

# Sensory-motor Enhancement on a Budget

— Kathy Rinden



After participating in the “Nurturing the Roots” Early Childhood Therapeutic Professional Deepening course,<sup>1</sup> I felt the need to look with fresh eyes upon my classroom’s physical space and how I could bring more healthy movement opportunities to the children in my care. One of the realities that I had to consider was that my classroom budget was tight. I knew that this perceived obstacle could be overcome. With some time, research, and imagination, I have been able to make some wise purchases to reach my goal and stay within my budget.

I had seen a lovely water/sand table in a catalog for about \$500. It was very well made, sturdy, and quite large. This was certainly not a choice for my classroom at this price, however. One day as I was shopping in a home improvement store for some storage bins, I happened to see a shallow, clear bin, which sent a picture into my imagination. If I were to set this bin on my table during free play time, children would be able to reach in to have access to a wide variety of sensory experiences. Over the past two years, I have used it

successfully, filling it with water, sand, birdseed, and a mixture of beans in various shapes, sizes, textures, and colors.

This kind of sensory bin cost \$18, and the various contents about another \$20. I also purchased a few bowls, spoons, funnels, and sieves from a dollar store for about \$10. So all in all, I invested \$40. I put this bin out often, changing the contents about every two to three months. No child has become ill from using this bin, as I keep it tightly closed with its locking lid, bringing it out about twice a week. The best part is that the children love it!

My most useful find of all came when I was looking online at a home décor and renovation website. I came across a picture of a standing C-frame with a chair hammock attached. The cost was \$129. I looked closely at the depth of the C-frame to make sure that there would be plenty of room for young children to sit in the hammock and swing back and forth safely. This range of motion would provide the children with vestibular stimulation in a fun and free way. I put the



C-frame together easily, placed two heavy sand bags on opposite sides of the x-shaped bottom legs, laid down a thick, heavy cushion on top of the iron legs and sand bags, and then covered it all with a quilt. It looked lovely and the children were overjoyed and enthusiastic to try this new apparatus.

After a while, I noticed that if I could find a swiveling carabiner (between \$10-\$30), the hammock would not only go back and forth, but would twist 360 degrees, allowing the children to twirl! This gave the flexibility to provide deeper experiences if children wished for them. Once I saw the benefits of the hammock chair, I began to add other possibilities. I purchased a wooden ladder for \$25, a monkey bar for \$25, a swing that I made for free from a rope and a smooth stick, and a hanging pod for \$30. All of these additional pieces of equipment, I simply attached with other carabiners to the swivel carabiner, which always remained on the C-frame. Now we had a wide variety of sensory-motor stimulating equipment from which

to choose each day.

These pieces of equipment are stored away and come out during free play time and during the first half-hour of our day when we also create “obstacle courses.” The obstacle courses are constructed using benches, balance beams, chairs, boards, a small (donated) trampoline, and curvy boards. My early-arriving students love to be the ones to help to set up the course each morning. Within those first thirty minutes of the day, the children have time to connect with friends and teachers, say goodbye to parents, and become engaged in a variety of playful opportunities that offer sensory-motor experiences.

So, for \$300, which I spent over the course of a year, I was able to bring many more sensory integration experiences to the children in my care. Such a reasonable investment has given me the chance to better support all of the children, especially those in need. Because the obstacle courses, sensory bin, and the C-frame apparatus give everyone the ability to



enjoy such opportunities in a playful way, the children are unaware of how much good work they are doing for their bodies and their growing brains. No one is ever singled out for needing to do extra work. The items are always there for their daily enjoyment. During the past two years, I have observed that the children who are in greatest need of such sensory input are the ones who gravitate most often to these opportunities.

Proprioceptive input—feeling where your body is in space, which comes from strong touch and input to the joints in the body—is another experience that helps children feel confident in their bodies and in movement. I have been able to add these experiences in very simple ways. Allowing children the freedom to jump off of objects, such as chairs, benches, and stairs or a small trampoline, is not only fun but also gives a wonderful opportunity to feel their bodies fully, especially in their lower limbs.

These sensory-motor integration activities have also been of great help to me as I observe which children are gravitating to these experiences and which are avoiding them. Because they are offered daily, I can allow the tentative children time to observe others and eventually join in with friends in an emotionally safe way.

It has been such a gift to create these experiences for the children in my kindergarten. It has helped to fulfill my goal of supporting all forms of growth, including

sensory-motor integration. Nurturing the four lower senses is key for the early childhood teacher, especially when the children are in great need of such support in our day and age.

Simple, strategic investments in our classroom materials can be achieved when we challenge ourselves to think “outside of the box.” I encourage everyone to take a close look at our classroom spaces to see where we might be able to create and provide sensory-motor integration opportunities to meet the ever-widening needs of the children who are coming to us today.

We all do the very best we can for our children and families, given the various constraints

that we face in our individual schools, in-home programs, and care facilities. I offer my personal journey on this path as mere suggestions for you to consider. You, too, may be doing or thinking of doing other things for the children in your care. If so, consider sharing them with others. Our collective inspirations will expand this work for the health and benefit of the young child. ♦

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**Note:**

- 1 This course occurs in Denver, CO. Description and information can be found at the website [nurturingtheroots.com](http://nurturingtheroots.com).

**Kathleen Rinden** *has been a Waldorf kindergarten teacher for over twenty years, currently teaching at Maple Village Waldorf School in southern California. With a background in Child Development and Family and Child Therapy, she also offers parent and family coaching. She is drawn to the art of storytelling and writing, with great interest in honoring multicultural stories. Bringing healthy movement that supports sensory integration into the classroom is also on the top of her list.*