



# TIME BANDITS: Sensory Pack



# AIMS



## Promote Emotional Safety and Regulation

To create a predictable, calming environment that helps children manage emotional dysregulation and anxiety, especially around emotionally charged events like family access.



## Support Child Autonomy and Empowerment

To provide children with tools they can use independently, fostering a choice in how they cope with stress or transitions.



## Facilitate Relational Connection and Emotional Support

To use sensory engagement as a bridge for verbal interaction and emotional connection between children and access workers.



## Enhance Quality of Transitions and Travel Experiences

To reduce stress and improve the overall experience of travel to and from access visits, making transitions smoother and less triggering.

# OBJECTIVES:

Support emotional and physical safety for children in care by creating a trauma-informed sensory environment before and after family time. This environment uses textures, music, and stress-relief tools to promote self-regulation and reduce anxiety, aligning with the principles of safety, empowerment, and trustworthiness.

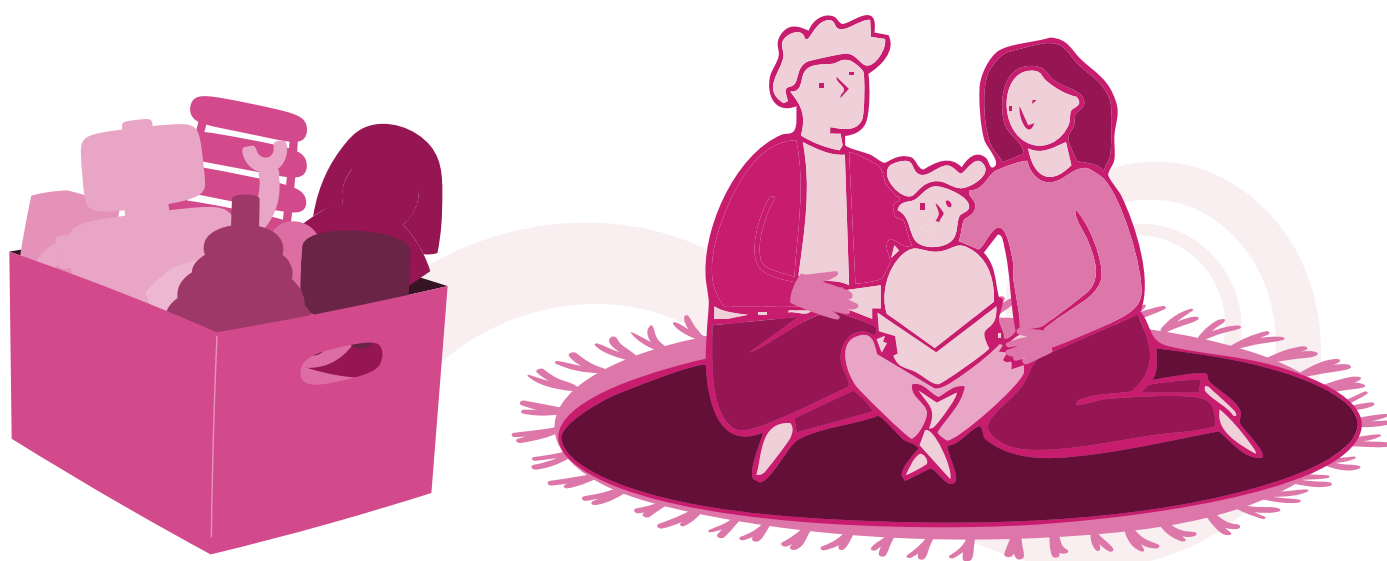
Enhance the travel experience for children in care by offering trauma-informed sensory packs that promote choice, engagement, and emotional expression. These packs support relational connection with access workers, fostering collaboration and trust while empowering children to manage transitions.



# OUR RATIONALE

Research in child development and trauma consistently shows that children in care often experience heightened stress, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation before and after family contact. This can stem from anticipation of seeing birth family which can create mixed feelings (excitement, fear, confusion). As workers who supervise family time, we often observe children experiencing an emotional dysregulation not just before visits but also after. Leaving an access visit can trigger grief, separation distress, or behavioural escalation. Sensory interventions help regulate the nervous system, reducing the emotional “spikes” that commonly occur during these transitions (Joseph et al, 2021).

Recognising the importance of young people’s lived experience, we engaged young people who we support in attending time to provide input on what would help them feel calm and supported during transport. Their feedback directly guided the selection of items in the sensory packs.



# TOOLS AND RESOURCES

We asked some of the young people we work with what items they would like to see in a sensory pack, options included:

- Books (e.g., puzzle books)
- Fruit
- Singing songs
- Slime / putty
- Snacks
- Car games (e.g., I Spy)
- Playdough
- Water
- Chewies
- Window markers
- Pillow
- Slinky
- Colouring book / colours
- Cushion
- Bubble popper
- Squishy ball
- Stress ball
- Fidget toy
- Blanket
- Battery pack
- Phone charger
- Auxiliary cable (to listen to music)
- Chewing gum
- Notebook and pen
- Headphones
- Rubik's Cube

Following this feedback The sensory packs was created to provide a variety of tools and resources, carefully selected to meet the diverse needs of children attending Family Access, including:

- **Fidget toys:** stress balls, squishy toys, textured balls
- **Comfort items:** small blankets, soft toys
- **Auditory tools:** noise-cancelling headphones,
- **Sensory activities:** playdough, colouring books



## KEY LEARNING AND REFLECTIONS

## Young people's voices are so important

Engaging young people in the design process ensured the packs were relevant, in line with their interests and child friendly. Their feedback challenged adult assumptions and highlighted items that supported real-life regulation needs.

## One size does not fit all

Children's sensory needs vary widely depending on age, developmental stage, trauma history, and personal preferences. A modular or flexible design (e.g., a core items as well as optional items) could prove more effective than a standardised pack.

## Practicality and safety matter

Items had to be:

- Safe for use in the car
- Easy to clean
- Durable
- Would not distract the driver

## Sustainability

Simple, low-cost items (e.g., fidgets, tactile materials) have been effective. Items can be used again and replaced easily. The initiative was quite cost effective to develop making it easy to replicate. Some young people may want to take some of the items from the pack, and this is ok. Items like chewies have to be replaced often as they are one time use and each child takes it away with them. It is important to replace items as used.

## Emotional Regulation

A major insight was that dysregulation often happens on route to or after leaving access visits. Having tools available during the car journey supports smoother transitions and reduces behavioural escalation.

## Clear guidance

Providing a short “how to use the pack” guide will help those supporting the young people understand:

- when to offer items
- how to model use
- how to support choice without overwhelming children

## Familiarity builds effectiveness

Children regulate better with predictable tools. Allowing them to choose and repeatedly use the same items over multiple visits increased trust and reduced anxiety.

## Trauma-informed design strengthens engagement

Building the packs with a trauma-informed lens—choice, control, safety, predictability—helped children feel empowered rather than managed. This also improved their willingness to use the pack.

Evaluation should include lived experience feedback

Ongoing reflection with young people and workers will be important as it will help in identifying which items were most effective, which were unnecessary, and what needed refinement.



# CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADAPTATION

These Sensory packs can be adapted for use beyond transport to and from family visits, including:



**Residential care** – Packs can be integrated into common rooms in residential centres. This may support behavioural escalation and promote engagement with staff as using the items can initiate conversation.



**Therapeutic environments** – Clinicians (OTs, psychologists, social care worker) can incorporate items into grounding exercises, skill-building, and emotional literacy work.

## Adjusting to Different Age Groups

Different developmental stages require different tools and approaches:

### Early childhood (2–6 years)

- Fewer items, more durable objects
- Simple sensory tools (soft toys, textured items, chewable items if appropriate)
- Visual symbols or picture-based emotion cards

### Primary school age (7–12 years)

- Wider range of fidgets and sensory options
- Tools that support emotional identification and grounding (small notebooks, visual timers, stress balls)
- Items that encourage choice and autonomy

### Teenagers (13+)

- More subtle, age-appropriate items (putty, resistance bands, headphones, chewing gum)
- Options that avoid appearing childish
- Opportunities for co-design to increase uptake and reduce stigma

### Foster carers

- Packs can be used at home as consistent, predictable regulation tools.
- Carers may need guidance on when to offer items and how to integrate them into routines.

# PRACTICAL REQUIREMENTS

## Planning and design (2–4 weeks)

- Consult with children and young people.
- Select items and where to purchase them.
- Develop guidance materials for staff.
- Pilot items with a small group (optional but recommended).

## Assembly and preparation (1–2 weeks)

- Order and receive materials.
- Assemble packs and label them.
- Train staff in use and safety considerations.

## Implementation (ongoing)

- Introduce packs during transport and access visits.
- Monitor use and effectiveness.
- Replace items as they wear out or as children's needs change.

## Materials

- Fidget tools (e.g., spinners, pop-its, stress balls).
- Soft or tactile objects.
- Visual calming tools (e.g., mini sand timers, sensory bottles).
- Colouring books and journals.
- Noise-reducing or focus aids (ear defenders, headphones).
- Snacks.
- Water putty.

## Optional items

(dependent on age and need):

- Chewable sensory items.
- Weighted lap pads (car-safe, small).
- Putty.
- Scented items (with cultural and sensory sensitivity).

## Supporting materials:

- Quick-use guide for staff
- Replacement item supply for worn items
- Cleaning and hygiene supplies

## Transport environment

- Items must be car-safe (no choking hazards, not distracting for drivers).
- Packs stored safely within easy reach of the worker.
- Items selected to minimise noise and movement.
- Clear guidelines on how and when to offer items to children.
- Documentation process (e.g., noting helpful items or regulation patterns).
- System for cleaning, restocking, and maintaining the packs.
- Feedback process for staff and children to improve the initiative

**In summary, the 'Creating Safe Spaces' project demonstrates the value of sensory packs in supporting children attending Family Access. By providing children with tools to manage their emotions and behaviors, the project helps to create a more positive and welcoming environment for everyone involved. The key learning and reflections from the project can inform the development of similar initiatives in other settings.**



## Acknowledgements

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