

Dr. Vera's
CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES



stop the sensory overload!

and help their body feel just right

What to Say and Do When Sounds,
Clothes, Touch and Crowds Are Too Much

DR. FERNANDO VERA, OT

DR. VERA'S CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

Stop the Sensory Overload

What to Say and Do When Sounds, Clothes, Touch and
Crowds Are Too Much

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Important: This guide is for education and support. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or individualized therapy. Every child with autism is different. Talk with your child's doctor about any new, sudden or worsening behavior, pain, hearing or vision concerns, and ask an occupational therapist before using weighted items or starting a sensory program. If anyone is in danger, call 911.

A note on language: this guide uses person-first language, such as "child with autism" and "child on the spectrum."

A LETTER BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Your child is not being difficult.

If you picked up this guide, you have probably fought over socks, left a store with a screaming child, or watched your child crash into the couch for the hundredth time and wondered why.

As an occupational therapist, this is the work I do every day. Here is the most important thing I can tell you: **your child's senses do not work the way yours do**. A hand dryer can truly hurt. A sock seam can feel like a rock. And some children can't feel enough, so they spin, chew and crash to wake their bodies up.

That changes what helps. You can't talk, bribe or punish a nervous system into feeling differently. What helps is **finding the trigger, changing the setting and building tolerance in small, safe steps**.

When a child's body feels "just right," everything else gets easier: getting dressed, going out, learning and playing. This guide shows you how to get there.

How to use this guide

In the moment

Find the situation in the contents. Read the "Instead of... Try this" swaps on the left page. Each one takes about 30 seconds.

When things are calm

Read the right page: what to say, what to do, what to avoid and how to set up for next time.

Get to know your child

Fill in the sensory profile and the trigger log. They turn guessing into a plan.

Share it

The "My Sensory Plan" page is made to hand to grandparents, sitters and teachers.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Believe what your child's body is telling you. "It's not that loud" has never once made a sound quieter.

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START HERE

Avoider, seeker or under-responder?

Children respond to sensation in three main ways. Most are a mix: a child can hate loud sounds and still crave hard hugs. Knowing which pattern you're seeing tells you what will help.

	AVOIDER	SEEKER	UNDER-RESPONDER
What it looks like	Covers ears, refuses clothes, gags at smells, hates messy hands, melts down in busy places	Crashes, jumps, spins, chews, touches everything, makes loud sounds, can't sit still	Seems not to hear you, misses pain or hunger, looks tired or "checked out," slow to react
What the body is saying	"This is too much. Make it stop."	"I need more. I can't feel enough."	"I didn't notice that."
What helps	Less input, warnings, control, a quiet place and small steps	Safe ways to get more: heavy work, movement breaks, chewy tools	Stronger, clearer input: bright, loud, crunchy, active, plus extra time
What makes it worse	Forcing, surprising or saying "it's fine"	"Sit still" and "stop that" with nothing in its place	Repeating yourself louder or assuming they're ignoring you

It's not behavior

Sensory responses are automatic, like flinching. Your child isn't choosing them, so rewards and punishments don't change them. Changing the input does.

Check the basics first

Ear infections, vision problems, tooth pain, eczema and constipation can all look like sensory issues. Tell your child's doctor about any new or sudden change.

START HERE

The sensory cup

Think of your child's nervous system as a cup. Every sound, touch, smell and demand adds a little. Your job is to notice how full it is and help empty it before it spills.

ready

JUST RIGHT

1 • Calm and ready

Your child can listen, play, learn and cope with small surprises.

- Good time for new things
- Practice small steps
- Notice what helps

rising

FILLING UP

2 • Filling up

Fidgeting, covering ears, louder voice, saying no, clinging or going quiet.

- Offer a break now
- Lower the input
- Add heavy work

overflow

TOO MUCH

3 • Overflow

Meltdown or shutdown. The thinking brain is offline.

- Safety first
- Quiet, dim, few words
- No demands

reset

RECOVER

4 • Empty the cup

Rest and calming input bring the level back down. This takes time.

- Quiet space
- Water and a snack
- Talk later

DR. VERA'S TIP

Some children start the day with the cup half full: poor sleep, a scratchy shirt, a rushed morning. On those days, plan less and give breaks sooner.

START HERE

The T.U.N.E. method

One simple plan for any sensory problem. Every page in this guide follows these four steps.



Track the trigger

Be a detective. What sound, touch, sight, smell or movement came right before? What time was it? How full was the cup already?



Understand the need

Is it too much (your child wants less) or not enough (your child wants more)? The answer changes what you do next.



Nudge the setting

Change the place before you try to change your child: lower the noise, dim the lights, switch the fabric, offer headphones, add a movement break.



Ease in, at their pace

Build tolerance in tiny steps your child agrees to, with lots of control and praise. Never by force or surprise.

What NOT to do

- ✗ Force or hold your child “to get used to it”
- ✗ Surprise your child with the trigger
- ✗ Take away a calming tool as a punishment

Remember

The goal is not a child who puts up with everything. It's a child who feels safe in their body and has tools to cope. Comfort first; tolerance follows.

PRINTABLE

My child's sensory profile

Check how often you see each one. Share this page with your child's OT, teacher or doctor.

MY CHILD...	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
Covers ears or gets upset at loud or sudden sounds	☐	☐	☐
Is bothered by clothing tags, seams, socks or shoes	☐	☐	☐
Avoids messy hands, sticky textures or certain fabrics	☐	☐	☐
Dislikes hair washing, brushing, haircuts or nail trimming	☐	☐	☐
Gags or complains about smells others don't notice	☐	☐	☐
Squints, covers eyes or gets upset in bright or busy places	☐	☐	☐
Crashes, jumps or climbs constantly	☐	☐	☐
Chews on clothing, pencils or other non-food items	☐	☐	☐
Touches people and objects more than other children	☐	☐	☐
Seems not to notice pain, cold, hunger or a dirty face	☐	☐	☐
Is afraid of swings, slides or having feet off the ground	☐	☐	☐
Rocks, spins or flaps hands, especially when excited or upset	☐	☐	☐

The three things that help my child feel calm are:

part one

Sound and Sight

Vacuums, hand dryers, sirens, bright lights and busy stores. How to turn the volume down on a world that feels too loud and too bright.

- | | |
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| 1 Vacuums, Blenders and Hand Dryers | 2 Noisy Places: Cafeterias, Gyms and Parties |
| 3 Sudden Sounds: Alarms, Sirens and Fireworks | 4 Making Loud Noises All Day |
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1

PART ONE · SOUND AND SIGHT

Vacuums, Blenders and Hand Dryers

What it looks like

The vacuum starts and your child screams, covers their ears and runs. They refuse public bathrooms because of the hand dryer or the flush.

What's really going on

Many children with autism hear sounds louder and sharper than we do. Sudden, roaring noises can feel painful and scary, and the body jumps into fight or flight.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just the vacuum. It won't hurt you."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That's really loud for you. I'm turning it off."

Why it works: If you show you believe them, the fear starts to come down.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Start a loud machine without warning.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give a warning and a choice: headphones on, or go to another room.

Why it works: A sound you expect and can escape is far less scary than a surprise.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hold your child near the hand dryer to get used to it.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Bring paper towels or a small cloth and skip the dryer.

Why it works: Forced exposure builds fear. Avoiding one sound costs you nothing.

More things to say

“Loud sound coming. Hands on ears. Good idea.”

“Want your headphones or the quiet room?”

“I’ll tell you before the blender starts, every time.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stop the sound if you can, or move with your child away from it.
- ✓ Offer noise-cancelling headphones or earmuffs without a lecture.
- ✓ Lower your own voice and other noise, like the TV.
- ✓ Give heavy work after, like pushing a laundry basket, to settle the body.

Avoid

- ✗ Laughing at the reaction or calling it silly.
- ✗ Surprising your child with loud appliances to toughen them up.
- ✗ Taking away headphones because they “rely on them.”

Set up for next time

- ✓ Vacuum or blend when your child is out, or give a two-minute warning first.
- ✓ Keep headphones in the same spot, plus a spare pair in the bathroom and the car.
- ✓ Let your child press the buttons themselves. Control makes noise feel less scary.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your child's doctor or OT if sound reactions are getting worse, or if they avoid bathrooms, school or meals because of noise.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Hand dryers in public restrooms are the worst. Carry headphones and just say, “We’ll use paper towels.” One small plan avoids big fear.

2

PART ONE · SOUND AND SIGHT

Noisy Places: Cafeterias, Gyms and Parties

What it looks like

In the lunchroom, at a birthday party or in a gym, your child covers their ears, hides under a table, cries or begs to leave.

What's really going on

Echoing rooms pile many sounds on top of each other. Your child's brain can't filter out the background, so every voice and scrape arrives at full volume.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Everyone else is fine. Stop making a scene."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's too loud in here. Let's take a quiet break."

Why it works: A break before the cup spills prevents a meltdown later.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stay in the middle of the room to "join in."~~

✓ TRY THIS

Pick a spot at the edge, near a door, away from speakers.

Why it works: The edge is quieter and gives your child a clear way out.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Plan to stay for the whole event.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Arrive early, stay for the best part and leave while it's going well.

Why it works: A short, good visit builds confidence. A long, hard one builds dread.

More things to say

“Show me your break card when you need out.”

“Ten more minutes, then the quiet car.”

“You stayed for the cake. That was brave.”

Do this in the moment

-  Bring headphones or earplugs and let your child decide when to use them.
-  Find the quiet spot when you arrive: a hallway, a porch, the car.
-  Take short breaks before your child asks.
-  Watch for early signs like humming, hands over ears or going quiet.

Avoid

-  Balloons popping, horns and surprise singing up close.
-  Pushing your child to stay because you paid or drove far.
-  Asking lots of questions in the noise.

Set up for next time

-  Ask the school about a quieter lunch spot or leaving class two minutes early.
-  Visit a new place when it's empty to learn the space.
-  Agree on a signal or card your child can use to ask for a break.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't eat lunch at school, or avoids school or activities because of noise, ask for a meeting with the teacher and an OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Leaving early is not failing. Ending on a good note is how you get a child to come back next time.

3

PART ONE · SOUND AND SIGHT

Sudden Sounds: Alarms, Sirens and Fireworks

What it looks like

A fire drill, a siren, thunder, a dog barking or fireworks sends your child into panic. Afterward they stay jumpy and keep asking if it will happen again.

What's really going on

A sudden sound is a danger signal to the brain. With sharper hearing and no warning, your child's alarm system fires harder and takes longer to settle.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop crying. It's over now."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That was a big surprise. You're safe. I've got you."

Why it works: The sound is over, but the body is still in alarm. Comfort helps it come down.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hope the fire drill goes okay.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask the school to tell your child before each drill and offer headphones.

Why it works: Knowing it's coming turns a shock into something your child can prepare for.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Take your child to the fireworks and stand up close.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Watch from far away, from the car, or on a screen with the sound low.

Why it works: Distance lowers the volume. Your child can still enjoy it on their terms.

More things to say

“That was a siren. It's helping someone. It's going away.”

“Thunder is loud. We're safe inside.”

“When the drill comes, you'll have your headphones.”

Do this in the moment

-  Name the sound and say that it's ending or finished.
-  Hold your child firmly if they like pressure, or just stay close.
-  Move indoors or to the car if you can.
-  Give extra quiet time afterward; the body stays alert for a while.

Avoid

-  Saying “don't be scared.”
-  Hiding that a loud event is coming.
-  Popping balloons or making sudden noises as a joke.

Set up for next time

-  Play recordings of the sound very softly while your child does something fun, and turn it up slowly over weeks.
-  Read a picture story about fire drills or storms.
-  Keep headphones in the school bag and the car.



GET MORE HELP IF

If fear of sounds keeps your child from going outside, sleeping or going to school, talk with the doctor or a psychologist.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Give the sound a job. “The siren is helping someone” or “the alarm is practicing” makes it less of a mystery.

4

PART ONE · SOUND AND SIGHT

Making Loud Noises All Day

What it looks like

Your child hums, squeals, sings the same line, taps and bangs from morning to night. They turn the volume up and hold noisy toys to their ear.

What's really going on

Some children seek sound to feel alert or calm. Their own noise is also predictable, so it can block out sounds they can't control.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop that noise! You're giving me a headache."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Loud voice outside. Inside, let's use the humming headphones."

Why it works: Your child still gets the sound they need, in a place or way that works for everyone.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Take away every noisy toy.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Set up a "loud time" and a "loud place" each day.

Why it works: Giving the need a time and place makes it easier to wait.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Shout over the noise to be heard.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Move close, touch a shoulder and speak quietly.

Why it works: Adding volume adds to the noise. Closeness gets attention faster.

More things to say

“Drum time is after snack. Ten whole minutes.”

“Inside voice is a three. Show me a three.”

“You love that song. Sing it to me in the yard.”

Do this in the moment

-  Offer music through headphones so your child gets sound without filling the room.
-  Give instruments, singing or audio books as a planned activity.
-  Add movement and heavy work; a calmer body often makes less noise.
-  Use a simple volume chart with numbers or colors.

Avoid

-  Scolding humming that isn't bothering anyone.
-  Holding noisy toys right at the ear; keep volume safe.
-  Expecting long periods of silence.

Set up for next time

-  Notice when the noise goes up: boredom, stress, excitement or a noisy room?
-  Give siblings headphones and a quiet place of their own.
-  Ask the teacher where quiet humming is okay and where it isn't.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child turns sound up very high or doesn't respond to voices, ask the doctor for a hearing test.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Humming is often a child's own noise-cancelling. Before you stop it, check what sound around them they might be trying to cover.

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PART ONE · SOUND AND SIGHT

Bright Lights and Sunshine

What it looks like

Your child squints, covers their eyes, refuses to go outside on sunny days or gets cranky under the lights at school or the store.

What's really going on

Eyes can be over-sensitive too. Glare, flicker from fluorescent lights and bright screens tire the brain and add to the cup all day long.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Take your hands off your face."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Is it too bright? Here are your sunglasses."

Why it works: You name the problem and hand over a fix in one sentence.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Turn on every overhead light.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use lamps, natural light or a dimmer where you can.

Why it works: Softer, steady light is easier on sensitive eyes than overhead glare.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist on no hats indoors.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Allow a cap or hood in bright places.

Why it works: A brim is a simple, portable way to cut glare.

More things to say

“Hat or sunglasses for the car?”

“Let's sit with the window behind us.”

“Your eyes need a rest. Let's dim the lights.”

Do this in the moment

-  Offer sunglasses or a brimmed hat before going outside.
-  Seat your child with their back to the window.
-  Lower the brightness on tablets and TVs.
-  Give a short break in a dim, quiet spot when eyes get tired.

Avoid

-  Flashing or strobe lights and toys.
-  Sitting under a flickering fluorescent tube.
-  Making a child give up a hat that helps.

Set up for next time

-  Try warm-white bulbs at home and replace any that flicker.
-  Use a sun shade on the car window.
-  Ask the teacher about a seat away from windows and bright lights.



GET MORE HELP IF

Ask for an eye exam if your child squints often, tilts their head, rubs their eyes or gets headaches.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Keep a spare pair of sunglasses in the car and the school bag. The pair that helps is the pair that's there.

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PART ONE · SOUND AND SIGHT

Busy Stores and Cluttered Rooms

What it looks like

Halfway through the store your child whines, runs, drops to the floor or shuts down. At home, a messy playroom leads to wild behavior or doing nothing at all.

What's really going on

Shelves, colors, signs, people and noise all compete at once. A brain that can't filter gets tired fast, and too many choices make it hard to start anything.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Do the big weekly shop with your child at the busiest time.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Go at a quiet hour with a short list, or use pickup.

Why it works: Less input and less time mean the cup doesn't fill.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop touching things and stay with me."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You hold the list. Find the bananas."

Why it works: A job gives the eyes one thing to look for instead of everything.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep every toy out on open shelves.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Put most toys in closed bins and rotate a few each week.

Why it works: Fewer things in view makes it easier to choose and to stay calm.

More things to say

“Three things, then we're done.”

“Push the cart for me. You're strong.”

“Eyes on the list. What's next?”

Do this in the moment

-  Give heavy work: pushing the cart or carrying a basket.
-  Use a picture list your child can check off.
-  Offer headphones, a hat or sunglasses in the store.
-  Leave when you see early signs; finish the shopping another time.

Avoid

-  Long trips with several stops.
-  The toy and candy aisles when your child is already tired.
-  Bargaining with treats in the middle of a meltdown.

Set up for next time

-  Ask your store about sensory-friendly hours with lower lights and music.
-  Practice with a five-minute trip for one item.
-  At home, clear one calm corner with little on the walls.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't manage any public place without a meltdown, ask an OT for a plan to build up outings step by step.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The cart is a tool. Pushing something heavy gives the body the input it needs to stay calm in a busy place.

part two

Touch and Clothing

Tags, socks, coats, messy hands and unexpected hugs. How to make touch feel safe and get out the door dressed.

7 Tags, Seams and “Itchy” Clothes

9 Coats, Hats and Changing Seasons

11 Hugs, Kisses and Unexpected Touch

8 Socks and Shoes

10 Messy Hands: Paint, Glue, Sand and Food

12 Touching Everything and Everyone

7

PART TWO · TOUCH AND CLOTHING

Tags, Seams and “Itchy” Clothes

What it looks like

Your child pulls at collars, cries that clothes hurt, strips them off or will only wear the same two outfits again and again.

What's really going on

Light touch from tags, seams, stiff fabric or elastic can register as pain or a constant itch. Your child can't tune it out the way you can.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~“There's nothing wrong with that shirt.”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“Show me where it bothers you.”

Why it works: Finding the exact spot lets you fix the real problem.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Buy clothes because they look nice.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Let your child feel the fabric and choose.

Why it works: Clothes your child picks are clothes your child will wear.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist on a new outfit on a busy school morning.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Try new clothes for a few minutes on a calm weekend.

Why it works: New textures are easier to accept when nothing else is hard.

More things to say

“Tag is gone. Feel it now.”

“Soft shirt or the blue one?”

“You can wear it inside out today.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Cut tags out completely, including the stiff stub.
- ✓ Turn socks or shirts inside out so seams face away.
- ✓ Offer a snug undershirt as a smooth layer underneath.
- ✓ Give a firm rub on arms and legs before dressing.

Avoid

- ✗ Calling your child picky or dramatic.
- ✗ Stiff jeans, lace, wool and scratchy trims.
- ✗ Changing laundry soap or softener without warning.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Buy several of whatever works, in the next size too.
- ✓ Wash new clothes a few times before the first wear.
- ✓ Look for seamless, tagless or “sensory-friendly” clothing lines.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't tolerate any clothing, or dressing takes over every morning, ask an OT for a sensory assessment.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A favorite outfit worn four days a week is not a problem to fix. Wash it at night and choose bigger battles.

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PART TWO · TOUCH AND CLOTHING

Socks and Shoes

What it looks like

The sock seam has to be exactly right. Shoes come off in the car, at school and in the store. Getting out the door takes twenty minutes of tears.

What's really going on

Feet are packed with touch sensors. A seam across the toes, a tight strap or a stiff new shoe can feel unbearable to a sensitive child.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just put them on. We're late!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Let's fix the seam together. Tell me when it's right."

Why it works: Thirty seconds of fixing beats ten minutes of fighting.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Buy stiff new shoes the day before school starts.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Break shoes in at home for a few minutes a day, weeks ahead.

Why it works: Feet and shoes both need time to soften up.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Force on the shoes that came with the outfit.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer two pairs your child accepts and let them choose.

Why it works: A choice between two "yes" options keeps you moving.

More things to say

“Seam on top or seam under?”

“Shoes on at the door. Then you can press the garage button.”

“Tight or loose? You tell me.”

Do this in the moment

-  Try seamless socks or turn socks inside out.
-  Rub or squeeze feet firmly before socks go on.
-  Check for pebbles, wrinkles and tongue position.
-  Allow soft slip-on shoes when the place allows it.

Avoid

-  Thick, bumpy or tight socks.
-  Shoes that are too small; check sizes often.
-  Shoe battles in the last two minutes before leaving.

Set up for next time

-  Buy several pairs of the socks that work.
-  Put shoes on in the same spot, at the same step in the routine.
-  Ask the school if indoor slippers or soft shoes are allowed.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child walks on tiptoes most of the time, or foot sensitivity limits walking or play, tell the doctor or an OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Deep pressure first, socks second. A firm foot squeeze “turns down” the light-touch feeling for a few minutes.

9

PART TWO · TOUCH AND CLOTHING

Coats, Hats and Changing Seasons

What it looks like

Your child refuses a coat in winter, wears a hoodie in July, or falls apart the first week of long sleeves or shorts.

What's really going on

A new season means new textures on skin that had just gotten used to the old ones. Some children also don't feel hot and cold clearly.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Switch the whole wardrobe on the first cold day.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Bring in new-season clothes a few weeks early, one item at a time.

Why it works: Slow change gives the skin time to adjust.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You'll freeze! Put your coat on now!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Coat on, or carry it? You choose. It comes with us."

Why it works: Your child keeps some control, and the coat is there when they feel the cold.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Force a bulky, stiff winter coat.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Try soft layers: a fleece, a vest or a snug base layer.

Why it works: Layers give warmth with less bulk and more choice.

More things to say

“Feel the air on your hand. Is it cold or warm?”

“Hood up or hat on?”

“Shorts are for when the picture shows a sun.”

Do this in the moment

-  Step outside together for a moment so your child feels the weather.
-  Let your child pick between two okay options.
-  Cut tags and wash new items first.
-  Keep a spare layer in the bag without comment.

Avoid

-  Arguing in the doorway.
-  Tight cuffs, scratchy collars and noisy fabrics.
-  Mocking clothes that don't match the weather.

Set up for next time

-  Use a picture weather chart: sun means shorts, snowflake means coat.
-  Practice wearing the new item for short times at home.
-  Tell the teacher what your child will and won't wear.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child doesn't seem to feel very hot or very cold, tell the doctor, and watch closely in extreme weather.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A coat carried is a coat available. Most children put it on within five minutes of feeling the cold themselves.

10

PART TWO · TOUCH AND CLOTHING

Messy Hands: Paint, Glue, Sand and Food

What it looks like

Your child refuses finger paint, cries at sticky hands, won't walk on sand or grass, or needs their hands wiped after every bite.

What's really going on

Wet, sticky and gritty textures give strong, unpredictable touch input. To a sensitive child it can feel alarming, even disgusting.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put your child's hands in the paint to show it's fun.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer a brush, a stick or a glove so they can join without touching.

Why it works: Taking part with a tool is a real first step.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just a little glue. It washes off."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Sticky feels yucky to you. The wipes are right here."

Why it works: Knowing they can get clean makes it safer to try.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Start with slime or shaving cream.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Start with dry textures: rice, beans, kinetic sand.

Why it works: Dry is easier than wet. Wet is easier than sticky.

More things to say

“One finger touch. Then wipe.”

“You can use the spoon to scoop.”

“You touched the dough! High five.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep a damp cloth in sight during messy play and meals.
-  Let your child watch first; watching is taking part.
-  Give firm hand squeezes or play dough before messy play.
-  Stop while it's still going well.

Avoid

-  Surprising your child with a messy touch.
-  Wiping the face from behind or without warning.
-  Making messy play a must.

Set up for next time

-  Hide small toys in a bin of dry rice or beans to dig for.
-  Move slowly toward wetter textures over weeks.
-  Cook together: stirring, pouring and kneading at your child's pace.



GET MORE HELP IF

If texture sensitivity limits what your child eats or stops them joining in at school, ask an OT for help.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The wipe is not giving in. It's a safety net. A child who knows they can get clean will stay with the mess longer.

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PART TWO · TOUCH AND CLOTHING

Hugs, Kisses and Unexpected Touch

What it looks like

Your child stiffens or pushes away from hugs, hates being bumped in line, or hits when someone brushes past them.

What's really going on

Light or surprise touch can set off the body's alarm. Your child isn't rejecting people. Their skin is reacting before they can think.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Give Grandma a hug. Don't be rude."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Hug, high five or wave? You pick."

Why it works: Your child can connect in a way that feels safe, and learns their body is their own.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Touch or tickle your child lightly from behind.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Come from the front, say what you're doing and use firm touch.

Why it works: Firm, expected touch calms. Light, surprise touch alarms.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put your child in the middle of the line.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask for the front or back of the line and an end seat.

Why it works: Fewer bumps means fewer alarms through the day.

More things to say

“I’m going to wipe your face now. Ready?”

“You can say, ‘No thank you. High five instead.’”

“Do you want a big squeeze?”

Do this in the moment

-  Ask before you touch, and wait for an answer.
-  Offer deep pressure your child controls: squeezes, a pillow sandwich.
-  Tell relatives ahead of time how your child likes to say hello.
-  Give your child room in crowded places.

Avoid

-  Forcing hugs or kisses with anyone.
-  Tickling a child who says stop.
-  Taking it personally.

Set up for next time

-  Teach a phrase or sign for “too close” and “stop.”
-  Practice greetings with a doll or in a mirror.
-  Find the touch your child does like, and offer it often.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child often hits or panics when touched, or avoids all contact, talk with an OT about a plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A child who can say no to a hug is learning something every child needs: my body, my choice.

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PART TWO · TOUCH AND CLOTHING

Touching Everything and Everyone

What it looks like

Your child runs their hands along every wall, squeezes the dog too hard, touches other children's hair and faces, and can't keep hands to themselves.

What's really going on

Some children don't get enough information from touch, so they seek more. They often can't judge how hard they are pressing or how close is too close.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Hands to yourself! How many times do I have to say it?"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Your hands need something to do. Here's your fidget."

Why it works: The need doesn't go away. You're giving it a safe place to go.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to walk through a store with empty hands.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Give a job for the hands: carry the bag, push the cart, hold the list.

Why it works: Busy hands with heavy work get the input they're looking for.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop hurting the dog!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Gentle hands look like this. Let me show you on your arm."

Why it works: Your child may not feel the difference until you show them.

More things to say

“Ask first: ‘Can I touch your hair?’”

“Squeeze the ball, not your brother.”

“One arm away. That's the space bubble.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep a fidget, putty or a textured keychain in a pocket.
-  Offer a touch box at home: fabrics, brushes, squishy and bumpy things.
-  Give heavy hand work: play dough, squeezing sponges, carrying.
-  Show the space bubble with an arm's length or a hoop.

Avoid

-  Slapping hands away.
-  Shaming your child in front of others.
-  Taking away all touch; the need comes back stronger.

Set up for next time

-  Practice gentle touch on a stuffed animal before the pet.
-  Read a picture story about personal space.
-  Tell the teacher which fidgets help your child focus.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child often hurts others without meaning to, or doesn't seem to feel their own injuries, ask an OT for an assessment.

DR. VERA'S TIP

“Don't touch” gives a child nothing to do. “Touch this instead” gives them a way to succeed.

part three

Daily Care

Hair, teeth, nails, lotion and smells. How to get through the routines no child can skip, with less fear and fewer fights.

13 Hair Washing and Bath Time

15 Tooth Brushing and the Dentist

17 Sunscreen, Lotion and Band-Aids

14 Hair Brushing and Haircuts

16 Nail Trimming

18 Smells That Are Too Strong

13

PART THREE · DAILY CARE

Hair Washing and Bath Time

What it looks like

Bath time means screaming, especially when water goes near the face. Your child fights the shampoo, the rinse or even getting in.

What's really going on

Water on the face, a tipped-back head, echoing sound, slippery surfaces and changing temperature all hit at once. It's a lot for one small body.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pour water over your child's head without warning.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Count “1, 2, 3” and let your child hold a dry cloth over their eyes.

Why it works: A count and a cloth give warning and protection.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Hold still or the soap will get in your eyes.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“Look up at the sticker on the ceiling. I'll be quick.”

Why it works: A target for the eyes tips the head back without a struggle.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wash hair every single bath.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Wash hair only when needed, and say which days ahead of time.

Why it works: Knowing most baths are “no hair wash” makes baths easier overall.

More things to say

“Today is a hair day. Tomorrow is not.”

“You pour first. Then my turn.”

“Three rinses. Count with me.”

Do this in the moment

-  Let your child test and choose the water temperature.
-  Use a handheld sprayer, a cup or a rinse visor.
-  Use a firm touch on the scalp, not a light one.
-  Wrap your child in a warm towel right away.

Avoid

-  Surprise splashes or face rinsing.
-  Strong-smelling soaps and shampoos.
-  Rushing a frightened child.

Set up for next time

-  Try a shower, a sponge bath or dry shampoo if baths are too hard.
-  Practice pouring water on a doll's head, then on your child's shoulders.
-  Put a non-slip mat in the tub so your child feels steady.



GET MORE HELP IF

If washing causes panic every time, ask an OT for a step-by-step plan for bathing.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Give your child the cup. A child who pours the water is in charge of it, and that changes everything.

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PART THREE · DAILY CARE

Hair Brushing and Haircuts

What it looks like

Brushing brings tears and ducking away. A haircut means holding your child down, and you've left the salon halfway through more than once.

What's really going on

The scalp is very sensitive, and tugging hurts. At the salon there are buzzing clippers, sharp scissors by the ears, strangers, smells and falling hair on the skin.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Brush from the roots down through tangles.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Hold the hair above the tangle and brush the ends first.

Why it works: Holding the hair stops the pull on the scalp.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hold your child down for a full haircut.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Do a few snips, take a break, and finish another day if needed.

Why it works: A partial haircut with no fear makes the next one possible.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It doesn't hurt. Sit still."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Ten brushes. Count with me. Then all done."

Why it works: A clear end point makes it easier to hang on.

More things to say

“You hold the mirror. Watch me.”

“Clippers or scissors? You choose.”

“Five snips, then a break.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Use detangling spray and a wide-tooth comb or soft brush.
- ✓ Give firm head squeezes before brushing or cutting.
- ✓ Bring headphones, a tablet and a spare shirt to the salon.
- ✓ Brush off loose hair right away and change the shirt.

Avoid

- ✗ Brushing wet tangles without spray.
- ✗ Surprise haircuts.
- ✗ Busy salons at peak times.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Ask for a stylist who knows children with autism, and book the first or last slot.
- ✓ Play haircut at home with a doll and let clippers buzz on your child's hand first.
- ✓ Choose a style that's easy to care for.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't tolerate any hair care, ask an OT for ways to reduce scalp sensitivity.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Let your child touch the clippers while they're off, then on, then on their arm. Fear shrinks when the thing is in their own hands.

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PART THREE · DAILY CARE

Tooth Brushing and the Dentist

What it looks like

Your child gags, bites the brush, clamps their mouth shut or runs. Dental visits are something everyone dreads.

What's really going on

The mouth is one of the most sensitive parts of the body. Bristles, foaming paste, strong mint and a hand near the face can all be too much.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Use a minty, foamy toothpaste.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Try unflavored or mild toothpaste, or start with water only.

Why it works: Taking away the strong taste removes one big trigger.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pin your child and brush fast.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Brush together in the mirror, your child first, then you “check.”

Why it works: Taking turns gives control and still gets the teeth clean.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Open up! Your teeth will rot.”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“Top teeth, count to ten. Then bottom teeth.”

Why it works: Counting makes brushing short and predictable.

More things to say

“Soft brush or the buzzy one?”

“Let's brush the dinosaur's teeth first.”

“All done. Sparkle check!”

Do this in the moment

-  Use a small, extra-soft brush, and try an electric one if your child likes vibration.
-  Press firmly on cheeks and lips before brushing.
-  Use a two-minute song or a timer.
-  Brush at the same step in the routine each day.

Avoid

-  Brushing only when your child is already upset.
-  Threats about dentists and needles.
-  Giving up brushing completely.

Set up for next time

-  Find a dentist used to children with autism, and ask for a visit just to look and sit in the chair.
-  Show pictures or a video of a dental visit before you go.
-  Bring headphones and sunglasses for the bright light.



GET MORE HELP IF

See a dentist if you notice pain, swelling, bleeding or dark spots, or if you can't brush at all. Mouth pain often shows up as behavior.

DR. VERA'S TIP

If two minutes is impossible, start with ten seconds. A short brush every day beats a perfect brush once a week.

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PART THREE · DAILY CARE

Nail Trimming

What it looks like

Your child screams, hides their hands or kicks when the clippers come out. You end up cutting nails while they sleep.

What's really going on

Fingertips are very sensitive. The pressure, the clicking sound and the odd feeling afterward are hard, and your child can't see when it will end.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Cut all twenty nails in one sitting.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Do one or two nails a day.

Why it works: Small doses stay under the level where panic starts.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Use clippers on dry nails.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Trim after a bath, or try a file.

Why it works: Soft nails cut with less pressure and less noise.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop pulling away or I'll cut you!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"One nail. Squeeze, click, done."

Why it works: Short, calm words tell your child exactly what will happen.

More things to say

“Which finger goes first?”

“Thumb is done. One more?”

“Your hands did so well.”

Do this in the moment

-  Squeeze each finger firmly before and after you trim.
-  Let your child watch a show or hold a fidget in the other hand.
-  Show the clippers and click them in the air first.
-  Stop on a success, even if it's a single nail.

Avoid

-  Sneaking up with the clippers.
-  Cutting too close to the skin.
-  Holding your child down.

Set up for next time

-  Trim at the same calm time each week, like after Sunday's bath.
-  Let your child trim a paper “nail” or a parent's nail with help.
-  Try a child's nail file or an electric file if clipping stays hard.



GET MORE HELP IF

If nails become ingrown or infected, or trimming is impossible, ask your doctor or OT for help.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Trimming during sleep is fine as a backup. Keep practicing one nail a day while awake, so it won't be needed forever.

17

PART THREE · DAILY CARE

Sunscreen, Lotion and Band-Aids

What it looks like

Your child screams and wipes off sunscreen, won't let you put cream on dry skin, and panics at a bandage or peels it off right away.

What's really going on

Creams are cold, wet and sticky, and they smell. A bandage pulls on the skin and feels “wrong” every second it's on.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Squirt cold lotion straight onto your child's skin.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Warm it in your hands and rub it in with firm, slow strokes.

Why it works: Warm, firm touch is much easier to accept than cold and light.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Chase your child with the spray at the pool.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Apply sunscreen at home before you leave, as a step in getting dressed.

Why it works: It's calmer at home, and it becomes part of the routine.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“You have to. Do you want to get burned?”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“Stick or lotion? Arms first or legs first?”

Why it works: Two small choices give your child a say in how it happens.

More things to say

“Warm lotion coming. Firm rub.”

“You do your arms. I’ll do your back.”

“Bandage or no bandage? Your choice.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Try different types: stick, roll-on, mineral or fragrance-free.
- ✓ Let your child put it on themselves with a sponge or makeup brush.
- ✓ Use sun shirts, hats and shade to cut down on sunscreen.
- ✓ For small scrapes, clean it and skip the bandage if your child prefers.

Avoid

- ✗ Spraying near the face.
- ✗ Strong-smelling products.
- ✗ Ripping bandages off quickly without warning.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Practice with a dot of lotion on the hand at a calm time.
- ✓ Find the one product your child accepts and stock up.
- ✓ Try fabric bandages or wraps instead of sticky plastic ones.



GET MORE HELP IF

Tell the doctor about rashes or very dry, itchy skin. Skin that hurts makes all touch harder.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A long-sleeved swim shirt covers most of the body. Less skin to cover means less sunscreen to fight about.

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PART THREE · DAILY CARE

Smells That Are Too Strong

What it looks like

Your child gags at cooking smells, refuses to enter a bathroom or the school cafeteria, or complains loudly about how people smell.

What's really going on

A sharp sense of smell picks up what others miss. Smell is tied closely to the gag reflex and to feelings, so the reaction is fast and strong.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It doesn't smell. Stop being rude."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That smell is strong for you. Let's open a window."

Why it works: You accept what your child senses and solve the problem.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Make your child sit at the table while food cooks.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Let your child play in another room until the meal is served.

Why it works: Smell is strongest during cooking. Distance helps.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Don't say that! You'll hurt her feelings."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Tell me quietly, in my ear. Then we'll move."

Why it works: Your child still gets help, and learns a kinder way to ask.

More things to say

“Smell your sleeve. That's your safe smell.”

“Let's step outside for fresh air.”

“You can sit at the far end of the table.”

Do this in the moment

-  Use fragrance-free soap, detergent and cleaners.
-  Run a fan or open windows when cooking.
-  Offer a “safe smell” on a cloth or wristband your child likes.
-  Sit near a door or window when eating out.

Avoid

-  Perfume, air fresheners and scented candles.
-  Forcing your child to stay near a smell that makes them gag.
-  Laughing at or scolding honest reactions.

Set up for next time

-  Ask the school about eating away from the kitchen or bins.
-  Teach a private signal for “the smell is too much.”
-  Explore smells as a game at home, starting with ones your child likes.



GET MORE HELP IF

If smells limit what your child eats or where they can go, bring it up with the doctor or an OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A drop of a liked scent on a sleeve gives your child something to breathe in when the world smells like too much.

part four

Movement and Body

Crashing, climbing, chewing, spinning and not feeling pain. How to give a body the input it's asking for, safely.

19 Always Moving, Can't Sit Still

21 Chewing on Clothes and Objects

23 Not Noticing Pain, Hunger, Hot or Cold

20 Crashing, Jumping and Rough Play

22 Afraid of Swings, Slides and Heights

24 Spinning, Rocking and Hand-Flapping

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PART FOUR · MOVEMENT AND BODY

Always Moving, Can't Sit Still

What it looks like

Your child wiggles, rocks the chair, gets up every minute at meals and school, and seems driven by a motor.

What's really going on

Some bodies need more movement to feel alert and organized. Sitting still takes so much effort that there's none left for listening or eating.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Sit still and pay attention!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Ten jumps, then we'll sit for the story."

Why it works: Movement first helps the body settle enough to sit.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Take away recess or playtime as a consequence.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Add more movement breaks through the day.

Why it works: A child who can't sit needs more movement, not less.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Require a regular chair for every task.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer a wobble cushion, a ball chair, standing or lying on the tummy.

Why it works: A little movement while working helps many children focus.

More things to say

“Your body needs to move. Let's do a lap.”

“Stand or sit? Either is fine.”

“Carry these books to the shelf for me.”

Do this in the moment

-  Give a movement break every 15 to 20 minutes.
-  Offer heavy work: carrying, pushing, pulling, climbing.
-  Tie a stretchy band around chair legs for feet to push on.
-  Keep seated times short and build up slowly.

Avoid

-  Long car rides or waits with no plan.
-  Punishing fidgeting.
-  Expecting stillness to equal listening.

Set up for next time

-  Start the day with active play before school.
-  Ask the teacher about movement jobs: handing out papers, wiping the board.
-  Plan active time before meals, homework and outings.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't stay with any activity, or you're concerned about attention or safety, talk with the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A child can listen while moving. Ask a question, and you may find the wiggler heard every word.

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PART FOUR · MOVEMENT AND BODY

Crashing, Jumping and Rough Play

What it looks like

Your child throws themselves onto the couch, jumps off furniture, bumps into people on purpose and plays too rough with other children.

What's really going on

Crashing gives strong input to muscles and joints. Your child is seeking that deep pressure to feel where their body is and to calm down.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop jumping on the couch!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Jumping is for the trampoline. Let's go."

Why it works: You say yes to the need and move it to a safe place.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait for your child to calm down without any outlet.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Build a crash spot: cushions, a beanbag or an old mattress on the floor.

Why it works: A safe place to crash means less crashing into people and furniture.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Ban all rough play.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer it on your terms: pillow squishes, wheelbarrow walks, tug-of-war.

Why it works: Planned rough play fills the need before it spills over.

More things to say

“Crash pad, not people.”

“Want a pillow sandwich?”

“Push the wall as hard as you can!”

Do this in the moment

-  Schedule heavy work before sitting times and outings.
-  Give chores with weight: carrying groceries, pushing the bin, digging.
-  Teach a “stop” word for rough play and use it yourself.
-  Supervise jumping and climbing, and check equipment.

Avoid

-  Trampolines without supervision or with several children at once.
-  Rough play right before bed.
-  Labeling your child as aggressive.

Set up for next time

-  Plan daily playground, pool or bike time.
-  Teach your child to ask: “I need a squeeze.”
-  Show siblings and friends the rules for rough games.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is often hurt, hurts others or seems to have no fear, ask an OT for a sensory plan and safety ideas.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Heavy work is the closest thing we have to an all-purpose tool. It calms a child who is wound up and wakes up a child who is sluggish.

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PART FOUR · MOVEMENT AND BODY

Chewing on Clothes and Objects

What it looks like

Shirt collars and sleeves are soaked and full of holes. Pencils, toys and fingers are always in your child's mouth.

What's really going on

Chewing gives strong input to the jaw that calms and helps focus. It often increases with stress, boredom or concentration.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Get that out of your mouth!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Chew this instead."

Why it works: A swap works. A "stop" doesn't, because the need is still there.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Punish chewed sleeves.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Give a safe chew tool: a chewy necklace or a pencil topper.

Why it works: A tool made for chewing protects teeth, clothes and health.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Offer only soft foods.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Add crunchy and chewy snacks and drinks through a straw.

Why it works: Food and drink can give the mouth the hard work it wants.

More things to say

“Your chewy is on your shirt clip.”

“Mouth needs a job? Carrot or pretzel?”

“Shirts are for wearing. Chewies are for chewing.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep chew tools within reach: clipped on, in a pocket, at the desk.
-  Offer gum if your child is old enough and can chew it safely.
-  Notice when chewing spikes and add a break or calming activity.
-  Wash chew tools daily and replace them when worn.

Avoid

-  Shaming or pulling things out of the mouth.
-  Small or breakable items that could be swallowed.
-  Bitter sprays on clothes or hands.

Set up for next time

-  Ask an OT which chew tool and firmness suit your child.
-  Tell the teacher the chewy is a tool, not a toy.
-  Try blowing games: bubbles, whistles, pinwheels.



GET MORE HELP IF

Tell the doctor if your child eats non-food items such as dirt, paper, paint or hair. This is called pica, and it needs a medical check.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A soaked collar is information. It tells you when your child is stressed, so you can step in earlier.

22

PART FOUR · MOVEMENT AND BODY

Afraid of Swings, Slides and Heights

What it looks like

Your child clings on escalators, refuses swings and slides, hates being tipped back or lifted, and gets carsick easily.

What's really going on

The balance system in the inner ear can be over-sensitive. Movement that is fun for others can feel like falling, even when it's small.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put your child on the swing and push.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Let them sit on a still swing with feet on the ground, in control.

Why it works: Movement your child starts and stops is far less scary.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Don't be a baby. Look, the little kids can do it."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That feels wobbly. You tell me when to stop."

Why it works: Trust builds bravery. Shame builds fear.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Avoid playgrounds altogether.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Start low and slow: stepping stones, low beams, a gentle rocker.

Why it works: Small, successful movement builds confidence in the body.

More things to say

“Feet on the ground. You're the boss of the swing.”

“Hold my hand on the first step.”

“You went one step higher today.”

Do this in the moment

-  Stay close and offer a firm hand, not a lift.
-  Let your child watch other children first.
-  Give heavy work before movement to steady the body.
-  Stop right away when your child says stop.

Avoid

-  Surprise lifting, spinning or tipping.
-  Pushing higher “just once.”
-  Comparing to brothers, sisters or friends.

Set up for next time

-  Play on the floor: rolling, crawling through tunnels, rocking on a cushion.
-  Visit the playground at quiet times.
-  In the car, try a front-facing view, fresh air and no screens.



GET MORE HELP IF

If fear of movement keeps your child from stairs, play or school activities, or balance seems poor, ask the doctor and an OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The rule for movement is simple: the child drives. When they control the speed, the brain learns it's safe.

23

PART FOUR · MOVEMENT AND BODY

Not Noticing Pain, Hunger, Hot or Cold

What it looks like

Your child doesn't cry after a hard fall, forgets to eat or drink, wears a coat in the heat, or doesn't notice they need the toilet until it's too late.

What's really going on

Signals from inside the body, like pain, hunger, thirst and a full bladder, can be faint or confusing. Your child isn't ignoring them. They may not feel them clearly.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"How do you not know you're hungry?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's snack time. Let's check your tummy."

Why it works: A schedule does the noticing until your child learns to.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait for your child to tell you they're hurt.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Check their body after a fall and look for limping or guarding.

Why it works: No tears doesn't mean no injury.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You should have told me you had to go!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Toilet check. We go before we leave, every time."

Why it works: Routine trips prevent accidents without blame.

More things to say

“My tummy is growling. That means hungry. Is yours?”

“Your cheeks are red. You look hot. Coat off?”

“Drink check! Five sips.”

Do this in the moment

-  Offer food, drinks and toilet trips by the clock.
-  Name body signals out loud as you notice your own.
-  Check water temperature yourself before baths.
-  Look your child over after rough play or falls.

Avoid

-  Assuming “no complaint” means “no problem.”
-  Shaming toilet accidents.
-  Leaving your child alone near heat, sun or cold for long.

Set up for next time

-  Use a picture chart of body signals: hungry, thirsty, hot, cold, need the toilet.
-  Play “body check” games: feel your heartbeat after running.
-  Tell teachers and sitters your child may not report pain.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor promptly for any fall, burn or illness, even if your child seems fine. A sudden change in behavior can be the only sign of pain.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Behavior is often the first symptom. A child who suddenly won't walk, eat or sleep may be telling you something hurts.

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PART FOUR · MOVEMENT AND BODY

Spinning, Rocking and Hand-Flapping

What it looks like

Your child rocks, spins, flaps their hands, flicks their fingers or paces, especially when excited, bored or upset. People stare.

What's really going on

This is called stimming. It helps the body calm down, wake up or show big feelings. For most children it is useful and harmless.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Quiet hands! Stop that."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You're so excited! I see your happy hands."

Why it works: You connect with the feeling and leave a helpful tool alone.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stop a stim because others are looking.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask yourself: is it hurting anyone or getting in the way?

Why it works: If the answer is no, there's nothing to fix.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hold your child's hands still.~~

✓ TRY THIS

If a stim is unsafe, offer one that gives a similar feeling.

Why it works: The need behind the stim still has to be met.

More things to say

“Rocking helps your body. That's okay.”

“Spin on the grass, where it's safe.”

“Need a break? Let's go to the quiet spot.”

Do this in the moment

-  Allow harmless stims at home, school and in public.
-  Notice what the stim is telling you: happy, stressed, bored, overloaded.
-  Lower demands and noise if stimming suddenly increases.
-  Give a short, kind answer to strangers, or none at all.

Avoid

-  Punishing or rewarding to stop stimming.
-  Explaining your child to strangers in front of them.
-  Forcing still hands or eye contact.

Set up for next time

-  Offer tools that match: a swing for rocking, a fidget for fingers.
-  Help teachers see stimming as a tool for focus.
-  Teach siblings a simple line: “It helps his body feel good.”



GET MORE HELP IF

Get help if a stim causes injury, such as head-banging, biting or skin picking, or if a new repeated movement appears suddenly.

DR. VERA'S TIP

When stimming goes up, the cup is filling. Treat it as an early warning light, not a behavior to stop.

TOOLS

Your home calming kit

A small bag or box your child can grab when things feel like too much. Keep one at home and a mini version in the car or your bag.

Ears

Noise-cancelling headphones or earmuffs, a favorite calm song.

Eyes

Sunglasses, a cap or hood, a picture book or a calm-down bottle.

Hands

Fidgets, a stress ball, putty, a soft fabric square.

Mouth

A chewy necklace or tool, a crunchy or chewy snack, a water bottle with a straw.

Body

A small weighted lap pad if your OT suggests one, a hoodie, a favorite blanket.

Comfort

A favorite small toy, a family photo, a picture “break” card.

How to make it work

- ✓ Let your child help choose and decorate the kit, so it feels like theirs.
- ✓ Practice using it when calm, so it's familiar in a hard moment.
- ✓ Rotate items every few weeks to keep it interesting.
- ✓ Never take the kit away as a punishment.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Ask your child's OT which tools match your child's sensory profile. The right kit is personal.

TOOLS

A sensory plan for the day

Therapists call this a “sensory diet”: small doses of the right input, spread through the day, so the cup never gets too full or too empty.

Morning

Wake the body up: jumping, animal walks, a crunchy breakfast, carrying the backpack.

Before sitting

Two minutes of heavy work before meals, homework and car rides: wall pushes, chair push-ups.

After school

Quiet first. A snack, a dim room and no questions for twenty minutes, then active play.

Outings

Pack the kit. Give a job: push the cart, carry the bag. Plan a break and an exit.

Evening

Slow things down: low lights, a warm bath, firm back rubs, quiet play.

Anytime

Heavy work is almost always safe: pushing, pulling, carrying, climbing, squeezing.

Words to use

“What does your body need?”

“Heavy work first, then we sit.”

“Break time. Let's reset.”

DR. VERA'S TIP

The best time for a sensory break is before your child needs one. Put the breaks on the schedule, like meals.

PRINTABLE

My small-steps ladder

Use this to help your child get used to something hard, like a new shirt, the hair clippers or a noisy place. Stay on each step until it's easy, and let your child decide when to move up.

What we're working on: _____

1 Look at it	2 Touch it	3 Try for 3 seconds
4 Try for 10 seconds	5 Try with help	6 I did it!

DR. VERA'S TIP

If your child gets upset, the step was too big. Go back one, make it smaller and try again another day.

PRINTABLE · SHARE WITH FAMILY, SITTERS AND TEACHERS

My Sensory Plan

Fill this in with your child when possible. Give a copy to anyone who cares for them.

My name is:

Sounds, touches, sights and smells that are too much for me:

Things my body likes and looks for:

Signs that my cup is getting full:

What helps me calm down:

My calming tools and where they are:

Please don't:

Call this person:

PRINTABLE

Sensory trigger log

Track hard moments for two weeks. Patterns jump out fast: the same sound, the same place, the same time of day, or a tired or hungry body.

DATE / TIME	WHERE	WHAT WAS HAPPENING (SOUND, TOUCH, LIGHT, CROWD)	WHAT I SAW	WHAT HELPED	HOW LONG

Patterns I notice:

IMPORTANT

When to get more help

CALL 911 RIGHT AWAY IF

- ✗ Anyone is badly hurt, or your child has a head injury with vomiting, confusion or fainting
- ✗ Your child has swallowed something dangerous or is choking
- ✗ Your child runs into traffic or water, or is missing

Call your child's doctor soon if

- ✓ A sudden change in how your child reacts to sound, light, touch or movement
- ✓ Signs of pain or illness: ear pulling, tooth pain, stomach problems, not sleeping or eating
- ✓ Eating non-food items such as dirt, paper, paint or hair
- ✓ Self-injury, such as head-banging, biting or skin picking that leaves marks
- ✓ Not seeming to feel pain, heat or cold
- ✓ Sensory problems that keep your child from eating, sleeping, school or leaving the house

Who can help

PROFESSIONAL	HOW THEY HELP
Pediatrician	Rules out pain, illness, hearing, vision, skin and dental problems
Occupational therapist (OT)	Sensory assessment, a daily sensory plan, tools and home and school setup
Audiologist or eye doctor	Checks hearing and vision when reactions to sound or light are strong
Speech-language pathologist	Communication tools so your child can say “too loud,” “stop” or “break”

Ask an OT before using weighted blankets, vests or brushing programs. They are not right for every child and need to be set up safely.

FOR YOU

Taking care of you

Living with a child whose senses are always on alert means you are on alert too: scanning every room, planning every outing. That is tiring work. Your own nervous system needs care as well.

In the moment

- ✓ Breathe out longer than you breathe in
- ✓ Drop your shoulders and unclench your jaw
- ✓ Say to yourself: "This is their body, not their choice."

Every day

- ✓ Ten minutes of quiet that are just yours
- ✓ Move your body, even a short walk
- ✓ Notice one thing that went well

Every week

- ✓ Share the load with a partner, family or respite care
- ✓ Do one outing the easy way: pickup, delivery, a quiet hour
- ✓ Talk to one person who gets it

Find your people

- ✓ Local autism parent groups
- ✓ Your child's school or therapy team
- ✓ Online groups with kind moderation

DR. VERA'S TIP

You may have sensory limits of your own. If the noise is getting to you, it's okay to put on your own headphones for a few minutes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Fernando Vera, OT

Licensed occupational therapist and owner and clinical director of Empower Health, a clinic in Houston, TX.

Dr. Vera helps families turn hard daily moments into calmer, more connected routines. His approach is practical and respectful: understand what the nervous system needs, lower the load, and give parents words and tools they can use the same day.

He is also the author of Dr. Vera's Dementia Action Manuals, including *Stop the Chaos!*

More Calm & Connected Guides

Stop the Meltdown!

What to say and do when your child with autism is overwhelmed.

Stop the Bedtime Battles!

A step-by-step bedtime plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Food Fights!

Sensory-friendly eating without the battle.

Stop the Potty Struggles!

An OT's toileting plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Loneliness!

An OT's guide to helping your child with autism build real friendships.

[StartEmpowering.com](https://www.StartEmpowering.com)