

# Beanbags: Fun with a Purpose



Remember tossing beanbags into a bucket? At a target? Over a barrier? While video games and soccer practice have replaced these activities as “play,” many teachers, occupational therapists, Brain Gym specialists, and optometrists have rediscovered them as therapy. Why? Because beanbag games assist those of all ages to

- Develop body awareness, balance, and motor coordination;
- Integrate touch, movement, proprioception, kinesthesia, and vision;
- Enhance concentration and attention;
- Cross the body’s midline;
- Prepare the eyes and hands for reading and writing.

**Basic Developmental Premises:** When using beanbags, remember that children develop control over their large muscles before their smaller ones. First, they learn to control their necks and heads, then trunk and limbs, and finally hands, fingers, and eyes. Choose games appropriate for developmental age, not for chronological age.

Ideas abound for games to play with beanbags. Here are a few from some of our favorite practitioners.

### Brendan O’Hara’s “Movement & Learning Beanbag Ditties”

This delightful Aussie is a Brain Gym expert, kinesiologist, and composer. His digeridoo and other native instruments enhance his music. Here are three of the 15 activities on the CD.

**Round and Round My Tummy:** In time to the music, transfer a beanbag from right hand to left hand and back again, below hip level, switching hands at the body’s midline front and back. Change directions, always finishing in a clockwise direction. For variation, do it facing a partner with two beanbags, timing movements so that beanbags are exchanged simultaneously on both sides without looking. Repeat standing back to back. This simple activity helps integrate the Moro, Plantar, Babinski, Asymmetric Tonic Neck, and Fear Paralysis reflexes.

**Quiet Tigers:** Get onto hands and knees. Pile one to four beanbags on the head. Rock and sway forwards, backwards, and sideways, balancing beanbags, while roaring quietly to music on the CD. Repeat, adding beanbags to back and hips. While balancing beanbags on head, back, and hips, follow an imaginary horizontal figure 8 with the eyes. Balance on one hand, and trace the 8 with the free hand. Change hands. Quiet tigers integrates the Symmetric Tonic Neck Reflex, develops the vestibular system and balance, enhances binocular vision, and coordinates balance, vision, and movement.

**Spinal Twist:** Get on hands and knees. Place beanbags on each hip and on sacrum. Look over one shoulder, observing the beanbags, and trying hard to bring the shoulders and hips very close together on each side, i.e., right shoulder to right hip, and left shoulder to left hip. Arms are firm, not stiff.

Repeat on other side. The “Spinal Twist” is an excellent activity for integrating the spinal gallant reflex, reducing bedwetting, and to help the “wiggle-worm” sit still.

O’Hara’s CD comes with two organic cotton handmade beanbags with rice inside. Their size and weight is perfect for young children. An insert in the CD illustrates moves for each track.

### Donna Wendelburg’s “Begin Where They Are” & “Beanbags and Fun”

This amazing vision therapist has improved the lives of individuals with disabilities for over 30 years. Her activity workbook for individuals with developmental delays and beanbag kit are two of her many products.

**Beanbag Breathing:** Lie on your back, with a beanbag on the diaphragm and another one on the chest. Inhale deeply through the nose so that the beanbag on the diaphragm moves up, and the one on the chest does not. Exhale slowly through the mouth. The beanbag on the diaphragm should move lower, and the one on the chest should remain still. Keep practicing until diaphragm breathing is natural.

**Throw and Hit:** While standing, throw the beanbag into the air. As it comes down, hit it with your head, back, stomach, and waist. Next, hit it with right, then left, hands, shoulders, knees, hips, elbows, and wrists. Is it easier on one side than the other?

**Juggle:** Throw/Switch/Catch - With one beanbag in each hand, throw one up, switch the other. Catch with the opposite hand. Throw first with the dominant hand and then with the non-dominant hand. Throw/Throw/Catch/Catch - Throw beanbag from right to left and left to right simultaneously. Juggle two beanbags with one hand. Holding one hand behind the back, hold two beanbags in one hand. Rotate them from hand to air by moving them in a circular pattern. Switch hands.

If beanbags are too challenging, use scarves, which are also included in the kit, as they move more slowly.

### Carol Kranowitz’s “The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun”

This pre-school music teacher turned author has put sensory integration on the map! Her fantastic book has great games including the following:

**Beanbag Jai Ali:** Make a basket by cutting out a section of a clean plastic water jug. Toss a beanbag back and forth with a child, first standing a foot away, and gradually increasing the distance. Use the dominant hand, and then switch to the non-dominant hand.

**Beanbag Mania:** Two people sit facing each other on the floor. Divide six matching pairs of beanbags so that both partners have one of each. Place three beanbags on to the left and right of each person, arranging them so that they mirror each other. Ask the child to “mirror” your motion. For instance if you pick up a green beanbag with your right hand and place it to your left, the child will pick up a green beanbag with his left hand and place it to his right. Start slowly at first, increasing speed as the child gets the hang of the game. Use beanbags of different shades and textures. This activity is great for crossing the midline and bilateral coordination. It also enhances observation skills, anticipating, and non-verbal communication.

Several great companies that support DDR carry beanbag kits, games, and CDs with “old-fashioned” kid-friendly music and imaginative ideas. Go to <[www.theraproducts.com](http://www.theraproducts.com)>, <[www.pocketfuloftherapy.com](http://www.pocketfuloftherapy.com)> and <[www.southpaw.com](http://www.southpaw.com)> for beanbags and related products. Be sure and let them know you heard about them from DDR. Have fun!