



Psychological
Service Home
Visiting Teachers

Play Ideas

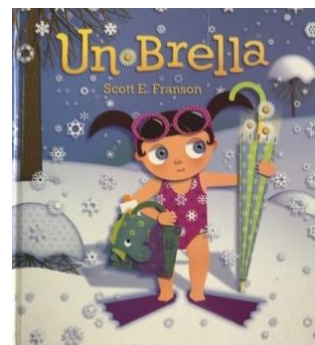
Sensory umbrellas

Background

Creating the ultimate sensory space can be a tall order for parents and practitioners. Often people consider the high-tech or more complex options such as sensory tents or white rooms bedecked with expensive lights and projectors alongside voice-activated music or switch-controlled cause and effect toys. But we can create these magical, other-worldly spaces more simply and even carry them with us wherever we go. Introducing... the Sensory Umbrella!

Introducing the umbrella to the child/group

Umbrellas provide a simple way of screening off distractions because, for umbrella sessions to be optimised, we need to focus the child's senses and attention to the stimuli we are presenting. The umbrella can do this relatively easily with the added benefit of creating new environments in which to play, explore and learn. This can be done by linking the umbrellas to story books, songs, rhymes, nursery themes, seasons, festivals, weather, - the list is endless. A great way to consider the introduction of the sensory umbrella is to read the story book "Un Brella" by Scott E Franson. This could even be read to all the children in the Early Learning and Childcare setting and provide all with the opportunity to explore this resource.



What do they look like and what do they contain?

What you add to your umbrella is up to you but it's more likely to be directed by the individual needs of your child or the child you are working with. Whether your sole focus is on sensory development or whether you are looking at attunement or physical targets or even developing social skills, the umbrella can be adapted to suit.

Most of what you hang from the inside will be related to your intention or targets but there are so many things you can use most of which are at your disposal. A great website which might be worth exploring for ideas is

www.sensorytoywarehouse.com/

A word of caution...

Umbrellas require close supervision. Most umbrellas come with a pointed metal ferrule and the spokes are of a metal construction with plastic caps. There are potential dangers if a child is left unsupervised or if used with a child with unpredictable or challenging behaviours. Used with supervision, however, they offer many advantages and are easily stored and quick to put up.



Gabby K on Pexels.com

Areas of development

Sensory Development:

Within this context there are lots of considerations and opportunities. A black umbrella provides a dark background to present brightly coloured or battery-operated lighting effects against. The contrast between dark and light exaggerates the stimuli and can improve the child's locating, tracking and reaching skills. Hanging fluorescent or reflective materials from the spokes also sparks visual interest. Body scrub sponges and bubble wrap have good tactile properties and vibrating toys can add to this. Potpourri and scented wooden balls in cloth bags can give an olfactory experience. And the inclusion of music or stories works on auditory skills.

Developing Attunement:

Quality 1:1 time with a child under the sensory umbrella naturally brings an opportunity to promote better attunement skills. This can be fostered within general play time, sensory time and story time or even just relaxing together to listen to music, rhymes or stories. Building positive relationships and a reciprocal pattern to your communication with the child can be enhanced in the relatively distraction-free space the umbrella creates.



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Social skills:

Children who cope less well with group experiences can practice skills within the umbrella context and then attempt to generalise the skill within group settings. Opportunities for active listening, sharing attention, shifting attention, waiting, etc. can be practiced in this space.

Physical skills:

Skills linked to reaching, grasping, letting go, using two hands together, passing between hands, etc. can also be practiced under the umbrella using a variety of stimulating objects hung from the spokes.

Literacy and story skills:

Song, rhymes and stories can be enhanced with the inclusion of different props dangling from inside. Turning off the lights and putting some music on before opening a sensory umbrella, full of materials, animals, lights etc. related to the story can have quite a dramatic effect and promote anticipation and even participation!

Numeracy skills:

Hanging various shapes or groups of similar objects to count and handle is also a fun activity. Various sizes can be explored along with identifying the sequence relating to the song/rhyme/story. All of these are great early maths skills.

Garden themed

Try making a garden themed umbrella using dried, artificial or even real ivy, leaves and flowers. Hang bumblebees and butterfly toys and even a sachet of lavender seeds or potpourri too.



Christmas themed

The christmas themed umbrella is an excuse to go all out for colour! Adding tinsel and battery operated fairy lights looks great and the scent of pine needles can be added to fir cones using scented oils.



Reflective and star themed

A black umbrella offers the perfect backdrop for the night sky and the addition of reflective accessories!



Winter themed

Craft resources on the theme of ice, frost, snowballs and other things of a winter nature can be added to this seasonal themed umbrella.

