

# Sensory Experience Kit for families at Woodland Park Zoo



Shizheng Miao | Museology Graduate Program

Committee Group: Jessica J. Luke, Ph.D., Mary Jackson, Alexander Jones, Amy Wagenfeld, Ph.D., OTR/L

## Introduction: Addressing Sensory Balance in Zoo Visits

Everyone experiences fluctuations in sensory sensitivity—sometimes seeking more stimulation, other times needing less—but these shifts often go unnoticed. This is especially true in outdoor recreational spaces like zoo<sup>3</sup>, where factors such as temperature, weather, crowds, peer interactions, sounds, and smells can make sensory and emotional regulation challenging for children<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, engaging with nature supports sensory integration, motor skills, attention, emotional regulation, and environmental awareness<sup>4</sup>, making zoos an ideal setting for exploration.

While many institutions provide sensory tools designed for individuals with specific needs, a more inclusive approach is needed to support all children. This project introduces a **Sensory Experience Kit** that considers visitors' everyday sensory balance, helping families create a more engaging, comfortable, and meaningful connection with nature during their zoo visit.



### Setting:

- Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ), Seattle, WA



### Purpose:

- The purpose of this nature-focused project is to create a sensory experience kit with flexible use that families can take with them during their visit to Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ).

## Goals, Outcomes, Target Audience

### Goals

- This project aims to balance sensory input through natural materials, allowing children to adjust their experience for comfort, engagement, and relaxation.

### Outcomes

- Support emotional regulation and stress coping, helping children stay calm and focused.
- Foster a deeper connection with nature through sensory engagement.
- Spark curiosity and environmental awareness with interactive prompts.

### Target Audience

- Families visiting Woodland Park Zoo, with a primary focus on children ages 5–8, while remaining inclusive for all ages.

## Key Phrases

### Phrase 1 Identifying Needs

- Conducted front-end evaluation to gather insights from families about sensory preferences, accessibility needs, and expectations.
- Analyze feedback to select appropriate sensory elements and design kit.

### Phrase 2 Design and Refinement

- Conducted a formative evaluation with families and individuals with disabilities to assess the kit's usability, accessibility, and engagement.
- Based on feedback, refined the kit to improve its functionality and effectiveness.

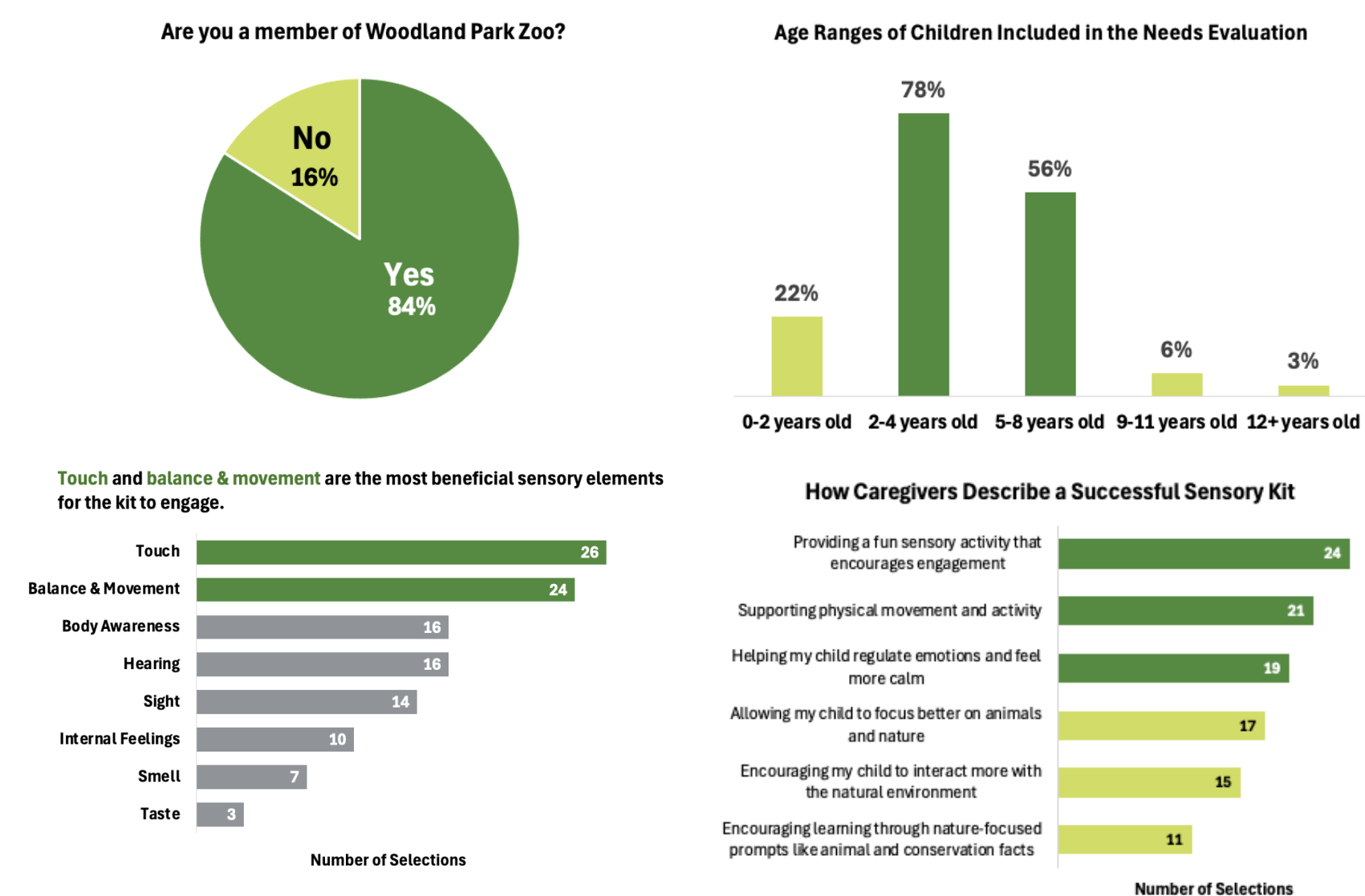
### Phrase 3 Implementation

- Distributed the kit to families and collected quick feedback on their experience. Reflections on future development.

## Evaluation-Driven Design Process

### Front-end evaluation

- I surveyed caregivers to learn about their children's sensory preferences and expectations. Most had young children (ages 2–8) and were familiar with sensory resources, though text-based tools were less used.
- Touch, balance, and movement** were rated most valuable. Families wanted fun, active experiences that also support emotional regulation.



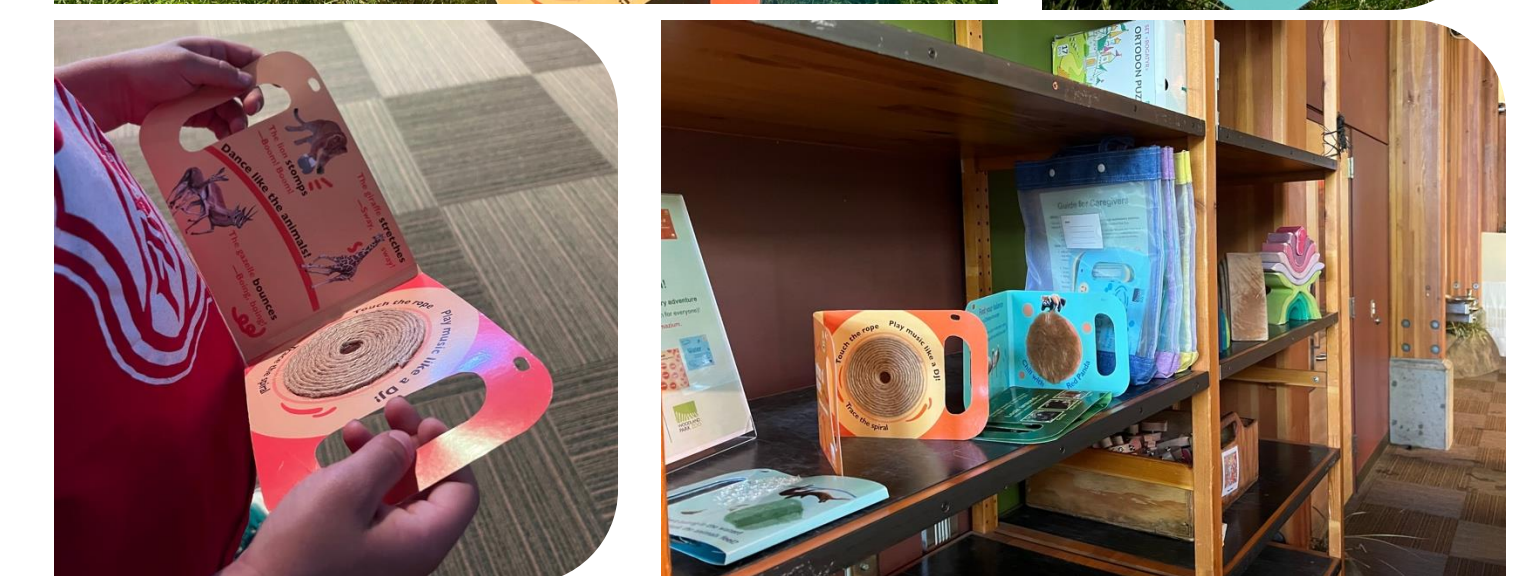
### Formative evaluation

- Families tried the kit and shared their thoughts. Most found it easy to use, and children especially enjoyed the touch and movement activities. Based on feedback, I revised the flyer and finalized plans to offer the kit in Zoomazium and occasionally at the zoo entrance to invite broader participation. In the future, the kit can be integrated into the zoo's existing sensory resources.

## Deliverable

The kit comes with four themed booklets, a caregiver guide, and an optional carrying strap. Each booklet is based on a **habitat** and a **sensory intensity** (high, medium, or low). Activities focus on:

- Touch activities** using natural textures (e.g., fur, bark, rope).
- Movement activities** inspired by animal behaviors (e.g., "Stretch," "Flap your arms," "Find your balance")
- Multisensory engagement** combining actions and observation (e.g., "Look around for a safe home for animals," "Take a deep breath")



## Reflections

### Feedback from Families

- One caregiver shared that their child often feels overwhelmed in crowds, and this kind of tool might help with focus and comfort. Another described it as a "break-time" activity and a fun "extra activity."

### Limitations

- Due to borrowing and return constraints, usage frequency may be limited. The kit is housed in Zoomazium for easier access and centralized management and occasionally offered outside. Design decisions were influenced by several factors, including seasonal conditions, visitor pacing, and whether families were zoo members.

### Future Development Possibilities

- Some families suggested creating kits for broader age groups. This type of sensory-based interactive activity could have wider potential—even for adults.
- Since sensory balance remains an underrecognized need, sensory support tools should be valued, tailored to specific environments, and refined for easier use—such as simplified instructions or self-service options.

## Important Reference

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