

Offering children the opportunity to slow down in order to calm their racing minds and bodies teaches the valuable skill of self-regulation that can be added to their emotional toolkit. Carefully designed with curved sides for little hands to hold, Sensory Calming Trails provide a relaxing visual and tactile experience for children to immerse themselves in as they slowly trace their finger around the trails within these enchanting nature-inspired resources. Taking long slow breaths while following the pathways activates a relaxation response by stimulating our Vagus nerve. This interrupts our body's stress responses and helps to regulate the nervous system and restore calm. Engaging in these mindful techniques provides effective strategies to manage strong feelings, such as anxiety, anger, frustration, sadness and overwhelm.

Calming pathways

Present the children with the Calming Trails when they are calm and regulated.

Explain that Slow Snail, Gentle Butterfly, Kind Fish and Cheerful Sunflower can help us to relax by teaching us to take long slow breaths as we move our fingers around their trails. These repetitive rhythmic movements help to soothe our busy brains and racing hearts, restoring a sense of calm and well-being.



- Introduce one board at a time and demonstrate how to run your finger slowly and carefully round the pathways.
- Next, explain that you are going to take long deep breaths as you follow the trail.
- You may want to highlight specific 'pause points' where you will finish your breath in, pause and then take a long deep breath out to the next point. For example:
 - From the fish's nose to the end of his fin – pause – continue round and back to his nose
 - All the way round the snail's shell to the centre – pause – breathe out as you follow the spiral back out.

While it's useful to suggest this, it is important not to make a huge point of it as children may be more concerned about where they should be stopping and starting rather than the main objectives of absorbing the sensory feedback of their fingers running along the smooth grooves and focusing on deep breaths.

- Demonstrate this in a slow, peaceful manner, emphasising your breathing.
- Ask the child which trail they would like to try and invite them to have a go.
- Praise them for engaging and allow them to repeat as many times as they wish.



Connection to nature

Children have an innate connection with nature and share fulfilling experiences when engaged with it. As you use the trails make up stories based on each of the nature-inspired illustrations.

- Exaggerate going really slowly around Slow Snail's spiral, yawning and talking slowly, saying: 'I'm Slow Snail and I like to take things reeeeaally easy ... No rush ... In my own time... Ooops, I forgot to pick up my gloves ... Round I go again to get them ... Oh, I forgot I don't have any hands ... I'd better take them back ... Silly me!'

- With Kind Fish, swirl your fingers slowly round his trail. Make up a story about him swimming through the ocean playing hide and seek, looking in the coral, under the starfish, and being really happy when he finds his friends.
- You could pretend a buzzy bee is darting around the edge of the sunflower looking for pollen, making a buzzy noise when he lands on each spot in the middle.
- With Gentle Butterfly, slowly glide your finger around her trail and pretend she is flying around a beautiful garden. Describe each colourful flower she notices.

Social-emotional sensory experiences

One of the most effective ways to calm our nervous system is to soothe our senses via tactile input. Research shows that it is also beneficial if we can verbalise our feelings. The Sensory Calming Trails provide a wonderful opportunity to benefit from both elements.



After children have used the trails, you could ask:

- What does that feel like? (smooth, tickly, soft, hard, swirly).
- What if you press harder ... or more gently?
- Which one is your favourite trail ... Tell me more.
- Did it make you feel calmer? What other things make you feel calm? Tell me why.
- Did it make you feel happy? What else makes you happy?
- How were you feeling earlier? How are you feeling now? Tell me more.
- How do you think Mr Snail is feeling? I wonder why? Have you ever felt like that?
- What do you think the butterfly is looking at / thinking of? If the child is struggling for ideas, you could invent a funny story to get them started: 'I think he's feeling *really* happy because he's just spotted an enormous turnip to munch on!'

Validating and empathising with children's feelings is helpful. You could try responses such as:

- That must've been very scary/exciting/tricky for you.
- I know I feel calm when ...
- I wonder if he is feeling happy because he's just spotted his friend hiding behind a shell?
- I understand – I've felt like that too.
- I imagine that was difficult for you.
- It's OK to feel all of those things. All of your feelings are safe with me.
- What might help you with those feelings?

These conversations, as well as being comforting and reassuring, can really help to build children's emotional awareness, empathy, vocabulary and self-expression skills.

- Play some gentle nature-inspired music in the background – woodlands, bird song, waves – as you use your calming trails to enhance the calming effect nature has on us.
- If you know a familiar song or rhyme about a flower, snail, butterfly or fish you could sing that as you follow the trail with your finger: 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary', '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, once I caught a fish alive'.

Alternatively, you may want to isolate the tactile sense and have no other sensory input, which, depending on the child and the situation, may be preferable.

Remind children that the characters and their slow breathing techniques are useful to remember and practise when they are feeling overwhelmed. When you notice a child becoming dysregulated you could gently remind them of Slow Snail's spiral breathing, Kind Fish's swirly breathing, and so on.

Calm Corner

Creating a quiet space for children to retreat to when they are experiencing big feelings is a hugely beneficial and effective way to help them feel understood, supported, safe and reassured. It also helps to develop their emotional awareness and self-regulation skills by demonstrating that:

- their big feelings – anger, worry, overwhelm, excitement, sadness – are perfectly normal
- there are lots of things we can do to manage and soothe our big feelings
- the Calm Corner is a safe space specifically equipped with resources to help manage them
- having spent some time in the Calm Corner, you can begin to explore and identify what has caused those big feelings and what might help the child to manage them next time.



Creating a Calm Corner

Choose a quiet corner in your setting – preferably away from doorways and noisy distractions. You could also consider using a small tent or teepee.

Once you have introduced your children to the Calming Trails, these will be a valuable addition to your Calm Corner.

Other items you could consider for your Calm Corner include: bean bags, blankets, fairy lights, lava lamps, playdough activities, sand trays, lavender bags, fidget toys, soft toys, soothing music, communication boards, jigsaws, pencils and paper, and emotional well-being books (see below).

Yellow Door resources that might help include:

- Let's Roll Emotions **YD1186**
- Roll Around Feel Calm **YD1223**
- Sensory Worry Stones **YD1118**
- Kindness Hearts **YD1188**.

These resources all help to reduce sensory overwhelm by interrupting the child's stress response (fight, flight, freeze or fawn) and offering positive and effective self-regulation strategies. These allow them the time and space to decompress and calm their busy brain.

A well-resourced Calm Corner can make the difference between a child being stuck in overwhelm and unable to learn, and being able to rejoin their peers and gain value from their day.



When the Calm Corner is ready:

- Introduce the children to it and explain why it is there for them (see above).
- Show them the various tools and resources in the corner and how to use them.
- Set some simple ground rules appropriate to their age and understanding:
 - One or two children at a time
 - Be kind to one another by waiting your turn to use something
 - Share the resources
 - Remember that your friends might need time alone with their feelings.

Calm and crafty!

Engaging in creative, mindful activities is hugely therapeutic and soothing for our busy brains.

- Sensory Calming Trails can be used as a quick and easy art activity – display the trails on a table or Tuff Tray and provide a variety of age-appropriate small parts: pom poms, beads, beans, sequins. Include tweezers and tongs for added interest. Children can arrange the loose parts in the grooves of the calming trails and decorate the characters however they wish.
- Offer a variety of playdough colours. Roll the playdough into thin sausage shapes and try to replicate the shapes of the trails.
- Provide a tray of sand and some paintbrushes. Encourage the children to copy the shapes of the calming trails in the sand using their fingers or the brushes.
- Lay out some paint and encourage the children to use brushes or their fingers to replicate the trails.

These are also great fine-motor activities that can help refine a child's pincer grip ready for writing.



Get talking – useful words

- Slow, smooth, deep breaths, relax, trace, flow, flutter, buzz, glide, swim
- Calm, quiet, gentle, happy, angry, joy, smiley, upset, peaceful, excited, frustrated, embarrassed, lonely, feelings, emotions.

Books about emotions

What To do When You Worry Too Much by Dawn Huebner

The Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst

A Volcano in My Tummy by Eliane Whitehouse and Warwick Pudney