

Early Years



Sensory Foundations Toolkit



**Supporting sensory development,
regulation and school readiness
through everyday experiences
(0-5 years)**



Purpose of This Toolkit



Dear colleagues, families and partners,

Across Tameside, we are continually reflecting on how we can strengthen the way we identify and respond to children's needs from the earliest years. Through ongoing conversations with families, early years settings, schools and professionals, it is clear that sensory development plays a profound role in early childhood, shaping learning, play, behaviour and emotional wellbeing. We also know that greater clarity and consistency across the system would better support everyone involved.

This Early Years Sensory Foundations Toolkit forms part of that wider improvement work.

It has been developed to support early years settings, families and professionals to better understand how sensory development grows in the earliest years, and how everyday experiences can build strong foundations for all children. Our aim is to build shared understanding across education, health and social care; promote early awareness of sensory development; and strengthen universal, sensory-friendly practice in homes and early years environments.

This offer is designed to be just as supportive to parents as it is to practitioners in education and early years settings. It includes work that sits firmly within early help, supporting families with the everyday challenges of early childhood development, including sleeping, eating and toileting, and recognising how sensory development can influence these routines.

We know that when children's sensory needs are not understood early, they can easily feel overwhelmed or misunderstood. Behaviours often reflect communication: a child expressing discomfort, anxiety or difficulties regulating within their environment. By focusing first on building strong sensory foundations through everyday experiences, we aim to create supportive environments where more children feel safe, settled and ready to learn.

This toolkit:

- **Builds understanding of how sensory development grows through everyday movement, play and experience in the earliest years**
- **Supports all children, not just those with identified needs, through a universal, developmental approach**
- **Offers practical, accessible guidance that can be used straight away in homes and early years settings to strengthen sensory foundations**
- **Supports families and practitioners to feel informed and confident, and signposts to further support where it is needed**

It has been developed by Sadie Charlton, Specialist Sensory Occupational Therapist from SensoryPie, in collaboration with colleagues across Tameside to ensure it aligns with local priorities, pathways and systems.

We are also incredibly grateful to Tameside Parent Carer Forum and ISCAN for their continued partnership and insight. Their contributions, along with the early foundational work led by Tyla d'Oliveira, Occupational Therapist within ISCAN, have played a significant role in shaping the development and direction of this toolkit.

This toolkit represents another step in our commitment to placing children and families at the heart of our approach, working together for shared understanding, more consistent practice, and earlier, more supportive intervention across Tameside.

Warm regards,

Hilary Cook

Hilary Cook

**Head of Send
Tameside MBC**



Using The Early Years Sensory Foundations Toolkit



WHAT THIS TOOLKIT IS FOR

- ✔ Supporting understanding of early development
- ✔ Reflecting on environments, routines and play
- ✔ Strengthening everyday experiences for all children

WHAT THIS TOOLKIT IS NOT

- ✘ A diagnostic or assessment tool
- ✘ A checklist to identify difficulties
- ✘ A replacement for specialist support

WHO THIS TOOLKIT IS FOR

- Early years practitioners (nursery staff, childminders, SENCOs)
- Parents and carers
- Health visitors and professionals supporting young children



Because all children use their senses to understand the world, this toolkit is designed for all children – not just those with identified needs.

KEY PRINCIPLES



Sensory systems are built through experience

Children don't develop these skills by being told- they develop them through moving, playing, touching and exploring every day.



The brain learns through repetition and predictability

When children know what to expect, they feel safer. When they feel safe, they are more able to learn, join in and try new things.



Behaviour is communication, not defiance

What looks like "won't" is often "can't yet." Children may be overwhelmed, unsure or still developing the skills needed to cope.



Small everyday experiences matter

Before children can sit, listen and learn, they need to feel safe, organised and confident in their body.



HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit can be used in whatever way works best for you. Dip into the section that feels most relevant, or start at the beginning and work your way through. You'll find downloadable resources throughout to take away and use straight away. As you read, please remember: this is a guide to how sensory development typically grows, *not a checklist of milestones* your child needs to meet. All children develop at their own pace, and that's okay.



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Understanding Sensory Development



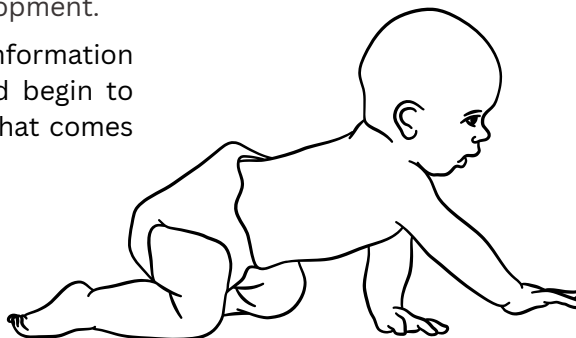
Children learn about the world through their bodies.

Before they can sit still, listen, write or follow instructions, they are learning through movement, touch, balance, and physical experiences. Every time a child climbs, spins, squeezes, crashes, or explores, their brain is building connections. This is sensory development.

Sensory development is how children take in information from their body and the world around them, and begin to understand it. It is the foundation for everything that comes later.

It underpins:

- movement and coordination
- behaviour and emotional responses
- attention and learning
- confidence and independence
- joining in and participating



WHEN SENSORY FOUNDATIONS ARE STRONG, CHILDREN ARE MORE ABLE TO FEEL SAFE IN THEIR BODY, ENGAGE WITH OTHERS, AND ACCESS LEARNING.



The Brain is Built Through Experience

Children are not born with a fully developed brain. Their brain grows and strengthens through repeated experiences.

Every movement, every touch, every interaction helps the brain learn:

- “What does this feel like?”
- “What happens next?”
- “Is this safe?”

Over time, these experiences build patterns in the brain. The more opportunities children have to move, explore and experience the world around them, the stronger these patterns become.

It Starts Early (and Happens Every Day)

Sensory development begins from birth and grows through everyday life. It doesn't require special equipment or complicated activities.

It happens through:

- being held, rocked and soothed
- crawling, climbing and playing
- messy play and exploring textures
- running, jumping and crashing
- everyday routines like getting dressed, eating and washing



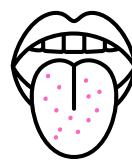
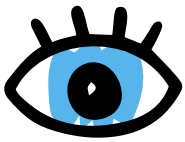
These small, repeated experiences are what build strong sensory foundations.



THE 8 SENSORY SYSTEMS



We often talk about the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. These are our outside senses and typically the sensory systems we are most familiar with.



But there are actually 3 more sensory systems that play a vital role in how children develop and function. Vestibular, Proprioception & Interoception - our inside senses.

Some of the most important sensory systems for early development are:

Click the sensory system for more information...



VESTIBULAR



This **system tells us about movement and balance**. It helps us know if we are moving, how fast we are moving, and where our head and body are in space.

PROPRIOCEPTION



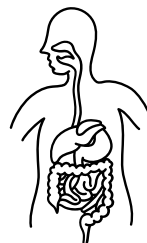
This is our **sense of body position/awareness & force**. This system gives feedback from our muscles and joints. It helps us judge how much pressure to use, how hard to push or pull, and where our body is without needing to look.

TACTILE



This is our **sense of touch**. It helps us notice how things feel on our skin - such as clothing, textures, temperature, and physical contact with others.

INTEROCEPTION



This system helps us **notice what is happening inside our body**. It tells us when we are hungry, thirsty, tired, need the toilet, or experiencing big emotions.

Click [HERE](#) to view ISCAN online module on Sensory Processing!

How the Brain Learns Through Predictability

**THE BRAIN IS CONSTANTLY TRYING TO WORK OUT:
“WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN NEXT?”**

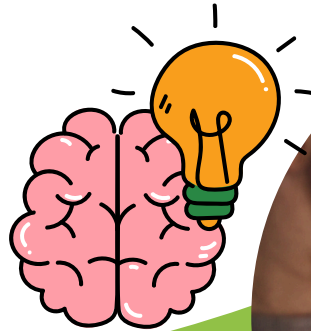
It does this by building patterns from repeated experiences.

When something happens again and again, the brain begins to recognise it and predict it.

For example:

- being rocked before sleep
- hearing the same song at tidy-up time
- repeating the same play activity

These repeated experiences help the brain feel more confident and organised.



Why predictability matters

When the world feels predictable, children are more likely to:

- feel safe
- stay calm and regulated
- try new things
- join in and participate



When things feel unpredictable or unfamiliar, the brain has to work harder to understand what is happening. This can feel overwhelming.

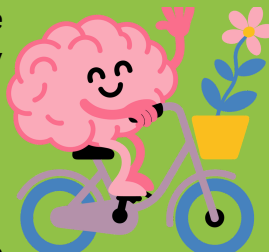
Building Confidence Through Repetition

The key to supporting sensory development is gentle, repeated experiences over time.

When children are supported to experience something in a safe and predictable way, they begin to:

- understand it
- tolerate it
- feel more confident with it

Over time, what once felt difficult can become familiar and manageable.



Why Some Children Avoid or Struggle

If a child has not had enough experience of a sensation, or if it feels too intense or unpredictable, they may:

- avoid it
- become upset or overwhelmed
- try to control or escape the situation

This is not “bad behaviour”.

It is the brain trying to protect itself from something it doesn't yet understand.



Screen Time & Modern Childhood

Childhood today looks very different from the past. Many children now spend more time indoors and have greater access to screens than ever before. Screens can be useful, enjoyable and part of everyday life. They can support learning, connection and downtime. But screens do not provide the same sensory experiences as real-world play.



WHAT BUILDS STRONG SENSORY FOUNDATIONS?

Children need...

- **movement (running, climbing, spinning)**
- **physical play (pushing, pulling, crashing)**
- **hands-on exploration (messy play, building, touching)**
- **real-life experiences (being outside, interacting with people and objects)**

These experiences activate the sensory systems that build the brain.

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Modern lifestyles can sometimes reduce opportunities for:

- **active play**
- **outdoor exploration**
- **physical movement**
- **hands-on experiences**

When screen use increases, it can replace time that would otherwise be spent building these sensory foundations.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Research into early childhood development suggests that high levels of screen time (especially when it replaces active, real-world experiences) can impact development in several ways:

➤ **Motor development:**

Many studies have found links between increased screen time and delays in both fine and gross motor skills, particularly when it replaces movement-based play.

➤ **Reduced physical activity:**

Time spent on screens is often time not spent moving, climbing, exploring or developing strength and coordination.



➤ **Sensory development:**

Screens provide mainly visual and auditory input, but very little input for key systems like movement (vestibular), body awareness (proprioception), and touch.



➤ **Learning and attention:**

Young children learn best through hands-on, real-world experiences. Passive screen use does not offer the same opportunities for exploration and trial-and-error learning.



➤ **Sleep and regulation:**

Some research suggests that higher screen use can impact sleep patterns (especially when used close to bedtime) as well as emotional regulation and developing emotional awareness.



Sensory Development

Screen Time & Modern Childhood



This isn't about blaming anyone or expecting parents to remove screens completely. Life is busy, and families are juggling more than ever- work, home, multiple demands, and very little downtime. For many, you might feel screens are what give you five minutes to get something done, have a hot drink, or simply wake up slowly after being up early with a toddler. That's real life, and it matters.

This is not about shame or doing things perfectly. It's about understanding what children need for their development and, where possible, gently making space for those experiences alongside the realities of everyday life. When we're aware of how development builds, we can make small, manageable adjustments that support our children over time.

Even small changes, done consistently, can make a meaningful difference to the foundations children are building for their future.

SUPPORTING HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

We can support children by:

- **creating opportunities for movement and play**
- **encouraging hands-on, real-life experiences**
- **balancing screen time with active, sensory-rich activities**
- **noticing what each child needs to feel regulated and ready**



Further advice on screen time....

Click to download tips!

Making Screen Time Work For Your Child

10 Top Tips on using screen time with your under 5's.

Gently Reducing Screen Time (Without the Battles)

Top Tips on reducing screen time for your under 5.

The Sensory Development Journey



Children's development doesn't follow a perfect timeline.

This journey is a guide to show how sensory skills typically grow (*not a checklist your child needs to match*). Some children will move through stages at different speeds, skip things, or need more time and support, and that's okay. This is not a diagnostic tool.

If you have any concerns about your child's development, it's always best to speak to your Health Visitor, GP or early years professional.

Click the stage to learn more..



**The First Year:
Building Foundations**

0-1



**1-2
years**



On the Move



**Exploring &
Experimenting**

**2-3
years**



**3-4
years**



Building Skills



Growing Independence

**4-5
years**



Supporting Sensory Development in Early Years Settings



Early years settings play a vital role in children's development.

The Early Years Framework recognises that children learn through:

- active play
- exploration
- movement
- relationships

These are not separate from development, they are how development happens. At the heart of this is sensory development.

Children build the foundations for:

- movement
- behaviour
- attention
- learning
- emotional regulation

through repeated sensory experiences in their environment.

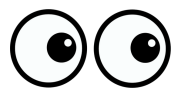
For many children, early years environments provide rich opportunities to:

- move
- explore
- interact
- learn through doing



However, for some children, these environments can feel:

- overwhelming
- unpredictable
- difficult to access



This might show up as:

- avoiding activities
- becoming distressed
- finding it hard to join in
- appearing disengaged



A Shift in Thinking

It can be easy to think: "The child won't do it"

But often, the more helpful question is:

"How can we make it easier for them to access?"



"What is making this hard for the child?"

BUILDING CONFIDENCE THROUGH ACCESS

When children are supported to access experiences:

- they build confidence
- they develop sensory systems
- they increase their ability to participate over time

Avoiding experiences may feel easier in the moment, but it can reduce opportunities for development.

Our role is to support children to join in, not remove the experience completely

DOWNLOAD [Understanding the Child's Experience Reflection Tool](#)



Supporting Sensory Development in Early Years Settings



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Creating a Sensory-Supportive Environment

The environment plays a powerful role in how children feel, behave and participate. Small changes to the environment can make a big difference to how accessible it feels.

NOISE, CLUTTER AND SENSORY LOAD

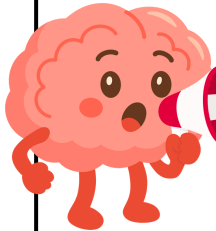
Busy early years environments can include:

- loud noise
- lots of visual information
- multiple activities happening at once

For some children, this can feel overwhelming.

When the brain is overloaded, it becomes harder to:

- focus
- regulate
- take part



MAKING THE ENVIRONMENT MORE ACCESSIBLE

Reducing sensory load can support children to feel calmer and more settled.

This might include:

- creating quieter spaces within the room
- reducing background noise where possible
- organising resources clearly
- limiting visual clutter



These changes help the brain focus on what is important.

THE ROLE OF MOVEMENT

Movement is not separate from learning- it supports it!

Children need regular opportunities to:

- move their body
- explore space
- use physical energy

Movement helps children to:

- regulate
- stay alert
- engage in activities



Environments that allow for movement (rather than expecting stillness) are more accessible for many children.

PREDICTABILITY AND ROUTINE

Children learn best when the environment is predictable.

Predictability helps the brain:

- feel safe
- understand what is happening
- prepare for what comes next

In practice, this can look like:

- consistent routines
- clear transitions
- using visual supports
- repeating familiar activities



When children know what to expect, they are more likely to join in.

SMALL CHANGES, BIG IMPACT

Often, it is not about changing everything.

Small adjustments can make a big difference, such as:

- offering movement before group time
- reducing noise during focused activities
- creating predictable routines
- providing space to step away when needed



For a structured way to review your environment, [click here...](#)

[Tameside Early Years Sensory Foundations Audit Tool.](#)



Supporting Sensory Development in Early Years Settings

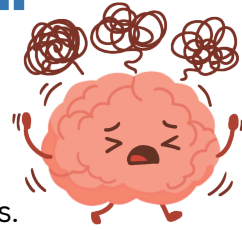


Helping Children Join In

Some children may appear:

- hesitant
- avoidant
- overwhelmed

during everyday nursery experiences.



This is often not about behaviour, it can be about:

- **unfamiliarity**
- **unpredictability**
- **sensory overwhelm**

Why Children Don't Always Join In

When something feels:

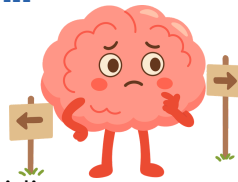
- new
- intense
- unpredictable

...the brain may respond by:

- avoiding
- becoming distressed
- withdrawing



This is a protective response, not a choice.



The Role of Experience

Children build confidence through:

- repeated exposure
- supported experiences
- predictable patterns



If a child has not had enough experience of something, it may feel unsafe or overwhelming. This is especially important when working with children looked after, or those who have experienced developmental trauma.

Supporting Participation (Not Forcing It)

There is an important difference between:

forcing participation ↔ **supporting participation**

Forcing can increase distress and avoidance.



When we support children to join in:

- we are building sensory systems
- we are developing confidence
- we are increasing participation
- we are supporting long-term learning

Supporting means:

- meeting the child where they are
- making the experience more accessible
- building confidence gradually

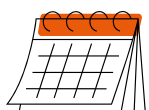
Building Confidence Over Time

Confidence does not happen instantly.

It builds through:

- repeated, supported experiences
- feeling safe and understood
- success at a manageable level

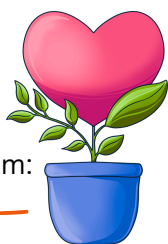
Over time, children move from:



← **watching**

← **to trying**

← **to joining in independently**



How to Help Children Join In

Children are more likely to take part when we:

- Make it predictable
- Help the child know what will happen and when
- Prepare them in advance
- Use simple language, visuals or demonstrations
- Reduce intensity
- Lower noise, simplify the task, reduce demands
- Start small (graded exposure)
- Allow the child to engage at a level they can manage
- Adapt, not remove
- Keep the activity, but adjust how it is presented

For practical strategies across everyday nursery situations..

Click HERE>>>

Early Years Joining In Guide





Preparing for School



SENSORY FOUNDATIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE

School readiness is often talked about in terms of letters, numbers or sitting still. However, before children can manage the demands of school, they need strong foundations in their body.

They need to feel safe, organised and confident enough to:

- follow routines
- manage everyday tasks
- cope with busy environments
- join in with others
- understand and respond to their body



School readiness is not just about academic skills.

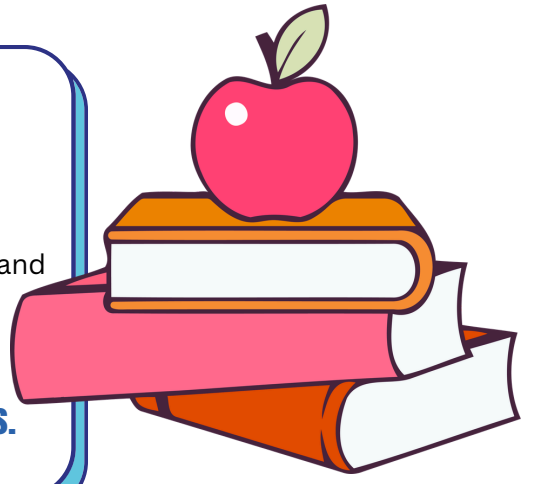
It is also about regulation, body awareness, participation, confidence and independence. This section brings together everything from earlier in the toolkit and shows how sensory development underpins these skills.

SCHOOL READINESS THROUGH A SENSORY LENS

School readiness begins with the body.

Children first learn through movement, touch, repetition and relationships. These early experiences build the sensory foundations that later support attention, posture, emotional regulation, self-care and participation.

When these foundations are still developing, children may find school more challenging- even if they are capable in other ways.



WHAT SCHOOL READINESS LOOKS LIKE BEYOND ACADEMICS

From a sensory perspective, school readiness includes a child being able to:

- sit with a stable posture for short periods
- follow simple routines and transitions
- cope with noise and busy environments
- manage basic self-care tasks
- take part in group activities
- begin to understand and communicate their needs



These are not “extra” skills- *they are what make learning possible.*





Preparing for School

SENSORY FOUNDATIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE



WHY MOVEMENT, BODY AWARENESS AND PREDICTABILITY MATTER

Children learn best when their body feels safe and organised.

Movement supports balance, posture and attention

Body awareness helps children coordinate actions and manage tasks

Predictable routines reduce uncertainty and help children feel secure

Interoception supports understanding feelings, hunger, tiredness and toileting

When these systems are supported, children are more able to:

- focus and attend
- follow instructions
- join in with learning
- feel confident in new situations

When children appear “not ready”

Some children may:

- struggle to sit still
- become overwhelmed in busy environments
- avoid activities
- find routines difficult



This does not necessarily mean they are not ready to learn. It may mean their sensory foundations are still developing

For example:

- a child who cannot sit on the carpet may be working hard just to stay upright
- a child who avoids the lunch hall may be overwhelmed by noise and movement
- a child who struggles with mark-making may still be developing the physical foundations needed for fine motor skills



Building Blocks for Learning





Preparing for School

Building Everyday Independence



WHY INDEPENDENCE MATTERS FOR LEARNING

As children move towards school, they are expected to manage more of their day independently. Everyday tasks like dressing, toileting, eating and hand washing are not just routines- they are opportunities for children to build the skills they need for school.

These tasks support:

- **body awareness**
- **coordination**
- **sequencing**
- **confidence**
- **understanding of routines**
- **awareness of body signals**

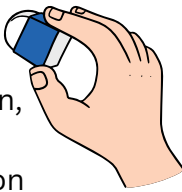


“Practice makes perfect!”

When children practise everyday skills, they are developing the same foundations they need in the classroom.

For example:

- dressing supports coordination, planning and tactile tolerance
- toileting supports interoception and body awareness
- eating supports posture, coordination and sensory tolerance
- hand washing supports routines, sequencing and transitions



Building confidence over time

In busy daily life, it can feel quicker to do things for children. However, children build independence through:

- repetition
- practice
- having time to try

Even when it takes longer.

Children benefit from:

- breaking tasks into small steps
- practising outside of rushed times
- being supported to succeed, not rushed to finish

Supporting independence through a sensory lens

Some children may find everyday tasks harder because of sensory differences.

For example:

- **difficulty with buttons may relate to fine motor strength and coordination**
- **avoiding toileting may relate to interoception or sensory sensitivities**
- **struggling with eating may relate to posture, coordination or sensory processing**

The four guides in this section break these skills down into:

- **the sensory steps involved**
- **why a child might find them difficult**
- **practical ways to support success**



Getting Dressed

Toileting

Eating & Drinking

Hand Washing





Preparing for School

Supporting the Transition to School



Starting school is a big change.

Children are adjusting to:

- a new environment
- new adults
- new routines
- increased expectations
- less flexibility than they may be used to

For some children, this feels exciting. For others, it can feel overwhelming.

Why transitions can feel difficult

Transitions involve uncertainty.

When the brain does not know what to expect, it has to work harder to make sense of the situation. This can increase anxiety and make it harder for children to engage.

Children may find it difficult if:

- routines are unfamiliar
- environments are busy or unpredictable
- expectations change quickly

What helps children feel ready?

Children cope best when transitions are:

- predictable
- repeated
- supported

Helpful approaches to prepare:

- talking about what school will be like
- visiting the school environment
- using photos or simple stories
- practising routines such as getting dressed or lining up
- repeating key experiences so they become familiar



When children know what to expect, they feel safer- and when they feel safe, they are ready to learn.

Supporting emotional and sensory readiness

Children may need support to:

- separate from parents or carers
- understand new routines
- manage busy environments
- cope with noise and group situations



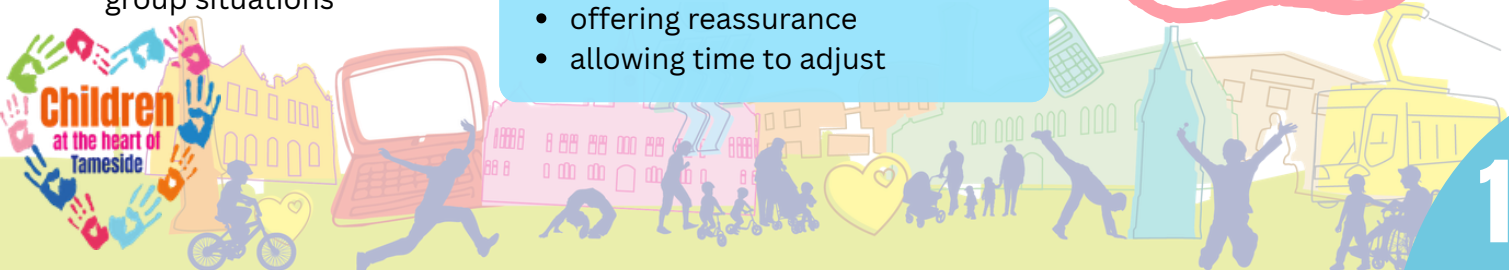
Adults can support this by:

- keeping routines consistent
- using simple, clear explanations
- offering reassurance
- allowing time to adjust

School readiness is not something children either have or don't have.

It develops over time through:

- movement
- relationships
- repetition
- everyday experiences
- supported opportunities to grow in confidence



5

Signposting & Further Support



SUPPORTING THE CHILD BEYOND THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is designed to support children's sensory development through everyday experiences. Sometimes, despite our best efforts at home or in the setting, children need a little more. This section offers some guidance on where to go next.

YOU MAY CONSIDER FURTHER SUPPORT WHEN:

- You have ongoing concerns about your child's development that haven't eased over time
- Everyday activities (such as eating, sleeping, dressing or joining in) continue to feel significantly difficult for your child or family
- Your child appears frequently distressed or overwhelmed in ways that are hard to understand or support
- You feel you need more guidance than this toolkit can offer



Seeking further support is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It means you know your child well, and you want to make sure they have everything they need around them.

WHERE TO FIND FURTHER SUPPORT....

HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT



- **Health Visitor:** Your named Health Visitor specialises in the health and development of pre-school children.
- **Community Nursery Nurses:** Part of the health visiting team, they specialise in child development, school readiness and early years support
- **GP:** Your GP can provide medical advice or refer you to paediatric specialists
- **ISCAN:** The Integrated Service for Children with Additional Needs includes Speech and Language Therapy, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy and Nutrition and Dietetics. They work in community clinics, nurseries and homes
- **Tameside and Glossop Parent Infant Mental Health Service:** Mental health support for parents and carers, focused on helping you and your baby or young child feel safe and secure, managing the emotional demands of early parenthood, and building a positive relationship you can both enjoy.

NURSERY AND SETTING-BASED SUPPORT



- Talk to your child's key person or SENCO about your concerns
- Where concerns continue, the nursery can arrange a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) meeting with parents and relevant professionals such as the health visiting team, to take a holistic look at the child's needs together

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT



- Neurodevelopmental (ND) Hubs with [Barnardo's Tameside](#)
- [Family Hubs Tameside](#)
- [Home Start Tameside](#) - peer support, baby and toddler groups for families
- [Go to Grow Tameside](#) - local activities and information for families with young children

