Creating a Calming, Soothing, and Self-Regulating Box

A “Safe Box”, “Happy Box”, “Calming Box”, “Sensory Box”, “Soothing Box” can support a young person in learning different self-soothing, self-nurturing, and self-regulating coping strategies. The described technique of designing a “Calming Sensory Box” is intended to be used within the context of other evidence-based approaches, and is just one of numerous available sensory approaches; it aims to target multiple areas, including the following:

1) To allow children to develop some concrete, playful, creative, and proactive strategies to effectively manage their bodies and emotions.

2) To engage and build rapport with the young person, whilst showing them that their needs and wants are important and being listened to by a thinking adult.

3) To promote a sense of external and internal safety, which is fundamental for enabling exploration, curiosity, and attachment.

4) To support young people to gradually and in a safe containing way widen their window of tolerance and to support them in finding a more manageable arousal zone.

5) To support the child in focusing in, tolerating, grounding, modulating, and sustaining a connection to their internal states.

6) To engage the child’s subcortical systems (Sensory, motor, limbic/emotional, and autonomic arousal), soothe their lower parts of the brain, and activate their body’s relaxation and stress reduction response. This multi-sensory approach (Visual,
kinaesthetic, tactile, olfactory, affective, and auditory) is particularly important given the multi-sensory nature of trauma and disrupted attachments.

7) To encourage their nervous system to process and integrate sensory input in organized and meaningful ways.

8) To create a physical container and a transitional object which has been created either with the therapist or within the caregiver relationship, and therefore, has relational elements including co-regulation and co-construction which can hopefully be internalised and anchored onto.

9) To allow children with a space and task where they can gain some mastery and control, and be active agents within their coping process.

10) To have a concrete means which enables other therapy strategies such as positive affirmation cards, prompt cards, and relaxation strategies to be incorporated into the contents of the box.

A Step-by-Step Guide in Creating a “Regulating Box”:

Step 1- Discuss the rationale of the box in a child-friendly, normalising, and accessible way. This can be usefully linked to psychoeducation around the brain, fight, flight, and freeze responses, and dysregulation. Enquire as to whether it is something that the child thinks may be helpful, and are willing to engage with. The more they are involved and invested in the process, the better.

Step 2- Support the child in choosing or bringing in a shoebox, plastic container, and/ or trinket box which will form the basis of the exercise. Please note that some children might prefer to use/make a different form of container which is absolutely encouraged as it offers them mastery and choice over all elements. This might be a jar, a star-shaped box, or a bag
Step 3- Have discussions around what things make the child feel calm, relaxed, nurtured, safe, happy, and warm. Use prompt cards, sentence completion tasks, “All About Me” type-questions, and other creative techniques to support the child in answering these questions (Chapter 2). Questions can range from their favourite season during the year, to their best meal, to their biggest role model, to their favourite hobby, to their favourite song etc. Try to incorporate a range of questions, which include enquiring about all of their senses, such as what things they might like to smell, touch, hear, do, taste, and see (See Worksheet 3.4 on identifying sensory likes, followed by Worksheet 3.5 on creating a “My Sensory Hand”). Children may like to draw, make a collage, or write on these worksheets; or instead, children may like to cut-out the headings, and place objects/items which are associated with each sense next to them. The images selected should be calming, positive, and strength-focused. If the child brings up negative images, acknowledge these, validate them, discuss them, and memory bank them, for other future tasks.

Be mindful that some young people will need scaffolding, prompting, and reassurance to facilitate this process; so, it is handy to have a few suggestions up your sleeve, and to also have memory banked in previous sessions, some things which they/ surrounding adults have said that they like, or have helped them, which can be integrated and incorporated.

Step 4- Depending on the child’s wishes, and on the assessment of their needs, either the therapist/ caregiver/supporting adult, or child (Might be a mutual task) collects a range of images/ pictures/ photos/materials to express the identified items above. Magazines,
newspapers, and google images can be helpful in assisting this process. For children who have often had the experience of not being kept in mind, the process of the therapist/supporting adult collecting the images which the child can then choose from can give a powerful message of being held and kept in mind.

Step 5- The child then decorates and/or names the outside of their “Box” with the identified images (If the therapist has collected the images, make sure the child has the opportunity to say which ones they like and/or which ones they do not want to include; it is also important to check-in if there are other images they have thought about since the initial discussions which they would like to add). Make sure you bring glue, scissors, and a range of resources to the session, as the majority of children like to decorate their boxes with additional materials, such as stickers, embellishments, fabrics, tissue paper, written messages, photographs, drawings, textured paper, and glitter etc.

It is also recommended to have several copies of the images, in case of them being lost/damaged, and so that the child can cut them up, and incorporate them into other strategies used during therapy; such as in their safe calming place poster, a key ring with soothing images in it, an “All About Me/ life story” book, and/or to add them laminated into being part of the contents of the box.

Step 6- Identified objects are then added into the sensory calming box (Some may be suggested or contributed to from the therapist, and others by the child- see below for some commonly used items). Some young people may benefit from an extensive range of options,
whilst others, become over stimulated and overwhelmed, and would probably get more out of the process by having a small selection of items.

Moreover, the choice of items/objects will vary depending on the young person’s unique needs, likes, choices, and safety requirements. Therefore, carrying out an assessment and getting to know the unique young person is key to this process. Ideally, many of the items will also match the child’s responses to the questions about the things that make them feel happy and calm. For example, a child who says their favourite time of year is winter and when it snows, may be supported to having or making a snow globe. Similarly, a child who likes stroking fluffy dogs, may be supported to buy or provided with some fluffy material resembling the hair of a dog.

**Step 7**- When in their “Thinking brain” and a regulated place, the child should be encouraged to practice/role-play using the items in the box during the session. Items and their usefulness should be explored and evaluated. The child should also be supported to thinking about a range of different scenarios/situations/feeling states, where the box may or may not be helpful.

**Step 8**- The child is then encouraged to use some of the items at home, or in their school setting. The Team around the Child with the child’s agreement are informed about the box, including the rationale behind it, and how and when to use it. If done in the context of therapy (This can be adapted for use elsewhere), some children may like to keep the box with the therapist and have a mini version at home/school.

*Some Common Items to Include in the Sensory Box:*
This worksheet is Copyrighted and taken from Dr Treisman’s forthcoming book “A Therapeutic Treasure Box for Working with Children and Adolescents with Developmental Trauma: Creative Activities and Tools”. See www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk or amazon for more details.

(Not an exhaustive list, and not to be used all at the same time). These suggestions are informed by theories around the impact of trauma and disrupted attachment on the body and brain.

Photo 3.13. Some Items for a Sensory Box

Try and consider all of the different senses:

1)  Tactile or somatosensory system- sense of touch.
2)  Visual seeing system.
3)  Auditory- sense of hearing.
4)  Gustatory system- sense of taste.
5)  Olfactory system- sense of smell.
6)  Vestibular system- sense of balance.
7)  Proprioception system- sense of body position.

_Distracters/ Sorting/ Organizing Items:_

Examples of these include: fidget toys, such as chewrlys, puzzles, crosswords, brain teasers, stress balls, Rubik’s cubes, colouring/drawing materials, colouring books, a kaleidoscope, and things to sort and organise, such as different coloured buttons/ badges/pebbles/ stickers/Lego pieces.
Tactile/ Soothing Items:

Examples of these include: Soft materials (e.g. Velvet, fluffy, silk, and suede), feathers, bubble wrap, different coloured pipe cleaners, crystals/pebbles/precious stones, play-doh/aroma-doh/clay, bean bags, tangles, massage balls, and stress balls.

Nurturing Items:

Examples of these include: Hand cream, lip balm, aromatherapy oils, a heat pad, face wipes, plasters, a self-hug cue card, a weighted blanket or pillow, breathing and relaxation exercises reminders.

Oral-Motor Items:

Examples of these include: Sucking sweets/chewing gum/chewy/sucking on straws/blowing bubbles/balloons/feathers.

Olfactory Items (Smell):

Examples of these include: Comforting and down-regulating smells (e.g. lavender, chamomile, rosemary, and vanilla), aromatherapy oil, perfume, candle, spray, aroma-doh (Smell, as with all senses are very personal so need to be selected by the young person).

Auditory Items (Hearing):

Examples of these include: Calming smoothing music, drums, a rain stick, a shell which you can hear the sea from, wind chimes, white noise, and/or a voice recording from people who love and support the young person.

Reminders of Support Items:
Examples of these include: Letters, cards, recordings, and special items from the Team around the Child (E.g. Hand of safety, safety net, life cheerleaders, and/or a jar of coloured sand representing all those special people).

_Coping Tool Reminder Items:_

Examples of these include: Pictures/ photos/ images/ memories which are calming and have positive associations, positive affirmation self-talk cards e.g. “I can do it”, “I am Ok”, “I am strong”, and coping reminder cards e.g. “When the difficult feelings take over I can calm myself by…”

Some Other Items Which have been Commonly Selected by Young People are:

Snow globes (These can be personalised), Guatemalan worry dolls, calming glitter bottle, weighted animal, a music maker, flowers, a heartbeat teddy bear, a dream catcher, a guardian angel, a wishing fairy, a mandala, and fairy dust.