

# new sensations

Sue Gascoyne begins a three-part exploration of babies' senses with smell and taste...

**W**e understand the need to nurture and nourish children's bodies and brains with love, nutritious food and physical movement, but rarely do we consider the importance of providing sensory stimulation. Our senses are the gateway for all learning and yet most of us think only of sight,

touch, hearing, taste and smell, ignoring the vital inner senses for spatial awareness (proprioception), movement (kinaesthetic) and balance (vestibular) – all critical to babies achieving those all-important milestones that we delight in.

We begin our tour of the senses with smell and taste, so closely related that when we have a cold, food tastes nondescript and bland.

## Smell

The sense of smell is one of the most developed senses at birth, with even newborn babies able to recognise the smell of their mother's milk. Smell is closely linked to the oldest limbic part of the brain, perhaps explaining how some smells can transport us back to our childhood. A nose typically contains about 10 million smell receptors, each responsible for detecting one of 20 different types of smell. Yet this is probably one of our most underused senses, with air fresheners and modern conveniences removing many of the smells prevalent in previous generations.

## Taste

Much of what we consider to be taste is actually feedback from smell and touch, as texture is also a key aspect of taste. Newborn babies can discriminate between pleasant sweet and unpleasant sour tastes when just a few hours old – remarkable given that they have never even 'eaten' food. As with smell this probably originates from our ancestors' survival tactics, with sour tastes associated with poison and danger.



Introduce each smell one at a time to avoid sensory overload and to understand more about children's likes and dislikes. Gently stroke their legs, toes or arms, letting the smell slowly waft to their nose. Watch closely to see their reaction and talk about each smell as they

explore, e.g. "Mmm, that vanilla smells lovely", or "Aargh, that coffee is pongy". Next time you're offering resources for messy play, think about whether you can safely add a smell dimension for babies to discover as they touch and explore.

## A treat for the tongue

For weaning babies, every new food encountered is a sensory adventure, so offer them a range to experience (one at a time, initially) to maximise sensory interest. Cut up different types of fruit for children to taste. Try to include some exotic as well as common fruits, and offer the whole fruit to see and feel as well as bite-sized pieces to taste. Talk about the taste, what type of fruit it is, whether they like it

and where it grows, as this helps increase the brain connections associated with each taste and fruit (Again, check allergies first!).

Try these fun activities yourself as it is only when reminded of the memories that smells and tastes conjure up that we can truly appreciate how magical our senses are. In the next issue, I will focus on sight and hearing.

## find out more

Sue Gascoyne is an author, early years researcher, educational consultant and trainer. She launched multi award-winning children's play resource company Play to Z in 2006. Sue's latest book, *Treasure Baskets and Beyond – Realizing the Potential of Sensory-Rich Play* will be available from Open University Press in August 2012.