

You, Me, and Dough!

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You, Me, and Dough!

As the creator of Squish4Joy and a parent with a deep passion for supporting children on the autism spectrum, I have dedicated myself to nurturing my children's growth and fostering their independence through sensory-rich activities. My personal journey as a mother of two children with autism, combined with my expertise in special education, autism, and transition, inspired the creation of You, Me, and Dough! This guidebook reflects the methods I used to teach my son skills through play and sensory engagement. It offers practical tools and strategies designed to empower parents and caregivers, helping children thrive in a supportive environment while bringing families closer together.

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You, Me, and Dough!

Welcome to You, Me, and Dough! This guidebook offers seven evidence-based activities using play dough to support sensory integration and skill development for children on the autism spectrum. Each activity targets specific areas such as tactile exploration, fine motor skills, visual-spatial awareness, communication, emotional regulation, creativity, and body awareness. Sensory play is not just fun—it's a powerful way to help your child process sensory information and grow. With simple materials and easy instructions, you're ready to create a sensory-rich, enjoyable experience for both you and your child. Let the fun begin!

What is Sensory Processing?

Sensory processing is how the brain interprets and responds to sensory input from our environment. For individuals with autism, sensory processing can be challenging, leading to either hypersensitivity (over-responsiveness) or hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness) to sensory experiences. This can affect how they interact with their surroundings and respond to stimuli. Sensory integration activities can help children with autism process sensory information more effectively, improving their comfort and ability to engage in daily life. Understanding and addressing these sensory needs is essential for their overall well-being and development.

Activity 1

Tactile Exploration Activity

Objective:

This activity is designed for children on the autism spectrum, whether they can follow directions or not, and whether they are speaking or non-speaking. **It allows them to explore different textures at their own pace, encouraging independent sensory play.**

Materials Needed:

- Squish4Joy scented or unscented Play Dough
- Various textured items (e.g., bubble wrap, sandpaper, fabric scraps, small beads, rice, pasta)
- A flat surface or tray to work on
- Great, happy energy! (Bring a positive, enthusiastic attitude to make the activity enjoyable and engaging for your child!)
- Encouraging words and praise

Prepare the Environment:

Set up a safe, comfortable space where your child can play independently. Ensure that all materials are within easy reach. Place the play dough and textured items in an open container on the tray or table.

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Encourage Free Exploration:

Allow your child to naturally explore the materials in front of them. If needed, gently guide their hands to the play dough and show them how to press the textured items into it, but don't worry about giving directions or expecting specific outcomes.

Facilitate Engagement:

Join your child in the play if they seem interested, but **follow their lead**. You can imitate their actions, like pressing textures into the dough, and narrate their play to reinforce engagement and connection. **Bring in your great, happy energy to make the experience more fun and inviting.**

Adaptation for Different Needs:

For children who can follow instructions, you can introduce more structured tasks, like creating specific shapes or patterns with the textures. Whether your child is speaking or non-speaking, the focus remains on tactile exploration. Use gestures, modeling, and **positive reinforcement** to communicate.

Observe and Adapt:

Watch how your child interacts with the materials. If they show interest in a particular texture, **provide more of that item**. Introduce new textures or different ways to interact with the dough if their interest wanes.

Allow for Sensory Play at Their Own Pace:

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Let your child take the lead in this activity. Be patient and let them explore the materials in their own way, offering **gentle praise to encourage their exploration.**

Activity 2:

Fine Motor Skills Activity

Objective:

This activity is designed to help children on the autism spectrum strengthen their fine motor skills by promoting dexterity and precision in their fingers and hands.

Materials Needed:

- Squish4Joy Dough
- Small objects for pinching and placing (e.g., beads, buttons, small pebbles)
- Child-safe scissors or plastic knife
- A flat surface or tray to work on
- Great, happy energy! (Bring positive enthusiasm to make the activity fun and engaging for your child!)
- Encouraging words and praise to motivate your child as they work on their fine motor skills

Prepare the Environment:

Set up a comfortable, well-lit workspace where your child can focus on the activity. Place the Squish4Joy Dough, small objects, and tools within easy reach.

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Start with Dough Pinching:

Show your child how to pinch off small pieces of Squish4Joy Dough using their thumb and index finger. Encourage them to make small balls or other shapes by rolling the pinched dough between their fingers. As they pinch and shape the dough, praise their efforts.

Introduce Small Object Placement:

Give your child small objects like beads or buttons and encourage them to press these into the dough balls or shapes they've created. Demonstrate how to use a gentle, precise pinch to pick up the objects and place them carefully on the dough.

Practice Cutting and Slicing:

Introduce child-safe scissors or a plastic knife and show your child how to cut through the Squish4Joy Dough. If your child struggles with using scissors or a knife, encourage them to start by tearing the dough with their hands. This will help build strength and control in their fingers. As they become more comfortable, you can try a hands-on approach with the scissors or knife. **Gently guide their hands as they use the tool, offering support while they practice.**

Expand the Activity:

Once your child is comfortable with pinching, shaping, and cutting, encourage them to create more complex designs, like cutting out shapes or creating patterns with the small objects.

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Continue to offer praise and positive feedback to build their confidence and keep them engaged.

Allow for Independent Exploration and Incorporate Praise:

Give your child time to explore the materials independently, allowing them to create and experiment on their own. As they work, provide gentle praise to encourage their efforts, such as, **“I love how you’re focusing on those tiny details! You’re really improving your fine motor skills!”**

Adaptations:

- **For Children with Weaker Fine Motor Skills:** Use larger objects or thicker dough to make pinching and cutting easier.
- **For Advanced Fine Motor Skills:** Challenge your child by introducing more detailed tasks, such as creating intricate patterns or using tweezers to place objects.

Activity 3:

Visual-Spatial Awareness

Objective:

This activity is designed to help children on the autism spectrum develop their visual-spatial awareness by enhancing their ability to perceive and interact with shapes and space.

Materials Needed:

- Squish4Joy Dough
- Cookie cutters or shape molds in various geometric shapes (e.g., circles, squares, triangles)
- A flat surface or tray to work on
- A small tray or container for sorting shapes
- Great, happy energy! (Bring positive enthusiasm to make the activity fun and engaging for your child!)

Prepare the Environment:

Set up a comfortable, well-lit workspace where your child can focus on the activity. Place the Squish4Joy Dough, shape molds, and sorting tray within easy reach.

Start with Shape Cutting:

- Roll out the Squish4Joy Dough to a flat sheet on the surface or tray.

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- Show your child how to press the cookie cutters or shape molds into the dough to create various shapes.
- Encourage them to try pressing the shapes themselves, guiding them as needed. Offer praise such as, “Great job pressing that circle! Look at the nice, round shape you made!”

Introduce Shape Matching:

- Once your child has cut out several shapes, place them on the tray or in the container.
- Next, draw or print matching shapes on a piece of paper or directly on the tray, and ask your child to match the dough shapes to the corresponding outlines.
- Guide them in aligning the shapes correctly, encouraging them with comments like, **“You matched the triangle perfectly! Look how well you lined it up!”**

Explore Spatial Relationships:

- Challenge your child by asking them to arrange the shapes in different patterns or sequences. For example, ask them to line up the shapes from smallest to largest or create a simple design using the shapes.
- Encourage them to think about how the shapes fit together and interact with each other. Offer suggestions like, **“Let’s see if the square fits next to the triangle—look at how the sides match up!”**

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Incorporate Movement:

- To further enhance visual-spatial skills, create a simple obstacle course using the dough shapes. Place the shapes around the room, and ask your child to move from one shape to another, naming each shape as they step on or near it.
- Praise their ability to navigate the space and recognize the shapes, saying things like, **“You’re doing great moving from shape to shape! You know exactly where to go next!”**

Allow for Independent Exploration and Incorporate Praise:

- Give your child time to explore the shapes and space on their own. Encourage them to create their own patterns or designs with the dough shapes.
- As they work, provide gentle praise to encourage their efforts, such as, “I love how you’re arranging those shapes! You’re really improving your visual-spatial skills!”

Adaptations:

- *For Younger or Less Experienced Children:* Start with larger, simpler shapes and gradually introduce more complex patterns as they become more comfortable.
- *For Advanced Learners:* Introduce more intricate designs, or ask your child to create a picture or scene using the shapes.

Activity 4: Communication and Language

Objective:

This activity uses Squish4Joy Dough to encourage language development and social interaction, helping children on the autism spectrum practice communication skills in a fun and engaging way.

Materials Needed:

- Squish4Joy Dough
- Simple, familiar objects or toys to use as prompts (e.g., toy animals, cars, or food items)
- A flat surface or tray to work on
- Great, happy energy! (Bring positive enthusiasm to make the activity fun and engaging for your child!)
- Encouraging words and praise to motivate your child as they work on their communication and language skills

Start with Object Naming:

- Use Squish4Joy Dough to create simple shapes that represent familiar objects (e.g., a ball, a snake, or a star).
- Show your child the shape and encourage them to name it. If your child is non-speaking, you can name

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the shape for them and encourage them to mimic or use gestures.

- Praise their efforts with comments like, “Great job! That’s a ball—can you say ‘ball?’”

Create a Story:

- Use the dough to create characters or objects for a simple story. For example, you could make a small dough animal and create a story around what the animal is doing.
- Encourage your child to add to the story by making their own dough characters or suggesting what happens next.
- As your child participates, offer encouragement and help them with words or ideas, saying things like, “What should our dough cat do next? Should it eat some food or go to sleep?”

Offering multiple choices during an activity is a fantastic skill to develop, as it not only empowers children by giving them a sense of control but also actively engages them in the task. By presenting options, you encourage decision-making and critical thinking, making the activity more interactive and enjoyable for the child.

Role Play Conversations:

- Use the dough shapes to role-play simple conversations. For example, you could have two dough animals talk to each other, practicing greetings, asking questions, or expressing feelings.

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- Encourage your child to take on a role, helping them with words or phrases if needed. Praise their attempts!

Activity 5: Emotional Regulation

Objective:

This activity helps children on the autism spectrum manage their emotions and reduce anxiety through calming play.

Materials Needed:

- Squish4Joy Dough in calming colors (e.g., blue, green)
- A quiet, comfortable space for relaxation
- Optional: calming scents (lavender, chamomile)
- Great, calm energy! (Bring a soothing presence to help your child relax during the activity!)
- Encouraging words and praise to reassure your child as they work on emotional regulation

Create a Calming Environment:

- Set up a quiet, comfortable space where your child can relax without distractions. Dim the lights if possible and play soft, calming music if it's soothing for your child.
- Offer the Squish4Joy Dough in calming colors.

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Start with Simple Squeezing:

- Encourage your child to squeeze and knead the dough in their hands, focusing on the sensation and texture. This repetitive motion can be very calming.
- Offer gentle praise to reinforce the calming effect, saying things like, “That’s it—just keep squeezing the dough. Doesn’t it feel nice and soft?”

Introduce Breathing with Dough Pressing:

- Teach your child to press the dough flat while taking deep breaths in and out. Encourage them to focus on their breathing as they press, which helps to regulate their emotions.
- Guide them through the breathing exercise, saying, “Breathe in as you press the dough, and breathe out as you let go. You’re doing great—nice and calm.”

Benefits:

- Provides a sensory outlet to help manage emotions and reduce anxiety.
- Teaches calming techniques like deep breathing combined with tactile input.
- Creates a peaceful environment where your child can self-regulate.

Activity 6: Creativity and Imagination

Objective:

This activity allows children on the autism spectrum to explore their creativity and imagination by molding and shaping Squish4Joy Dough into whatever their minds can dream up.

Materials Needed:

- Squish4Joy Dough in a variety of colors
- Optional: small accessories like googly eyes, pipe cleaners, or buttons for decorating
- A flat surface or tray to work on
- Great, happy energy! (Bring excitement and encouragement to inspire your child's creativity!)
- Encouraging words and praise to celebrate your child's creative efforts

Set the Scene for Creative Play:

- Provide your child with different colors of Squish4Joy Dough and any optional accessories.
- Encourage them to create whatever comes to mind—animals, shapes, imaginary creatures, or anything else they can think of.

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Encourage Imaginative Play:

- As your child creates, ask them about what they're making. Engage in a conversation about their creations, helping to expand their imagination and language skills.
- Offer praise and encouragement, saying things like, "Wow, I love your dough dinosaur! What's its name? Where does it live?"

Expand on Their Ideas:

- Suggest adding more details or combining different creations to make a story or scene. For example, if your child makes a dough tree, ask them if they want to make animals to live in the tree.
- Praise their creativity, saying, "You're so imaginative! I love how you added leaves to the tree—it looks amazing!"

Activity 7: Proprioceptive and Vestibular Input Activity

Objective:

This activity **incorporates movement and body awareness** into your play sessions, helping children on the autism spectrum **develop proprioceptive and vestibular skills** using Squish4Joy Dough.

Materials Needed:

- Squish4Joy Dough
- An open space for movement
- A yoga mat or soft surface for floor activities
- Great, active energy! (Bring enthusiasm and movement to make the activity dynamic and fun!)
- Encouraging words and praise to motivate your child as they engage in movement play

Start with Dough Warm-Up:

- Begin by having your child squeeze and roll the Squish4Joy Dough in their hands to warm up their muscles.
- Encourage them to use both hands and press the dough with varying pressure.
- Praise their efforts with comments like, “Great squeezing! Your hands are getting nice and strong!”

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Incorporate Body Movements:

- Guide your child through a series of movements while holding the dough. For example, ask them to stretch their arms up high while holding the dough, then bring it down to touch their toes.
- Encourage them to balance on one foot while holding the dough in one hand, then switch to the other foot. Offer support and praise, saying, “You’re balancing so well—keep it up!”

Introduce Floor Play:

- Lay out a yoga mat or soft surface and encourage your child to use the dough while doing simple exercises like rolling on the floor or pushing up from a seated position.
- Combine the dough play with body awareness exercises, such as pressing the dough flat with their palms while lying on their stomach. Praise their movements, saying, “You’re doing such a great job pressing the dough and moving your body!”

A Journey of Continuous Growth

As you conclude "You, Me, and Dough!", remember that supporting your child's development is an ongoing journey. Progress takes time and patience, but your consistent efforts, combined with your child's engagement, will lead to meaningful growth. Regular practice of these activities is crucial for developing communication, emotional regulation, and fine motor skills. Keeping track of achievements and challenges will help tailor future sessions and provide valuable insights for professionals. Celebrate every success, no matter how small, as it reflects both your child's hard work and your dedication, motivating continued growth.