How to Make a Feely Tube or Feely Box: Sensory Play for Children

What is the most crowded exhibit when you visit the aquarium? The touch tank. What exhibit does a child always ask to enter when you go to the zoo? The petting zoo. As babies our sense of touch is one of the first ways we experience the world and children love to use their sense of touch to learn and explore.

Playing with a feely tube can enhance a child’s sense of physical awareness which builds confidence. It can also expand their vocabulary as they learn to describe how the objects feel. Feely tubes can be used with a group of children or in a one-on-one setting.

How to Construct a Feely Tube

1. Save an old canister.
   Canisters from iced tea, lemonade, or oatmeal work well.

2. Decorate the outside of the canister.
   Kids can help with this part to extend the tactile part of this activity. Paint their hands with non-toxic, washable paint and press down on a sheet of paper. Then attach the paper to the tube using tape or glue.

3. Add a sock.
   Get a thick black sock and cut off the end to make a tube. Put the stocking inside the canister and stretch one end over the top. This will make it easy for kids to reach their hands inside without peeking. Make sure your stocking is long enough to hide your items but not longer than your feely tube.

4. Cover the tube.
   Stretch one end of the sock over the top of the tube and secure it using strong tape like duct tape or electrical tape or hot glue.

5. Choose your items and start playing.
   Find small items around the house/classroom to hide inside your feely tube. Be sure they are not a choking hazard. Children can help you find the items or you can make it a surprise. Try for a variety of shapes and textures.
Ways to Play

1. Surprise Me!
Choose a selection of items you think the children might recognize but do not show them the items. I like to hide them inside of a bag or a box. Secretly put an item into the feely tube and then have them feel and try to guess. If playing with more than one child, have them keep their answers a secret until everyone has had a chance to feel. This works well for older children who may have experience with this type of activity.

2. Which One?
Choose your items and lay them out on a table. Allow the children to examine all of the items before playing with the feely tube. Before you hide the items, review the name for each one. Then put the items away. Select one and secretly put it into the feely tube. Have them put their hand inside the feely tube and try to guess what the item might be. Repeat for each child. This works well for younger children and those who have difficulty with tactile perception.

If children are still having a difficult time guessing what is in the feely tube, take the other items out of their hiding place and lay them on the table. See if they can figure out which one is missing from the group.

3. Mix it Up...
Once kids know how to play you can make all kinds of changes to this game. Have them choose items for you to feel and guess. Make multiple feely tubes and create a range of textures inside (hard, soft, rough, smooth, etc.) for kids to compare. If you create pairs of tubes with the same textures, they can work on matching (or grouping if you make more). Using multiple feely tubes you could also put objects of different sizes in the tubes and have children put them in order from smallest to largest based on feel alone.

Dealing With Feely Tube Anxiety

When most kids see this activity they immediately want to stick their hand in the tube and investigate. However, some children may have some anxiety about sticking their hand into a dark, unknown space. The most important thing to remember when this happens is not to try and force them. The more you push, the more resistant they will become. To help ease their fears there are several things you can do.

- Put your hand in the tube first so they will see that it is safe.
- Open the stocking and allow them to look inside the empty tube. When they can see what’s going on in there, they may become less worried.
- Let them handle the object before putting it into the tube. If they handle it first so they know what feeling to expect and they see you put it into the tube they will know what to expect when they put their hand inside.
- Let them put the object in the tube.
- Have them watch other children. When they see others having fun being surprised, they may be more willing to try.
- Play a little and then play again another day. You may need to introduce this activity on one day and then return to it later. They may not be ready to put their hand in on the first day but as you continue to play and they get more familiar with the feely tube, they may be willing.
- Do not get discouraged. You may have to go through the process of showing the inside of the tube and reviewing the items each time you play but with continued exposure most children will begin to warm up to this game.