

# Enhancing Potential: Occupational Therapy and Education

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## Aim

- To define occupational therapy within the school setting
- To offer an overview of common areas of need based on school visits
- To offer general strategies in relation to these areas of need

# What is occupational therapy?

- Helps people engage in their '**occupations**'
  - Any activity that we need, want, or like to do
  - Sometimes called **Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)**
- Split into broad categories, e.g.,
  - Self-care
  - Productivity
  - Leisure

Necessary for physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

# Paediatric occupational therapy – school setting

## Occupational Therapy

- Fine motor skills
- Handwriting
- Visual perceptual skills
- Sensory processing
- School-based self-care: e.g., toileting, feeding, dressing.

## Physiotherapy overlap

- Gross motor skills, including motor planning
- *Moving and handling techniques and associated equipment (specialist area)*

## Speech and Language Therapy overlap

- Attention and concentration
- Emotional regulation

## Role with ELP

Bottom-up  
approach



Increasing staff **knowledge** and **confidence** so students' difficulties are picked up **early** and **interventions** are implemented without waiting for specialist input

# Common areas of need

**Sensory processing**

## The hidden senses

- **Vestibular:** sends information to brain about our orientation and balance
- **Proprioception:** sense of 'body awareness'/where our body is in space
- **Interoception:** understanding and interpreting the internal state of our body, including attributing physical reactions to emotions



## Sensory differences

- We all have sensory preferences and dislikes
- This is **not the same as a sensory difference**
  - Non-typical reaction that impacts a person's function

Refusal

Stress

Preoccupation

Anxiety

- Sensory differences are not limited to autism
- Differences in the way sensory input is interpreted can occur across any of the senses



# Processing and reacting to sensory input

## Over responsive

Small amount of input:  
Overwhelming and feels  
like a lot



## Under responsive

Large amount of input:  
May not register  
or feel like very little



There can be different responses **between** and  
**within** each sense

# Regulation

- Maintaining a calm-alert (focused) state
- Impacted by various factors including the way sensory stimuli is processed

Over alert / heightened



Calm - alert (focused)



Under alert / drowsy



## Self regulation

**Independently** achieving / maintaining a calm alert state

## Co-regulation:

Requiring **support** to achieve / maintain a calm alert state

**Sensory processing training will soon be available online.**

**Meanwhile here are some universal strategies to aide regulation...**

# Common areas of need

**Environment**

# A sensory friendly school environment

- **Organisation and structure**
  - Reduce visual clutter
  - Avoid items hanging from ceiling
  - Ensure the daily timetable is visible to all students
- **Displays**
  - Use pale backing paper/borders
  - Keep displays consistent and uncluttered
  - Consider the purpose of displays



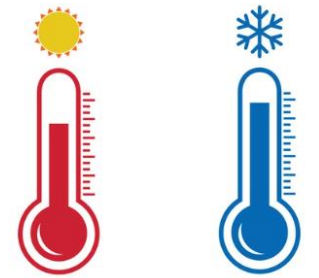
# A sensory friendly school environment

- **Lighting and environment**
  - Laminate in matt (avoids glare)
  - Assess whether lights need to be on
  - Turn off Smart board when not in use
- **Sound and noise management**
  - Volume of speech
  - Volume of videos (consider using captions)
  - Rubber ferrules on chair legs
  - Carpets to reduce echo and footfall



# A sensory friendly school environment

- **Sensory and environmental comfort**
  - Calm corner, or quiet area when feeling overwhelmed
  - Ventilation
  - Temperature
- **Accessibility and Awareness**
  - Adequate signage around building
  - Staff knowledge of neurodivergency



# How do we know this is helpful?

Pupil voice and lived experiences

Knowledge of neurodivergency and sensory differences

**Kinnealey et al (2012):**  
Sound absorbing walls and a change in lighting improved the attention, and mood, of students with ASC and dyspraxia.

**Fischer, Godwin and Seltman (2014):**  
Kindergarten aged children were more distracted when walls were highly decorated

Research limitations include low sample size and observational methods of data collection (subjective)



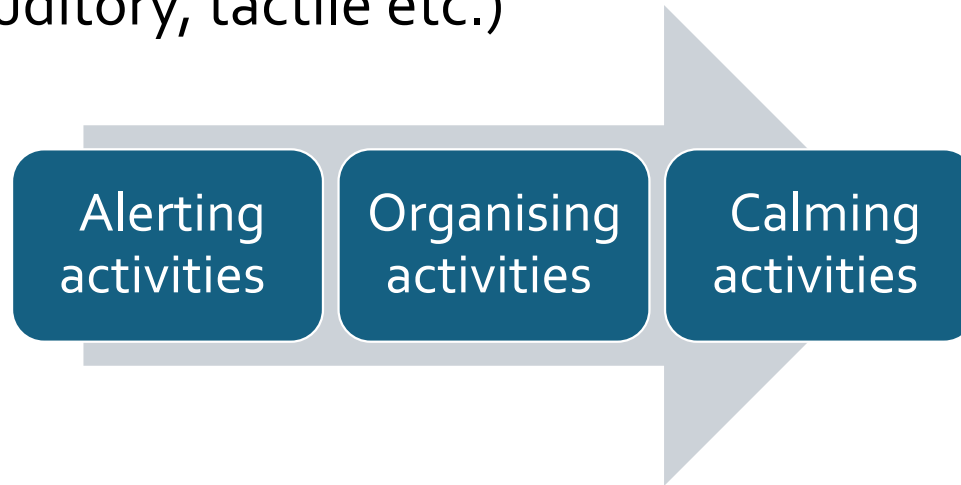
# Common areas of need

**Sensory circuits**  
**Movement Breaks**  
**Sensory Rooms**

# What is a sensory circuit?

## Not a movement break. Not a sensory room.

- Activities set out in a structured route containing items from **various sensory domains** (vestibular, proprioceptive, visual, auditory, tactile etc.)



- Encourages regulation: student should feel calmer and more focused upon leaving
- Allows student to identify what helps them feel focused

# Setting up a sensory circuit

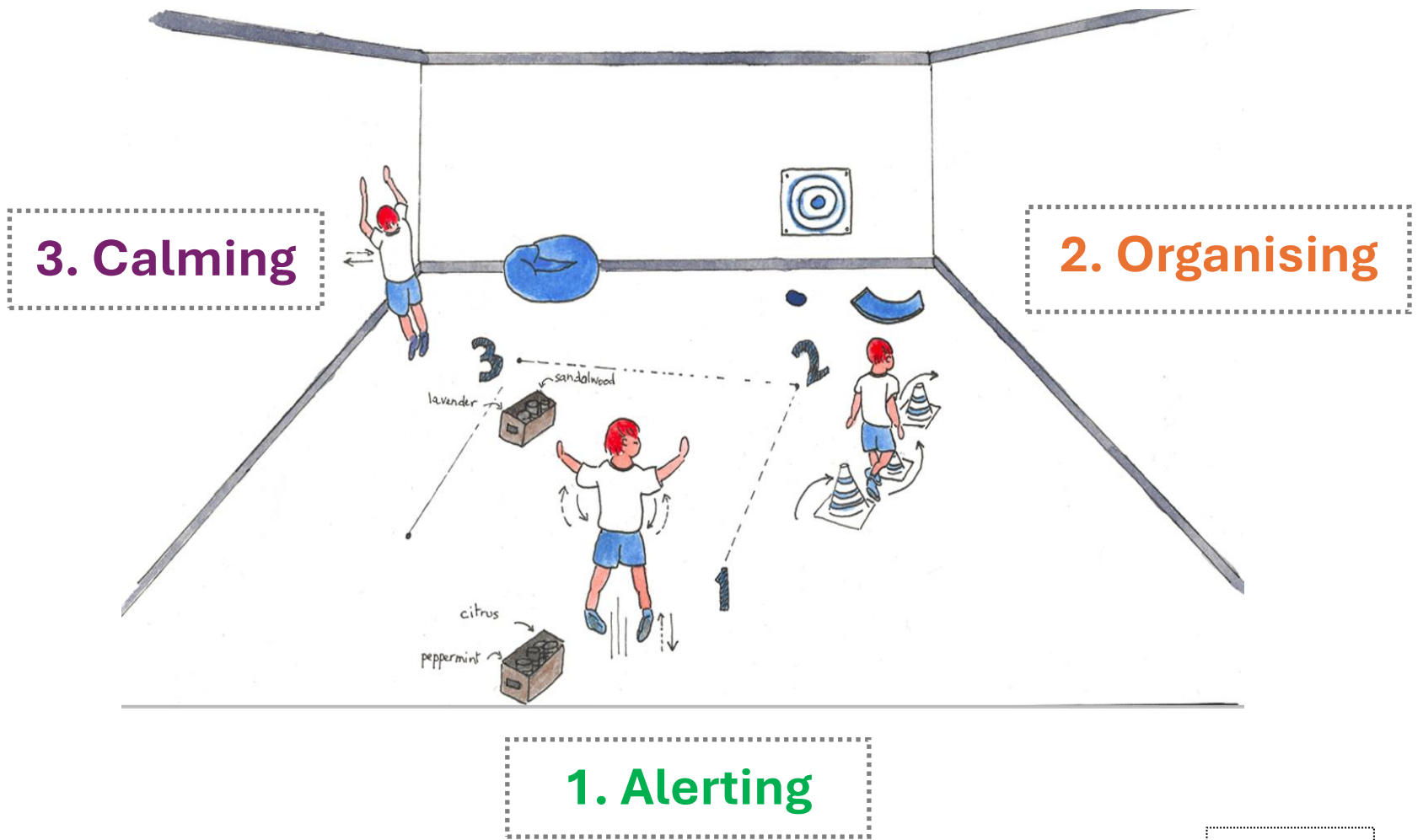


Image: Olivier Curti and Esther Mellor (2025) ©



**3. Calming**

**2. Organising**

**1. Alerting**

With thanks to Featherstone Primary School

## What is a movement break?

### Not a sensory circuit.

- A break from learning, involving movement
- No equipment required – just your body
- Utilise whole class movement breaks
- Try a staged approach with the student



# Whole class movement break



Alerting

March on spot, stretch arms to ceiling and wiggle fingers



Organising

Pat head and rub tummy, alternate elbow knee touches



Calming

Push hands together, deep breathing, sit down, place hands on table

Couple of minutes  
Carry out at 'flash points' and/or as required

# Moving through the stages

## **Desk 'movement break'**

Can be carried out whilst other students are completing their work:

1. Move head side to side and back and forth (slowly)
2. Chair push ups and toe taps
3. Hand pulls and pushes
4. Deep breathing

## **Classroom job**

- Give a note to a teacher/front desk
- Hand out sheets or books
- Help move the chairs/tables
- 'Heavy work' is best
- Walk to the water bottle station

# Moving through the stages

## Corridor movement break



Alerting

Star jumps  
Scissor jumps  
Jumping/hopping



Organising

Movement sequences  
Walk heel to toe



Calming

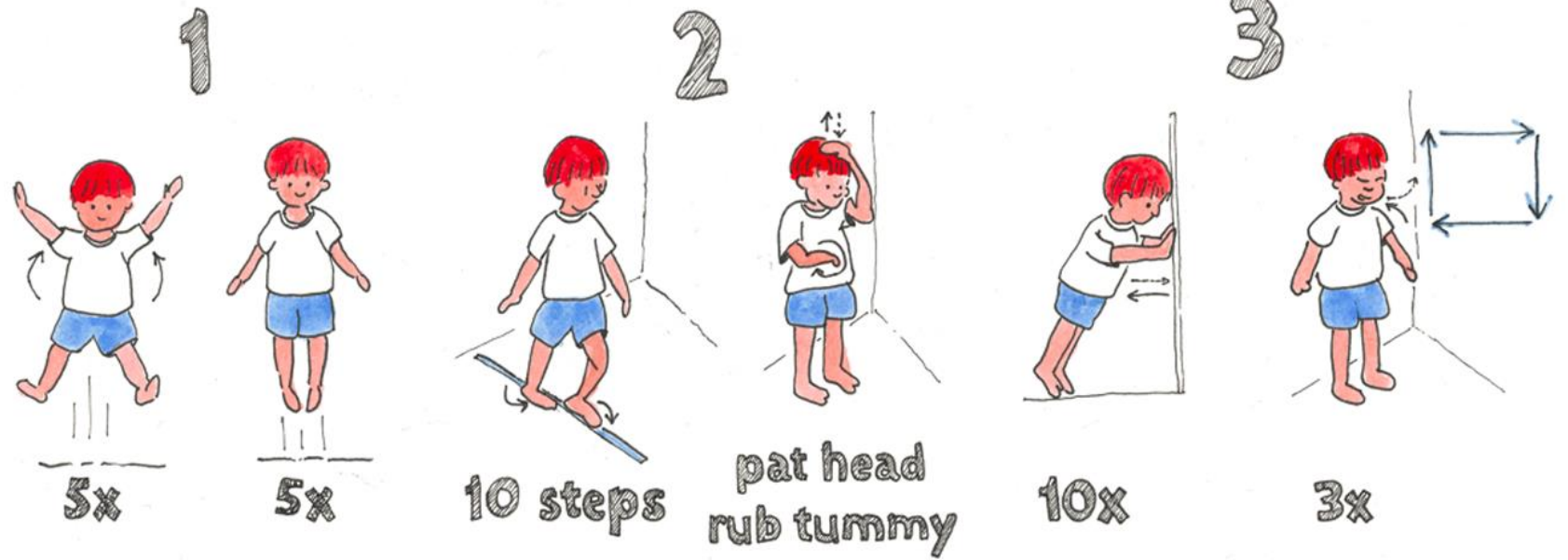
Hand pushes and pulls  
Wall push ups  
Square breathing

Activities can be changed  
Keep the order the same



# Corridor movement break example

## movement break



# What is a sensory room?

Uses items from different sensory domains to aid regulation

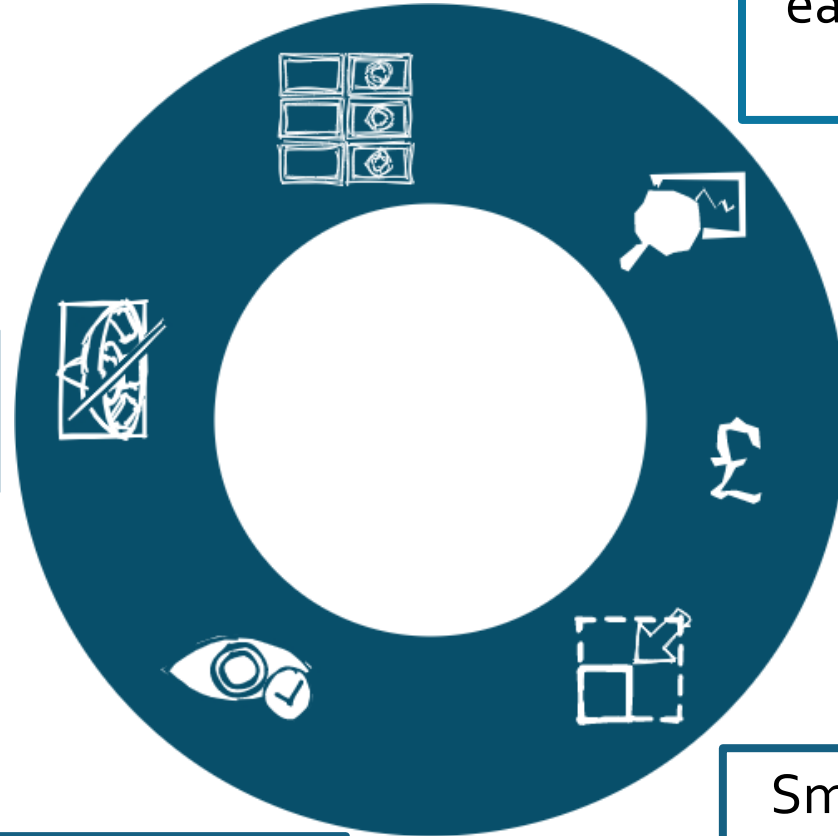
Stimuli should be easily controlled and monitored

Calm and pressure free

Can be achieved on a budget

Items should be visible and/or easily accessible

Small spaces are fine



# Setting up a sensory room

Sensory items on a shelf  
(e.g., vibrating pillow, massage roller, smell pots, sensory balls)

Stereo with calm music (use is optional)

Darker coloured walls

Battery operated fairy lights

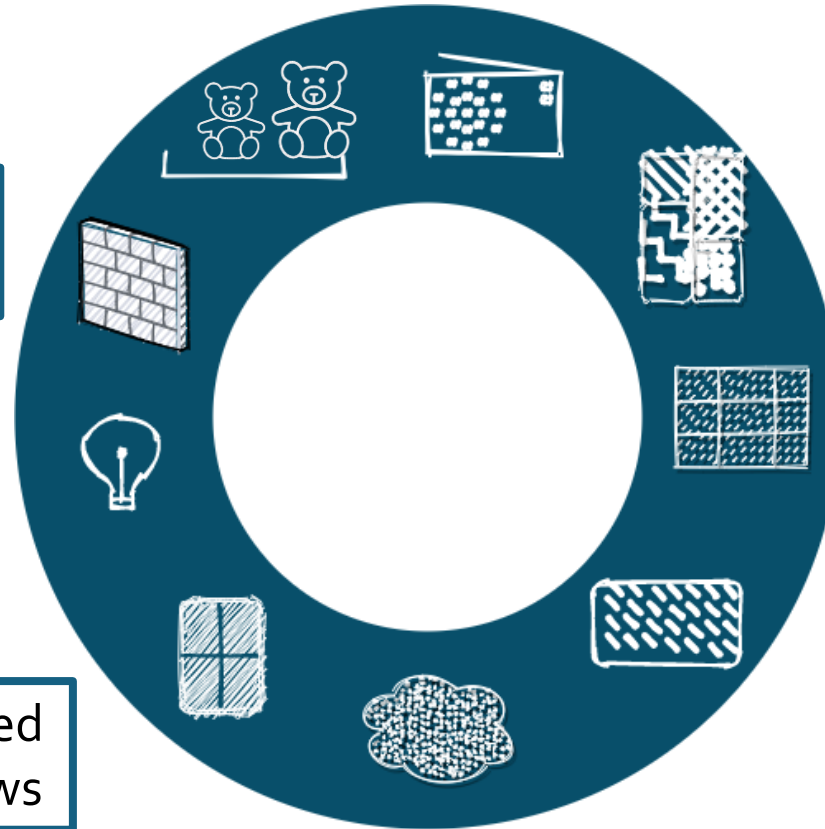
Blinds or frosted film on windows

Bean bags and cushions

Squares of material or fabric on wall

Foam square corner

Carpet or carpet squares



# Sensory room example



Image: Olivier Curti and Esther Mellor (2025) ©

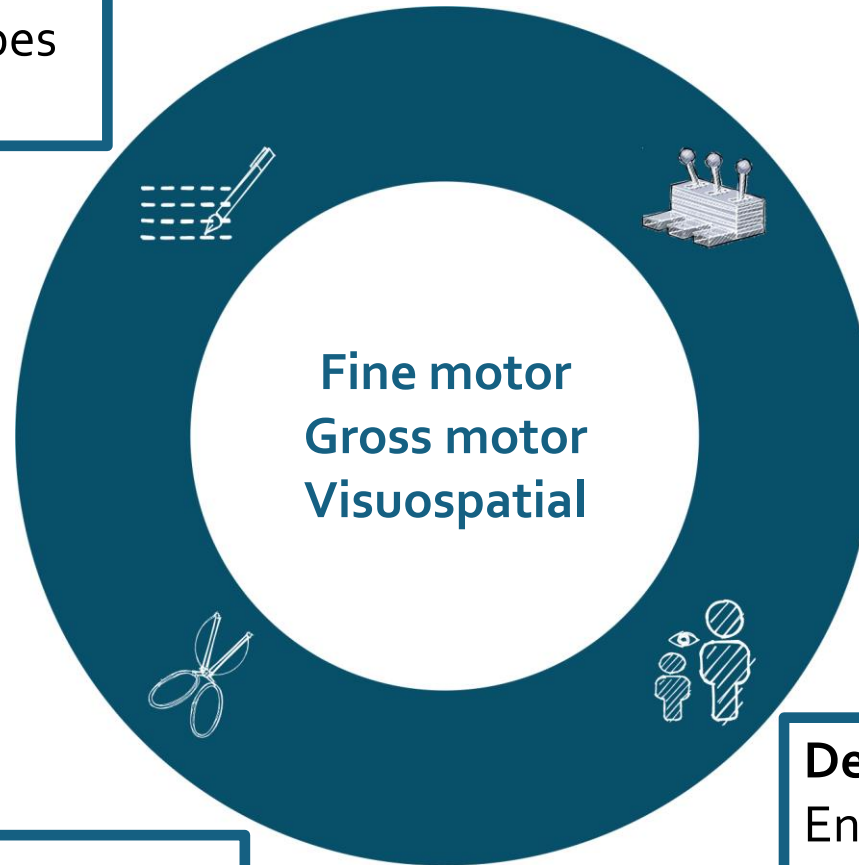
# Common areas of need

**Utilising Early Years  
Foundation Stage  
(EYFS)**

# Skills development

## Back to basics

Grasp development  
Pre-writing shapes  
Milestones



## Games

Simon Says  
Sequences  
Copying games  
I spy  
What's under the blanket?

## Scissor skills

Real scissors from nursery  
Grade up from one snip

## Demonstration

Ensures accuracy  
Sit next to student  
Lead with their active or dominant hand



# Pencil skills

Palmar Supinate Grasp



Digital Pronate Grasp



Quadrupod Grasp



Static Tripod Grasp



Dynamic Tripod Grasp



1-2 years



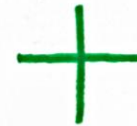
2-3 years



3 years



3 years



4 years



4 years  
4 months



4 years  
6 months



4 years  
7 months



4 years  
11 months



5 years  
3 months

- **Prewriting reminders:**

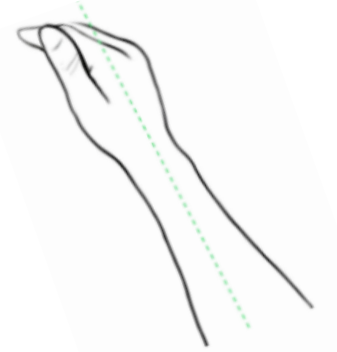
- Stick shapes on the 'writing table' to prompt staff.

- **Shoulder strengthening:**

- Stick sheets of paper on the wall or use a free-standing chalk board.

# Scissor skills

- Arms at side
  - Move paper within fingertips.
  - Reduces arm fatigue.
  - Increases accuracy.
- Neutral wrist



- Strips 3cm wide (one snip)
- Strips 6cm wide (two snips)
- Bold 10cm line
- Square (10cm for each line)
- Triangle (as above)
- Large semi-circle
- Large circular shapes, e.g., circles / ovals
- Curved and zig-zag lines





# Hand and finger positioning

## Threading boards:

- Do not swap hands or turn the board over
- Supporting hand is 'stuck to the board'
- Encourages dexterity and challenges visuospatial skills



## Tweezers:

- Tripod grasp with ring and little finger tucked into the palm.
- Cotton wool ball in palm of hand to secure with ring and little fingers



## What next?

Training on **sensory processing, gross and fine motor skills, visual perception and the importance of PE** will soon be available online

OT 'Handbook' coming soon...

- ✓ Environmental checklist
- ✓ Checklists to support the Identification of difficulties
- ✓ Strategies and tips
- ✓ Outlines for interventions

# References and resources

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