

Sensory Ladder Tool

*with acknowledgements to Kath Smith,
Sensory Integration Network 2017

How to Use a Sensory Ladder with your Child

The 'sensory ladder' tool* was designed by OT Kath Smith. It is designed to help young people who have sensory processing difficulties which affect their energy levels and self-regulation. It is useful for children whose energy levels are very high, too low or who seem to switch from one extreme to the other (0-60 in seconds!).

The sensory ladder will help your child begin to recognise and label how their body might look and feel when they have too much energy, too little energy or feel just right.

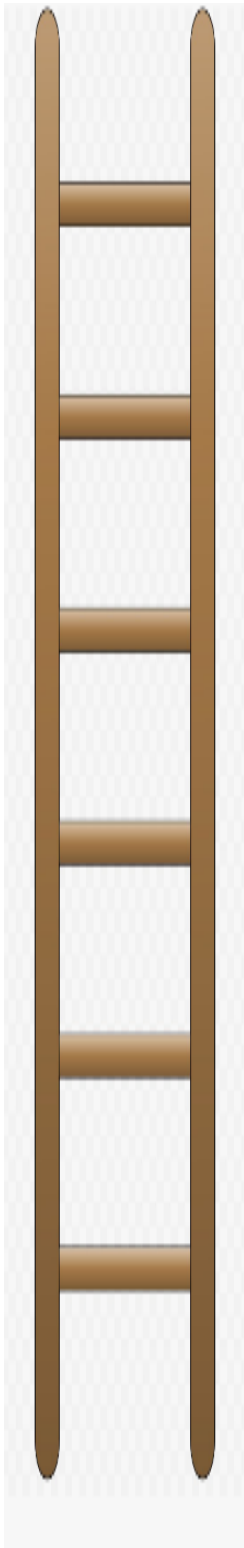
It is recommended that you use your child's interests to make a sensory ladder which is personalised to them. If they are able to use their own words to describe how their body feels do include this when putting the ladder together as this will make it much more effective and meaningful to them.

1. Once you have completed the ladder start by showing your child where you think they are on the scale and get them to indicate where they think they are as well. Make sure you refer to the ladder at each stage of alertness (not just when they have too much energy!) so your child starts to get the idea. It can be very helpful for other family members to make their own ladders as well. Children can sometimes find it easier to identify other people's behaviour rather than their own!
2. Once they begin to grasp the different levels of alertness on the sensory ladder start to explain to your child what can be done to move up and down the ladder (e.g. "your body looks like it is going **too slow** / **too fast** lets do some **calming** / **alerting** exercises to help you move **up** / **down** the ladder")
3. With support from you they will then select suitable sensory activities to help them move up or down the ladder towards a 'calm and alert' state. Some children and young people may eventually be able to do this pretty much independently. Others will always need a bit of help.
4. Get your child to rate how helpful each activity was so you can compile a shortlist of the most effective interventions. Activities they enjoy will always be the easiest to build into their daily routine.

Every child with sensory needs is different and the length of time they will need to complete a sensory activity for before a change is seen in their energy levels will be different as well. The activity record chart at the end of this booklet can be used to document your child's response and help them work out what works best for them.

NB: Ensure children are supervised at all times to maintain their safety and to monitor their response to each sensory activity (e.g. did it help them to calm them or did it increase their activity levels?).

Sensory Ladder



SHUT DOWN



OVER-ALERT



CALM AND ALERT



UNDER-ALERT



SLEEP STATES



OVER-ALERT

Might look like ...

- ▶ A change in **energy** levels...very active, restless, boisterous.
- ▶ A change in **voice quality** or **vocalisations** (for less verbal children)...increased volume, higher pitch, faster pace.
- ▶ May see physiological **body changes**...pupils of eyes dilate, skin flush / pallor, sweating. Body may appear 'tense', muscles stiff.
- ▶ **Cognitive** changes...unable to listen, reason, use judgement.
- ▶ Usual sensory-seeking behaviours 'in overdrive'
- ▶ Sensory-seeking behaviours may be used to 'block out' other poorly tolerated sensations



CALM AND ALERT

Might look like ...

- ▶ Focused on activity or attending to given task
- ▶ Body appears relaxed and at ease.
- ▶ Energy levels remain appropriate for task and situation.
- ▶ Voice / vocalisations at an appropriate pitch, volume and pace for task.
- ▶ Able to produce best work, listen more attentively, access higher cognitive reasoning skills.
- ▶ Sensory seeking is minimal and does not interfere with learning or play (as sensory needs have been met).



UNDER-ALERT

Might look like ...

- ▶ Energy levels appear very low.
- ▶ May struggle to get going or wander aimlessly and be unable to initiate activity.
- ▶ May appear very passive or tired
- ▶ Eyes may appear unfocused
- ▶ Body may appear 'floppy' or slouched.



SHUT DOWN

Might look like ...

- ▶ Blank or vacant episode
- ▶ Sudden significant melt-down
- ▶ Significant 'avoidance' behaviours atypical of child (e.g. bolting)
- ▶ Usually follows on from over-alert behaviours



SLEEP STATES

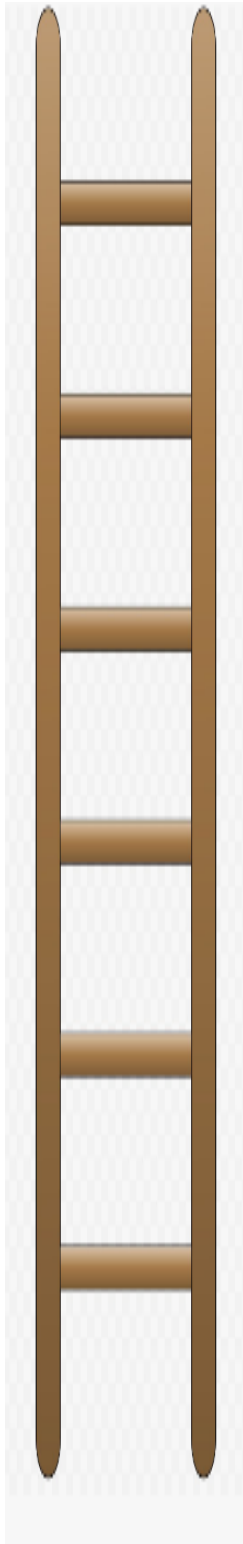
Might look like ...

- ▶ Physical exhaustion
- ▶ Light or deep sleep
- ▶ Catatonic

NB: Children in 'shut down' will require a small, low-stimulus space, with reduced sensory input (such as a dark-den or sensory tent) to calm and re-group.

Sensory Ladder:

Examples



Exploding!!!



Hyper and Buzzy



Calm and working well



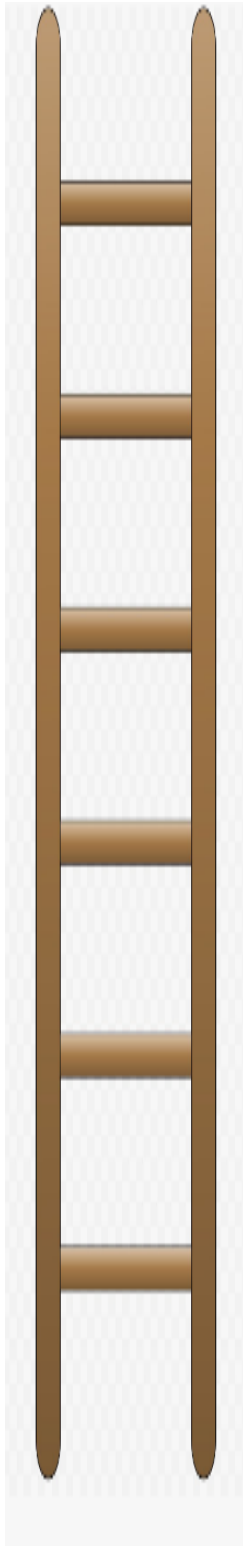
Zoned Out



Asleep or very tired

Sensory Ladder:

Examples



Roaring!!!



Full with energy, can't
stop moving



Just right



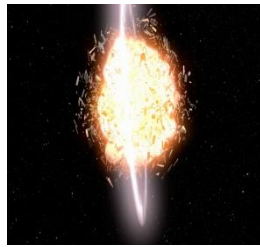
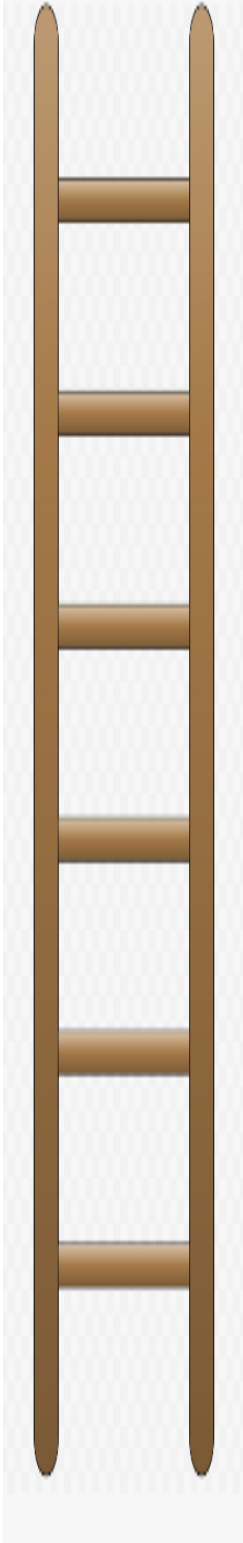
Hard to get going



Asleep or very tired

Sensory Ladder:

Examples



Ka-booom!!!



**Full of Busy
Bouncing from one
thing to another**



**Calm and totally in
control**



Too slow



Unable to move

Calming Activity Ideas

- ▶ Relax in a deep beanbag or inflatable air lounger.
- ▶ Lie underneath a big pile of cushion (make sure you can breath!!)
- ▶ Quiet time in the garden (e.g. rock slowly in a hammock, mud kitchen, gentle gardening, watch the clouds!)
- ▶ Sustained Yoga poses
- ▶ Spend quiet time in a small space (like a sensory tent or home-made den) sensory toys
- ▶ Watching oil and water sensory toys
- ▶ Firm massage (if this is tolerated!)
- ▶ Squeeze into a Lycra loop or 'squish box'
- ▶ Rock slowly back and forth over a gym ball on your tummy
- ▶ Dim the lights (or wear dark glasses or an eye mask)
- ▶ Watch a fish tank (or sensory visualizer on YouTube)
- ▶ Talk in a whisper
- ▶ Listen to calming nature sounds or relaxation music
- ▶ Mindfulness activities (colouring book, meditation app etc.)
- ▶ Try '7-11' breathing...breath in for the count of 7 and out for the count of 11)
- ▶ Suck a lolly or thick milkshake
- ▶ Aqua beads (e.g. Orbeez) or kinetic sand

Alerting Activities

- ▶ Bounce on a trampoline or trampete.
- ▶ Squat-thrusts, bunny hops or star jumps
- ▶ Sit and bounce on a gym ball or space hopper.
- ▶ Listen to music with a strong beat...dance and sing along
- ▶ Splash face with cold water
- ▶ Vibrating sensory toys
- ▶ Massage brushes, rollers, loofah's etc.
- ▶ Drink an ice cold drink or crunch an ice cue.
- ▶ Swing set (fast and high to alert; slowly to calm)
- ▶ Pull 'monster faces' in the mirror (squeeze your facial muscles as tight as you can...then release)
- ▶ Supported handstands
- ▶ Shuttle run
- ▶ Skipping rope
- ▶ Skating or skateboarding

Calm-alert Activities

- ▶ Climb on a trim trail, PE apparatus or climbing frame
- ▶ Jobs involving heavy work (lifting and carrying; gardening; deep cleaning)
- ▶ Commando crawling or wheelbarrow walking
- ▶ Yoga poses
- ▶ Press-ups (half, full, wall, chair- as able)
- ▶ Plank or side-plank
- ▶ Pull-up bar or 'hang tough' from wall bars or apparatus
- ▶ Isometric exercises
- ▶ Home exercise equipment
- ▶ Ride a bike, scooter, go-kart
- ▶ Wear a heavy backpack (NB: ensure this is a snug fit and is around 5% of the child's body weight)
- ▶ Non-contact martial arts
- ▶ Running over distance

Activity Record

Where were you on the ladder?	What did you do?	How long for?	Did it help you move up or down the ladder?	Where are you on the ladder now?

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