

**Sensory Processing Difficulties**

**in Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

**What Are Sensory Processing Difficulties?**

We use our sensory systems to understand the world around us. We process information through our senses and decide how to respond to the things we are experiencing.

**Our sensory systems are:**

* **Sight** (visual)
* **Taste** (gustatory)
* **Smell** (olfactory)
* **Hearing** (auditory)
* **Touch** (tactile)
* **Body awareness** (also known as proprioception) – the sense of where our body is in space using our muscles.
* **Balance/ movement** (also known as vestibular system) - the sense of how our bodies move against gravity)

The last 3 sensory systems (touch, proprioception and vestibular) help us to feel in tune with our world and to feel grounded as a person.

Learning how to process sensory input can be challenging for all of us at times, but it can be even more challenging for a young person with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

To process sensory input we have to filter out information that can be ignored from that which we need to attend to (e.g. hearing our name being called in a room where there are other noises that could distract you). Some young people have difficulty with this filtering process.

**Helpful Resources**

Sheffield Children’s Hospital:

<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/services/child-development-and-neurodisability/sensory-processing-difficulties/>

Derbyshire County Council:

<https://localoffer.derbyshire.gov.uk/#!/model/page/information/33146>

**Information for Parents and Carers**

**Examples of Sensory Sensitivities**

● Fascination with watching movements of things (e.g. opening and closing doors, wheels of a car);

● Finding lights or the sun too bright;

● Having difficulty hearing or listening;

● Disliking loud sounds (e.g. the vacuum or blender);

● Putting non-edible items in the mouth or licking things to get a better sense of what they are;

● Finding flavours too strong / being a picky eater / resisting new foods;

● Having a high tolerance for pain;

● Touching others too gently or too hard;

● Dislike being tickled or cuddled;

● Dislike having haircut, washed or brushed;

● Complaining about tags on clothing;

● Putting socks on “just so” or never going barefoot;

● Needing to rock, swing or spin;

● Difficulty controlling body movements;

● Bumping into people;

● Difficulty with fine motor skills such as handwriting or fastening buttons;

● Walking on tiptoes.





**The Sensory System**

Any of our senses may be over- or under-sensitive, or both, at different times.

**Sensory Overload**

Struggling to deal with everyday sensory information can lead to information overload. Too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and possibly physical pain. This can result in withdrawal, [challenging behaviour](http://tweb-delivery.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/challenging-behaviour.aspx) or a [meltdown](http://tweb-delivery.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns.aspx).

**Activities That Can Support Sensory Processing**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Sense** | **Under-sensitive**  *An under-sensitive sensory system needs more input to wake it up and help the young person to attend to the sensory input.* | **Over-sensitive**  *An* *over-sensitive system needs help to slow down and filter incoming information. This may first involve high-paced activities to relieve some energy and then gradually introducing calming activities.* |
| Sight | * Increase visual stimulation   *(e.g. use bright lights, lots of colour and movement, different coloured paper; try coloured lenses).* | * Decrease visual stimulation   *(e.g. reduce florescent lights, provide sunglasses, use blackout curtains, reduce visual distractions by putting things in away).* |
| Taste | * Provide strong-tasting food. | * Provide bland foods. |
| Smell | * Use strong-smelling products; provide scented items *(e.g. candles, lotions, pens).* * Engage in activities that have strong smell component *(e.g. smelly playdough, playing in freshly cut grass, cooking with strong smells).* | * Make the environment as fragrance-free as possible   *(e.g. use unscented detergents or shampoos, avoid wearing perfume).* |
| Hearing | * Provide background noise.   *(e.g. music, white noise, fan)*   * Offer activities involving sounds they enjoy.   *(e.g. music, white noise, fan)*   * Use visual supports to back up verbal information. | * Reduce external noise   *(e.g. shut doors and windows).*   * Provide low level background noise to block out louder noise   *(e.g. music, white noise, fan).*   * Prepare your child before going to noisy/crowded places   *(e.g. provide ear plugs and music to listen to, have a quiet area with beanbags, cushions, duvets etc.).* |
| Touch | * Provide access to different materials to activate the touch system *(e.g. squishy, soft, textured, soft).* * Offer massages. * Offer messy play *(e.g. with jelly, cornflour, water)*. * Provide supervised opportunities to carry objects/ heavy backpacks or lie under heavy cushions or blankets. | * Warn your child if you are about to touch them. Remember, a hug may be painful rather than comforting. * Remove labels from clothes. * Gradually introduce different textures. * Allow your child to complete activities themselves so they can do what is comfortable *(e.g. brushing hair).* |
| Body awareness | * Position furniture around the edge of a room to make navigation easier. * Provide deep pressure by squeezing them in a “burrito” using a blanket. * Offer shoulder squeezes or massages. * Build body awareness with activities that require locating body parts *(e.g. Simon says).* | * Help improve 'fine motor' skills by offering activities like playing with playdough, lacing, beading and painting. |
| Balance/ movement | * Engage your child in up and down movements *(e.g. jumping rope or seesaw),* back and forth movements *(e.g. swinging)* and/or spinning movements *(e.g. roundabouts).* | * Break down activities into small, manageable steps. * Use visual cues such as a finish line or point that indicates where to stop. |

