

What is Heavy Work? How Can it Help?

We all need to be able to calm our bodies and self-regulate. **Heavy work** is any activity which requires us to use our muscles and joints, putting pressure on them as we move. Moving with intention and experiencing resistance can help our bodies help us regulate. Feeling where our bodies are in space is calming as we can better gauge our balance and movement (our vestibular sense). Feeling our bodies exert force can also be calming as we feel and use our muscles and joints to change our place in time and space (our proprioceptive sense).

Heavy work is great for all children, not just children with sensory processing disorder. In fact, heavy work is AWESOME for us adults too. Before I ever knew the term “heavy work” or had any understanding of the concepts behind it, I had a few different things I used to find helpful for myself. One was, going downstairs to sort and start or change the laundry. I found it would relieve, de-escalate, or otherwise calm me. One of my kids would often come down to “check-up on me” when he noticed I’d headed down to the laundry during a challenging time with his sister. Neither of us knew I was doing my own heavy work. All we knew was it helped.

Proprioceptive input- If we seek this as kids we might give people tight hugs or crash into things to feel the physical contact and pressure. If we are avoidant we may try to get away from those sensations.

Vestibular input- If we seek this as kids we might rock back and forth, spin or swing, hang upside down or jump from heights. If we are avoidant we may be more physically cautious.

When our bodies are over or under stimulated we can become anxious or antsy. We can be prone to an outburst of energy, strong acts of avoidance, or we might employ unconscious sensory seeking behaviors. Heavy work provides manageable stimulation in both our proprioceptive and vestibular sensory systems and can help us to self-regulate. Heavy work can also help with coordination, posture, body awareness, the ability to attend and focus, and speech.

Heavy work can provide manageable sensory feedback that can help organize our brains. We may find that this:

- Is Calming
- Alerts us Before Mental Work
- Improves Attention
- Helps with Body Awareness, Balance and Coordination
- Strengthens Muscle Tone

Heavy work does not need to include something “HEAVY.” It can include many different actions like: chewing, cutting, writing, squeezing, pushing, carrying and pulling. Experiment and make lists of what you find helpful. Maybe each member of the family has their own heavy work list that helps them self-regulate.