

40 Heavy Work Activities for Kids

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Our body has an internal sense known as “proprioception,” which is basically our sense of body awareness. Our body senses proprioception through messages sent to the brain from sensory receptors in our muscles and joints. These sensations from the muscles and joints tell us how our bodies are moving, what each body part is doing in relation to the others, and where they are in space.

The proprioceptive system is activated any time we push or pull on objects (such as closing or opening a car door), **as well as any time the joints are compressed together or stretched apart** (such as jumping up and down or hanging on monkey bars). This system helps us understand how much force we are using and whether we need to use more or less force in order to successfully complete the task, such as when coloring, cutting our food with a fork and knife, or opening a door. It can also sometimes be the reason why some kids hang, lean, and climb on EVERYTHING.

Proprioceptive input tends to have a calming and organizing effect on the body, particularly when feeling overstimulated or overwhelmed. Proprioception also helps us better balance (“modulate”) the sensory input coming in from the other sensory systems so we can more accurately respond to it (such as the loud noises we hear or the feelings of certain textures on our skin or in our mouth, for example).

Any activity which involves “heavy work” such as pushing or pulling provides input to the proprioceptive sensory system. When children participate in these types of activities, and in the specific amount of time and intensity their body needs, we often see them become more calm, organized in their behavior, and able to follow through with daily activities such as getting dressed, participating in meal time, and following directions. For this reason, occupational therapy professionals often recommend heavy work activities as part of a child’s individualized sensory home program (often referred to as a “sensory diet”), in order to help prepare their bodies to be able to more fully participate in the things they want and need to be able to do on a daily basis (aka – their “occupations”).

If you are looking for a big list of heavy work activities to provide your child with more proprioceptive input, you’ve come to the right place!

Listed below are 40 heavy work activities kids can do in the home and/or community environments. I’ve divided this list of heavy work activities into **Playtime Activities**, **Chore/Helper Activities**, and **Snack/Mealtime Ideas**. Affiliate links are included below for your convenience (see full disclosure here).

Playtime Activities

- Try different animal walks: Bear walks, crab walks, snake crawls (on belly), frog jumps
- Do turtle walks: Place a large pillow on the child’s back and see how long they can crawl around with a “heavy shell” on their back
- March or jog in place while stomping
- Do push-ups either against a wall or on a mat or carpet
- Push the doorway: Stand in the doorway and push against the

sides of it as hard as possible with one arm on each side.

See how many seconds they can push.

- Wheelbarrow walks: Child places hands on floor, grown-up holds child's legs off floor and helps them walk with only their hands on the floor. Child should keep fingers facing forward as much as possible. Easier = hold child's legs at knees or hips, harder = hold child's legs at the ankles
- Jump and crash into a bed mattress, large beanbag pillows, or couch cushions
- Wrestle or rough house for fun (keep it clean!)
- Tug-of-war: Can be done in a variety of positions such as standing, sitting, kneeling, or laying on tummy
- Play with heavy balls/medicine balls (but be careful)
- Jump on a trampoline
- Jump rope
- Play on the monkey bars or a single bar for hanging
- Climb a rock wall
- Pour items such as sand, dry beans, dry rice, or water back and forth between containers (larger containers = more heavy work)
- Cut the bottom off an empty milk jug and use as a heavy work scooper for water, sand, rice, beans, etc. (see my example here)
- Dig in a sandbox (use scoopers or hunt for buried items)
- Squeeze, squish, and smash play dough (a homemade recipe will give you a lot more to play with)
- Play with Kinetic Sand
- Rip paper or pieces of cardboard: Give your child yesterday's newspaper or junk mail and have them tear it into strips, you can create a collage with all the different colored strips of paper. They can also help you tear up empty cereal boxes or other boxes from the store. These activities can also be especially helpful for children who need to "get out some aggression."
- Play catch with a big pillow or ball

- Complete an obstacle course or relay race
- Ride a tricycle, bicycle, scooter board (find fun scooter board activities from Therapy Fun Zone or The Inspired Treehouse), or any other item that requires “heavy work” to propel
- Build a fort (include chairs and large pillows for extra heavy work while constructing)
- Lay on tummy while reading, doing a puzzle, or even doing homework
- Do yoga (my kids and I like these kids’ yoga cards)
- Blow bubbles, kazoo, harmonica, whistle, pinwheel, or similar items (provides proprioceptive input orally)

Chore/Helper Activities

- Have the child help in the kitchen: Stir thick batter, knead and roll pizza dough, use rolling pin, peel fruits
- Dig in a garden
- Push a wheelbarrow
- Carry laundry or bags of groceries into the house (make sure child is given bags of items that will not break)
- Carry heavy loads of books, a bucket of blocks, or pail/bucket of water
- Help with “pushing” and “pulling” activities around the house: “Heavy work” chores such as vacuuming, sweeping, mopping, wiping down tables or countertops, wiping/washing mirrors or windows, scrubbing floor, scrubbing bathtub or shower, transferring wet laundry from washer to dryer (avoid exposing to chemicals unnecessarily)
- Pull a wagon with rocks, grocery bags, or sibling/friend in it (if can do so safely)
- Help push the stroller while out and about
- Help push a shopping cart or carry a shopping basket at the store

Snack/Mealtime Ideas

- Provide chewy or crunchy food at snack or meal time: Celery,

carrots, apples, fruit leather, jerky, pita chips (some kids like to chew on uncooked pasta or ice as well)

- Drink thick liquids through a thick straw: milkshakes, smoothies, yogurt, applesauce
- Drink from a suction water bottle (I like the kids' Camelbak ones)
- Chew gum (if appropriate for age/ability level)

Please remember this list is meant to be a helpful resource and should not be used as a replacement for consultation or collaboration with a qualified occupational therapy professional. If you have concerns about your child's sensory needs, please mention them to your child's primary care physician. Be sure to note specific examples of how your child's sensory challenges impact or interfere with his or her ability to complete daily childhood activities (aka – "occupations") such as eating, sleeping, bathing, grooming, hygiene, dressing, playing, socializing/interacting with other children, or participating in family and community environments. This will help your child's doctor be able to better determine whether an occupational therapy evaluation is warranted in order to address your child's sensory needs and their impact on your child's ability to participate in his or her daily occupations.

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