee. A piece of tape over the holes will help to seal the fragrance, and can be opened and shut with relative ease. This resource may need to be closely monitored depending on the age of the children.

Provide a range of pots, pans, pestle and mortar and other utensils in a Petal Perfume Creation Station-don't forget beautiful bottles and storage containers to inspire little inventors, and materials available to label their fragrances.



Make mobiles with potpourri or herbs. Shake a pleasant-smelling spice such as clove or cinnamon on to cotton balls and put them inside baby socks. Tie the top of the sock and sew elastic on to the top. These can then be attached to a hanger, coat hooks or a washing line, so that children can pull them down to sniff.

Introducing fragrance within the environment:

- Herbs growing in pots, in the snack area
- Tumble dryer sheets in the home corner washing machine
- Empty bottles of fabric conditioner in the home corner
- Empty spice pots in the home corner kitchen
- Dry 'ingredients' such cinnamon bark, star anise, coffee, baby powder, lavender, rosemary in sand, water and other malleable materials
- A few drops of essential oils on cushions/blankets/fabrics
- Essential oils and essences in playdough
- Collection of miniature/travel sized soaps/shampoos to explore
- Collection of miniature/travel sized soaps/shampoos etc to inspire exploration and potion making alongside the water tray
- Collection of (non glass)scented candles to explore
- Herbal teabags in water tray
- Collection of empty perfume bottles
- Hang up oranges with cloves, dried apple rings etc
- Wardrobe pomanders/sachets with dressing up
- Fragranced drawer liners in bottom of drawers and baskets

SAFETY CONSIDERATION: Ensure that no ingredients could trigger a known allergy. Young children in particular need to be closely supervised when handling some of these resources.

