

How does my Child Process Sensory Information?

Understanding How Children with Autism or an Intellectual Disability Experience Sensory Input

WHAT IS SENSORY PROCESSING?

We all experience the world through our senses - sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, body awareness, movement and sensing our internal body state (e.g., feeling hungry, sick, tired).

Sensory information (called 'sensory input') is what we see, sounds we hear, things we touch, how our body feels etc. Sensory processing is how our brains use this information to understand and interact with the world around us.



Everyone's brain processes sensory input differently. For example, some children don't like the feel of certain fabrics, some don't like being hugged, others seek out physical contact. Some children have strong food preferences, enjoy fast movement, or don't like loud noises.

SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFICULTIES

Children can become overwhelmed with too much sensory input (e.g., bright lights, cooking smells and noise at the playground) or not respond to sensory input in their bodies – this means they have sensory processing difficulties. Children with autism and intellectual disability are more likely to have sensory processing difficulties.

Children with sensory processing difficulties often have one or more of the following characteristics:

Hyper-responsive – these children are more sensitive to sensory input than most children. They are often overwhelmed by sensory experiences, which can make them feel distressed and agitated.

Sensory Avoiding – these children actively avoid specific experiences because they create unpleasant sensations for them.

Hypo-responsivity – these children are less sensitive to sensory input than most children and can be unaware of or slow to respond to sensory input.

Sensory Seeking – these children seek out experiences where they will have specific sensory input that they enjoy.

WHAT DO SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFICULTIES LOOK LIKE?

Children who are **hyper-responsive** to sensory input may:

- be easily overwhelmed by group activities and noisy or crowded places
- refuse to wear clothes they describe as 'itchy or scratchy'
- be easily distracted in class by noises or movement that others haven't noticed
- dislike getting messy
- spit out or refuse particular foods because of the taste and texture (how the food feels in their mouth).



Children who are **hypo-responsive** to sensory input may:

- seem clumsy, bump into things a lot, and have poor hand-eye coordination.
- want to touch and feel things all the time.
- find it hard to sit still and want to jump around, jump on a trampoline etc.
- enjoy crisp, crunchy foods.

HOW CAN I HELP?

Strategies to help with sensory processing difficulties are different for each child.

Children who are **hyper-responsive** to sensory input may benefit from:

a quiet space to be on their own so that they can leave a stressful situation to re-gain calm and control

less sensory input - dim lighting, decrease noise, reduce the number of people in the space

a predictable environment so the child knows what sensory input to expect

preparation for a situation that might be overwhelming e.g. give them headphones if they will be in a loud space

learning to notice when sensory input is becoming too much for your child, and how they can get away or take a break.

Children who are **hypo-responsive** to sensory input may benefit from:

visual supports to help them focus on a task or activity

practicing **mindfulness** activities, e.g. describing things they can see, hear, feel, and smell to help them be more aware of these sensations in their body

fidgit items (puzzles, squishy balls, bubbles, sensory bottles, bean bag chairs)

high energy physical activities- e.g., climbing equipment, a ball pit, a trampoline, swimming

sensory activities – e.g. playing with play doh, digging in sand

lots of **movement breaks** in their day

eating foods with **strong flavours** and **mixed textures**

deep pressure on their body – bear hugs, weighted blankets, lap pads or firm clothing

learning to notice when sensory input is becoming too low for your child, and how they can increase their level of arousal.

WHEN & WHERE TO GET MORE HELP:

If your child's sensory difficulties are interfering in everyday activities, arranging an assessment to find out their sensory profile and sensory preferences may be helpful.

This assessment might lead to a diagnosis of a Sensory Processing Disorder.

Occupational Therapists are usually involved in the assessment and treatment of sensory processing difficulties. They will give you strategies to help your child to feel calmer and more confident. They can also work with your child's school to support your child in the classroom.

If you have any feedback on this tip sheet please fill in our [feedback form](#). You can find readings, resources and links related to this topic on our [webpage](#).

If you are still concerned, contact your GP or Paediatrician about services that might be helpful.

