

Sensory activity pack



**COLLAR &
CUFFS CO**



Poplar Union

**Digital Arts
Festival**

looking out • looking in • looking up



Context

This pack has been created to accompany **Looking (Be Curious)**, an original song by **Collar & Cuffs Co**. The song, video and supporting pack are a digital commission from **Poplar Union** responding to the theme of Looking Out, Looking In, Looking Up. The commission is part of Poplar Union's digital arts festival taking place during November 2020, midway through Lockdown II of the Covid Pandemic.

Why this response?

The mental health needs of children, including those with complex needs, has never been more important following the strange and turbulent events of 2020. Many parents and carers can find it stressful and difficult supporting their children through big emotions, tantrums or meltdowns. at the best of times, but this is made harder still when parents and carers may be overwhelmed themselves by worries. ...and so much is magnified by having to spend a lot of time at home and indoors together whilst in local or national Lockdowns.

Simple, sensory strategies and having a plan in mind for when big feelings take hold can make a difference to both adults and children. These ideas are presented here as games and activities with a little bit of theory thrown in.

The song is designed to help embed the strategies and has been presented in a contemporary style referencing artists such as Dua Lipa. It's not meant to be the world's greatest vocal, it's meant to be a song to sing along to and to dance without self-consciousness or judgment. Songs about mental health don't need to be sentimental ballads, and songs with memorable information also don't need to sound like nursery rhymes. This is a song for now, created with limited resources in Lockdown, with ideas that can make a difference today.

No expertise is needed to try out these activities. No expensive sensory toys. Just you, your child, their feelings and a bit of imagination.

You are all your child needs.

You are enough.

Julia
x

Director | Collar & Cuffs Co



What are 'Big Feelings'

Big feelings are those that create a massive response in a person's brain and body. They can include anxiety, anger, frustration, sadness or pain, but excitement and euphoria or even boredom can also be felt to a profound extent by some.

These feelings are usually visible and apparent, especially in very young children if you've ever witnessed a tantrum, for example. For some people, however, their emotional expressions appear rather more like icebergs with only subtle clues on the surface and hidden depths lying beneath. These people are feeling the same intensity of emotion as those that outwardly express themselves, but, for very good reasons, it may be safer for them not to show it; this can be particularly the case for autistic children who may 'mask' feelings and behaviours in some environments to appear more neurotypical.

Extreme behaviours can accompany big feelings. These behaviours may be loud, persistent, aggressive, crazy, or involve lots and lots of movement. All behaviour is communication: there is always a reason for it. Extreme behaviour usually shows us there is an unmet need, and that a person doesn't yet have the skills or experience to be able to navigate a problem or challenge. Big feelings and their associated behaviours are rarely attention-seeking. Instead, they are attachment-seeking: the child is looking to engage an adult with them to help them solve their problem.

Big feelings can also be about survival and may arise in response to real or perceived threats in the environment. Hearing 'no' for some children can be the emotional equivalent of facing down a raging tiger! Big feelings show that our fight/flight/freeze or fawn reflexes are active and that we are entering survival mode. For tantrums, the person remains in control of their behaviours until they get what they want. The longer a tantrum goes on the brain becomes increasingly stuck and overwhelmed, which then risks it shifting into survival mode. Survival mode is not a choice; it's a reflex. Once we're in survival mode it can take a long time to come out of it.

In survival mode, the brain diverts oxygen and blood supply to parts of the body that enable us to react quicker, run faster, hit or bite harder, scream louder and longer, or to shut down altogether. In doing so, the bits of our brain that are really helpful for problem-solving, using language, understanding consequences and making objective choices dull down or go offline. When our survival is at stake, thinking takes time and effort that could make the difference between life and death, so reflexes that bypass conscious thought are more efficient. Often when we are dealing with someone in survival mode, we try to reason them out of it, but, simply, their brains are not available to hear us.



Everybody's brain and body move between states of regulation and dysregulation. We can sometimes become so used to living with a degree of constant dysregulation, however, perhaps as a result of living through a pandemic, that our resilience decreases and it sometimes doesn't take much to flick us into survival mode; this is the origin of the saying about the last straw that breaks the camel's back - we have been pushed to our limit and we snap.

Bringing more calm into our lives and regulating ourselves improves overall wellbeing, and makes stresses easier to ride out for everyone. A child cannot regulate themselves if you are not regulated. We listen to each other's nervous systems all the time, and children can feel instinctively when we are in survival mode; if even our grown-ups are projecting big feelings or a threat response, then things must be very unsafe indeed.

The good news is that sensory strategies, including connection with others, can help calm the brain and body down. Soothing sensory experiences help us send our survival systems back to sleep and bring our thinking skills back online. When we are calm and have more of our brain available to us, then there is no problem we cannot find a way through especially if we have loving support from others to help and guide us.

Being Curious

It can feel hard sometimes not to take someone's dysregulated behaviour personally, especially when we are stressed out ourselves. A useful quote to remember is: "[this person] is not giving me a hard time, they're having a hard time". Or, simply, that the behaviour shows the person is out of resources and skills right now and needs help and compassion.

Being curious about the person, what their behaviours may be showing us, and using our empathy to wonder about their feelings can help us to stay calmer and to provide the support the person needs to regulate again. Once calm, you can then work together on solving the problem.

We can also use curiosity about the world beyond as a tool for calm. Looking beyond ourselves helps to ground us in the present, a key element of Mindfulness, and the sheer scale of the universe we live in can also help to bring our feelings and worries back down to size. When we are spending a lot of time in home or in the same environment, our circumstances can feel like living in the heat of a greenhouse where everything becomes magnified and intense. These are great conditions for big feelings to over-grow and turn into giants! Sometimes, bringing our bodies and all the feelings they contain out into the fresh air makes things more manageable and easier to prune.



Looking Out | Distraction

Big feelings can get stuck. The thoughts and feelings are triggering a survival response so strongly in the brain that all rational thought, problem-solving, and listening skills have gone offline. Sometimes a 'jolt' back to the present can be helpful. Big feelings that hit indoors may be the result of overstimulation, so getting outside helps the brain to shift gear.

The idea is not to distract your child calm and then move on, but to help them find calm so you can then work through the need or problem that triggered such a massive response in the first place.

Looking Out is First Aid.

Jolting back to the present is a form of 'Mindfulness', and we can use lots of senses to support this. Going outside into the fresh air, even if it's raining, contributes new sensory stimulus for the body, increases access to oxygen, and small children also have an inbuilt survival mechanism that means they become quieter outdoors when they are in survival mode; this mechanism is designed to protect them from predators who will be alerted to their presence if they are noisy or moving too much.

So, when a Big Feeling hits. If it is proving tricky to soothe, then tell your child you are going to help them calm down by going outside, then head out onto your doorstep with your child - don't forget your keys, just in case. If you are not able to get out of your door easily, then going to a window and opening it to allow some fresh air in works just as well. Calm your own breathing, drop the tone of your voice, reduce your movements. If you are able to hold and cuddle your child, then use rocking, patting, and bouncing to jiggle and comfort their brain. Model the calm you would like to help your child to find.

I Spy

This traditional observation and guessing game is a great way to draw focus to what's going on in the street where you live and to bring attention back to the here and now.

For very young children, those who are non-verbal, your calm words and repetition are the magic here. Here's how you can play I Spy together:

First, take a big gasp or say Wow! Use your voice to alert your child that you've seen something amazing. Then say: I can see, I can see, I can see....and then add in what you can see e.g. a blue car, a plane in the sky, etc. Point to it. This game works especially well if your child has a special interest such as transport, animals, colours, etc.



After a while as the child calms, and depending on their age or ability, you may be able to say something you can see and then wait to see if they can scan, find and point to it.

If your child is finding it hard to engage, then try going for speed by saying I can see, I can see, I can see a blue car, point, then change direction (think high and low, close and far, big and small) and immediately move on to I can see, I can see, I can see a broken paving slab. For some children, lots of quick, fast nudges drawing attention to the outdoors have more of an impact - their thinking brain comes back online so they can keep up with you.

Top Tips

For this variation, add in other senses too, such as I can hear, I can hear, I can hear an ambulance, or I can touch, I can touch, I can touch rough (run your fingers over the bricks of your home, for example). How many senses can you involve?

You can also use this game to create lovely connections and empathy by saying things about your child e.g. I can see, I can see, I can see...your beautiful brown eyes. I can see, I can see, I can see...tears on your face. I can see, I can see, I can see...you're really, really cross, etc. You can also include things like: I can see, I can see, I can see...my arms around you keeping you safe. You can also include silly things such as I can see, I can see, I can see...a raspberry on your hand (then blow the raspberry).

Variations on I Spy for older children

Traditionally, I Spy uses the initial letters of objects, landscapes or features, but you can also spy things according to their colours e.g. I spy with my little eye something that's red.

Other variations could include shapes (round, square, etc); numbers (3 of something, 7 of something, etc); rhymes (something that rhymes with hat, etc); adjectives (something smooth, etc); measurements (something that's 1m tall); or that involves other senses e.g. something that sounds like/smells like/tastes like, etc.

The Five to One Game

A much-loved Mindfulness game that is really helpful for grounding, especially when feeling very anxious.

Simply, look outside together and invite your child to name five things they can see, four things they can hear, three things they can touch, two things they can smell and one thing they can taste. You may need to help and guide them until they get the idea - smells and tastes are always hardest, so prompts could include the smell of washing detergent, perfume, or simply fresh air; tastes can include toothpaste, a food eaten a while ago, or some children may even taste their emotions - fear can have a taste for some people, for example.



For younger children you may need to provide all the answers for them and draw their attention to each item in turn. Things you can feel can also include your arms around them, their breath on your face, or other sensory observations that help to illustrate you are present with them, comforting them and keeping them safe.

The more you practice this game, the more the strategy will be embedded. Repetition creates an internal 'script' your child may one day use independently when they feel overwhelmed and anxious.

For people with complex needs, you can bring the game to life with a box or bag of consistent and familiar sensory items that may help them to regulate when you head outdoors. You will need to scaffold use of the items with your calm, reassuring presence, and by modelling their use - a calm jar doesn't create calm simply by looking at it, though it may look lovely. The calm comes from you showing your child how you can use the object to soothe yourself, so be alongside your child, breathe long and slow, invite them to copy, reduce your movements and show your body is regulated. You may need to narrate how you are looking at the calm jar and noticing what's happening inside it, such as commenting on the way the light shines through it, or how the colours are swirling, or that the jar's contents are nearly all settled now, and so on.

I Wonder Where Game (inspired by Game of Thrones)

Sansa Stark would gaze at the boats moored in the harbour of Kings Landing , and she would make up a story for what the boat's cargo is/was, where it came from, where it's going, why, and so forth. The more imaginative and fantastical, the better.

Look out and spot a van, lorry, car or person. Make up a tiny story about what they are doing - you can keep things close to reality and narrate observation e.g. 'Look, there's Mike from over the road. I wonder if he's walking to the post office? He has letters in his hands' Or, you can be really creative e.g. "I bet that lorry is full of balloons. It's going to deliver them to a party for a giant, and there will be so many that when the giant holds the strings of all those balloons, he'll float up into the sky!".



Looking In | Detection

Not everyone is very good at knowing how they're feeling inside. It can take a long time for these skills to develop, and they can also be impacted by sensory processing difficulties, physical disabilities or trauma. Our sense of knowing how we're feeling inside is called 'interoception'.

Interoception helps us to know when we feel unwell or are in pain, are hungry or thirsty, if we need the loo, and also what bodily sensations go with our emotions, for example, butterflies in our tummies when worried, feeling hot and tight when angry, and so on. Developing our sense of interoception so we can link feelings to sensations helps us build self-awareness, emotional literacy and empathy with others. **Looking In builds connection and self-knowledge.**

Looking In activities can be helpful to use when someone's Big Feelings look very sad, withdrawn or if someone is in shut down. They're also great to use when everyone is calm; the more you play these kind of games, the more you are building skills and knowledge that may be helpful when Big Feelings turn stormy.

Listening To My Insides

Sit or lie near or next to your child and tell them you can see they have lots of big feelings, and that you're going to use your listening superpowers to check they're okay.

Ask your child if you can listen to their hand/foot/heart/tummy/head, etc. Then place your ear on that body part. For each, say things like 'Ah yes, I can hear lots of feeling here. I'm wondering if you're feeling sad/disappointed/angry that...(and state what you think may have happened).

If your child is not ready for you to be close to them, then say you will use listen with your mind instead. Close your eyes and touch your fingers to your temples, and say: I'm going to listen to your feelings. Then, breathe and listen - you could even make a little meditative humming sound - and then repeat the steps as above, acknowledging what the feeling is and why you think it may have happened.

As your child relaxes and begins to engage in the game, they may agree or disagree with your wonderings; either response is brilliant as it means they are thinking about their feelings and the reasons for them, and you then have the ability to start to work together on solving the problem. Sometimes the best solutions are hugs and cuddles, not always putting things right.

You can also inject some playful humour into the game e.g. listening to you child's heart and saying: my goodness! Your heart is thumping so hard! Have you got a stomping dinosaur hidden in there? Your child might also like you to kiss or blow a raspberry on each body part as you listen to it. The more you play this game, the more you will be able to tailor it to what your child finds most appealing and helpful. You could also invite them to listen to your feelings in your body too.



Breathing and Being

It's not always possible to fix children's feelings. Sometimes we just need to be with them until they regulate again. Repeated experiences of feeling distressed and overwhelmed, but being supported back to calm and safety help teach children important skills for life in managing big feelings, especially those that are aroused when they don't get what they want or expect; sometimes life's events are beyond anyone's ability to control, and we have to find ways to cope with that.

If your child's big feelings are showing as sad, depressed, withdrawn behaviour, then sometimes non-verbal and sensory forms of communication can be helpful. Focus on yourself first and make sure you are as calm as possible, breathe slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth; your calm breathing and body will be picked up subconsciously by your child, and those signals of calm and safety will slowly begin to help them to regulate.

Support this by engaging in a sensory activity. The idea is to gradually engage your child's curiosity and that, combined with slow breathing and minimal communication, can help them begin to emerge from their overwhelm. Sensory activities could include:

- A calm jar
- Play dough or slime
- Drawing and doodling
- A bowl of warm water for putting hands or feet in
- Blowing bubbles
- Patting a balloon in the air
- A sensory light
- A selection of different smells
- Rubbing in moisturiser
- A jug of iced drink - water or squash - and some glasses
- A jigsaw puzzle
- A marble run or other toys with moving parts

The best activities are ones that you may be able to gradually entice your child to share with you as a form of communication e.g. shifting from patting a balloon in the air on your own to patting it back and forth with your child; from rubbing moisturiser into your own hands to massaging theirs, etc.

Think about what sensations interest your child most and design your Breathing and Being activity with this in mind. These activities also work really well as calm downs before bedtime, when children are very tired or feeling unwell, or in the aftermath of a fall or other injury that causes pain and shock.



Looking Up

When big feelings hit at night, especially in relation to bedtime, then you can combine getting outdoors with your observation skills to bring feelings back down to size. Looking up at night can be helpful for little ones right the way through to grown-ups.

When it starts to get dark our instincts usually mean we want to be at home where we feel safe and secure; we want to roost or nest just like animals and birds. However, being at home at night can also amplify thoughts and feelings. For young people and adults, the experience of insomnia can feel very lonely and isolating and we can find ourselves waiting for the daylight and a sense of reconnection to the world while our thoughts and feelings spiral.

If we can be a little bit brave, a little bit creative, and a little bit less worried about convention, then we can make great use of the nighttime to help ourselves feel better by tapping into our sense of the 'numinous'. The numinous is a spiritual sense, and can be found by putting ourselves in a position where become aware of feeling very small in relation to the universe beyond us. We can find this experience when inside huge buildings with high ceilings, such as churches, mosques, or museums, or when we stand on the top of a tall tower or bridge. We naturally become quieter in these places, and we naturally want to look around and take in all we can see.

We can access the numinous at night by looking at the sky, even on a cloudy, rainy night. Stick a coat on over your pyjamas or tuck your child into their buggy with a blanket, pop on some shoes or wellies - or go outside in your slippers or bare feet if you need to - and get out under the sky.

Pyjama Walk

Go out in your pyjamas for a walk! Even a quick three minute stomp can make a difference. Better still, plan a route round your community that you always do when you Pyjama Walk. The world looks completely different in the dark, so think about interesting places to pass - if you walk past your local leisure centre would you be able to see people dancing in an exercise class, for example? Can you watch trains, busses or cars? Are there interesting smells from your local takeaway or from people's chimneys? Are there shops nearby that have interesting window displays? Where could you see nighttime animals such as rabbits or foxes?

Pyjama Walks are especially lovely in November/December as you may see fireworks and seasonal lights. If your children find managing the excitement of winter festivals such as Bonfire Night, Diwali or Christmas overwhelming, then Pyjama Walks could become part of your bedtime routine.

If you have a torch, then you could also visit your local public playground and consider using some of the equipment in the dark. Swinging, rocking and spinning are very calming, as well as the novelty and numinous quality of being out at night.



Meeting the Moon

The moon is an endless source of fascination, so why not befriend it?

Get outside together and see if you can spot it - what size and colour is it tonight? Where is it in the sky? Are there clouds passing over it, or is it glowing from behind a thick cloud coverage? Can you see it at all? Is there a face in the moon, or is it a crab?

When you see the moon, wave and say hello. If you can't see the moon, you can say come back soon.

The moon is good at listening, so you can sing, talk or even shout at the moon. You can wonder together about what the moon can see, where it was before it became nighttime where you are and where it will go next - think about the people, animals and lands it passes over.

Develop your sense of wonder and knowledge of the moon by finding out about the moon missions, by learning its phases, and how it creates the tides.

Stargazing

Learn to spot some key constellations and the legends behind their names. Easy ones to find include Orion, the Great Bear/Plough, and Pegasus. It's also easy to spot planets such as Venus and Mars too. Have a look in your local library or online for guides to help you develop your skills,, and for magical myths and legends. If you follow @VirtualAstro on Twitter then you can find out almost daily information that will help you to spot when the International Space Station is passing overhead, the Starlink satellites, and to get the best views of meteor showers or other celestial events.

You can enhance your stargazing with hot chocolate and snuggly blankets or even hot water bottles.

When you start looking at the night sky and think about how far away objects are, how old the light is that's reaching your eyes, you start to feel how big our planet is and how vast the universe is. Clear nights when you can see lots of stars can feel full of wonder and calm.

For people with complex needs

It can sometimes take quite a lot of planning to get out of the house, so impromptu nighttime walks may be tricky. You can bring the stars indoor, however. There are some very inexpensive star projector lights available from places like B&M, Poundland, eBay, etc, and these in a dark room can achieve a lovely effect. You can stargaze indoors, with hot chocolate and blankets if your person would enjoy them.



Using music

Music works really well with numinous nighttime adventures. Choose expansive sounds that create calm. 'Weightless' by Marconi Union is a piece of ambient music that has been designed to regulate the mind and body, it also works really well as a soundtrack for stargazing.

Other Things To Try

Looking out, looking in and looking up activities are just starting points for finding calm and connection, but there are lots of other things to do too:

Rain

Being overstimulated and bored indoors, especially on a rainy day, is more likely to lead to big feelings. Rain will not melt anyone, and, with the right clothing, the sensory experiences of being in the wet and wind can be exhilarating. Get out and splash in puddles and mud, don't worry about wet or dirty clothing as all can be washed and dried, but use the splashing to work out frustrations and to inject some fun to shake up the brain; movement is really helpful for regulation, and big, jumping, splashing, stamping motions are really calming.

If your person is in a buggy or wheelchair, then they can still splash with your help. Try zooming through puddles together, or take a bowl or other container with you to catch raindrops in that you can explore with fingers. If you can't get outside, then watching raindrops on a window pane can be soothing - you can also play races by each choosing a drop and watching to see which one runs down to the bottom of the window first.

If you live near water fountains then even on a dry day you can go and feel the water spray on your skin when you stand close by, plus there's sound and visuals of the water tumbling.

On a rainy or dewy day when there are water droplets hanging from leaves or other surfaces, see if you can hold your hand still enough to be able to touch a droplet with your fingernail and for it to transfer to you and stay on your nail as a perfect crystal globe of water. If you look closely through the drop, what can you see? Can you transfer the droplet from your fingernail to someone else's? You will have to be really calm, still and careful to avoid it running away. Look for spiderwebs in the rain or dew too - can you spot Incey Wincey?

Public Playgrounds

The play equipment in your local playground isn't just for fun: it can have a therapeutic benefit for big feelings too. Increasingly, playgrounds are becoming more accessible to wheelchairs, which means even more people can access movement to help settle big feelings.

Movements such as swinging and spinning can be really helpful, but also pulling and pushing when



climbing. The deep pressure pushing and pulling create through the body's muscles and joints is very soothing.

We often take our children to the playground to 'burn off energy', but usually that energy is coming from a place of dysregulation so think instead about taking children to the playground to regulate.

Hugs, cuddles and connection

The power of physical contact in helping with big feelings is really important - humans thrive on touch and we all need to feel loved. Touch is soothing, calming, and necessary.

Hugs and cuddles, from great big bear hugs to snuggling up to watch the television, all feed connection and regulation. Very simple physical action games can also be powerful, from those that have rhymes, such as Round and Round the Garden, to just holding your child by their hips and saying 'I'm not going to let you go!', letting them pull against your hands, pulling them back into your lap, and so on.

Connection can look like close physical contact, but it can also look like sharing a book together, playing together, putting down our phones and work and giving our children our undivided attention, telling jokes and laughing, bringing our children a drink or snack they haven't asked for, etc. If our children are having lots of incidents of big feelings in a day, have a think about how much connection they have also had that day with you. Sometimes more connection reduces patterns of tricky behaviour associated with big feelings.

Dance

Not everyone can dance brilliantly, but it really doesn't matter - moving in rhythm to music you love, without self-consciousness, can be regulating.

When you spot big feelings on their way, get in there early and put on some music and dance together. Pick up your child and whirl them around, hold their hands and jiggle them in time to the music, sit on the floor and have them in your lap and rock them, or just jump around! To help with self-consciousness, you can turn off lights or close the curtains, you could even crack out some glowsticks (packs available from pound shop) or a sensory light to turn your room into a disco.

Alternatively, you can have a finger disco! Put on music and get dancing with fingers in play dough, slime, paint, or any other tactile sensory substances you feel like moving with - even a tray of dry cereal, beans or pasta can feel nice to touch, rattle, and finger-dance with.



For more information

To find out more about big feelings, here are some resources that may be useful:

The Sensory Projects - from sensory engagement and inclusion specialist, Joanna Grace, you will find sensory stories, books, and also training in mindful approaches for supporting the mental health of people with complex needs.

The A - Z of Therapeutic Parenting - designed primarily for parents/carers of children with developmental trauma, however much of the content is applicable for children who find it hard to manage big feelings for other reasons including as a result of autism, including PDA, or anxiety. Simply look up the behaviour you're seeing and find helpful descriptions of why this may be happening and suggestions for how to help or support.

The Explosive Child - a really clear and helpful book that will reframe how you see your child, their big feelings and any tricky associated behaviours. The book explores how gaps in skills, including difficulties handling frustration, are often behind difficult behaviours. Ross Greene guides parents/carers through the process of working on these without punishments, consequences, yelling or stress.

SEND VCB & Newbold Hope - Yvonne Newbold offers free or very affordable training for parents/carers around supporting their child or young person, especially those with SEND, with violent and challenging behaviour (VCB). Yvonne's warm and friendly approach that comes from a place of lived experience parenting her son is consoling, normalising, and focused on solutions that are simple but effective. She also runs both a public and private Facebook support group.

Little Meerkat's Big Panic - Jane Evans storybook unpacks the neuroscience of anxiety and big feelings in a very simple, clear way. Story in the front, neuroscience in the back. A really useful model involving cute animals that can help everyone get to grips with what brains and bodies are doing when big feelings happen.

The Out-of-Sync Child - a really clear and helpful book for anyone who has a child that's always on the go or that seems to need a lot of movement or sensory input to cope with big feelings. If you know your child has sensory processing difficulties then this is a great resource for supporting your knowledge and awareness, plus lots of practical ideas to help your child feel better in their body.

You can also find free sensory stories and other resources all with a mental health and wellbeing focus for 0-7s and people with complex needs on our website at www.collarandcuffs.org or via our [Facebook](#) page.