



Supporting a Child with
Sensory Processing Differences
A Guide for Parents

If your child has sensory processing differences or you've noticed some of the symptoms and are unsure of what to do, use this guide to find out a bit more and how to support your child at home.

What are sensory processing differences?



Sensory processing differences refer to variations in how individuals perceive and respond to sensory information from their environment and their own body. They might be more or less sensitive to things like sounds, lights, smells, tastes and touch. These differences can also affect how they move and interact with their surroundings.

Sensory processing differences are not 'curable' or 'fixable'. They make up a part of an individual. Sensory sensitivities can be part of other neurodevelopmental conditions, such as Autism Spectrum Condition or ADHD. They can also exist independently.

Signs of Sensory Processing Differences



There are many signs of sensory processing differences. It's important to remember that every child is different and may display some of these behaviours but not be diagnosed as having sensory processing differences, just as a child with sensory processing differences might not display these behaviours. It all depends on the individual.

A child with sensory processing differences might be overstimulated or understimulated by sensory input.

A child with **sensory sensitivity** who is **overstimulated** by sensory input might:

- react strongly to loud or sudden noises, struggle with crowded or noisy environments and be bothered by background sounds;
- be sensitive to bright lights or specific patterns, needing to avoid certain types of lighting;
- dislike certain textures of clothing, food or being touched;
- experience discomfort with messy activities;
- avoid close proximity with others or avoid physical contact such as hugs with others, even familiar adults;
- be overwhelmed by strong smells, disliking certain perfumes or food odours;
- be a picky eater, disliking certain tastes or textures of food.



A child who is **sensory-seeking** who is **understimulated** by sensory input might:

- talk or sing loudly, enjoying loud music or environments;
- have a fascination with bright or moving objects, seeking out visual stimulation;
- enjoy rough play, constantly touching objects or people;
- enjoy being underneath heavy clothing or blankets;
- seek out deep pressure or proprioceptive input (e.g. squeezing into tight spaces or jumping);
- sniff objects or people, enjoying strong scents;
- have a reduced or delayed response to pain or extreme heat or cold;
- eat or chew non-food items (pica), enjoying very spicy or strong-tasting foods.

Other signs include:

- **Clumsiness and poor motor skills:** They might have difficulties with balance, walking on tiptoes, coordination and fine motor tasks (e.g. writing or buttoning clothes).
- **Emotional regulation:** They might have difficulty managing emotions and struggle to express feelings – as a result, they may experience meltdowns or shutdowns in response to sensory overload.
- **Social difficulties:** They might experience difficulty with social interactions due to sensory sensitivities or the need for sensory input, leading to withdrawal or challenging behaviours.
- **Difficulty with attention:** They may be easily distracted by sensory input, struggling to focus on tasks or conversations.

What causes sensory processing differences?

Research into sensory processing differences is ongoing and the cause is not yet fully understood. Studies have shown that it can run in families. Sensory processing differences are also related to Autism and ADHD, although just because your child might have sensory processing differences, it doesn't necessarily mean they are Autistic or have ADHD. Some research suggests that infrequent handling of a baby or decreased interaction with them affects the stimulation required for sensory development.



Diagnosing Sensory Processing Differences



If you have concerns about your child, it is best to speak to your GP. They might ask you for examples of the symptoms you've noticed, where and when you observed these symptoms and how they affect your child.

You could talk to your child's teacher and the SENDCo at their school so that you can discuss what you've observed and ask for their input. The SENDCo might be able to do some more formal observations of your child to help build a bigger picture of how their sensory processing differences are affecting their progress in school. Discuss these with your doctor, who might refer your child to an occupational therapist or a physiotherapist for a more detailed analysis and support.

To diagnose sensory processing differences, your child will be assessed by a physiotherapist or an occupational therapist, who will perform a range of tests as well as observe your child's behaviour, interactions and responses to sensory stimulation. They will ask your child some questions and they'll want to get a detailed developmental history. They'll ask you about your child's behaviours too – so the notes you have kept will come in very handy. They'll especially be interested to know whether:

- the behaviour affects your child's everyday life;
- symptoms come on suddenly or become more pronounced;
- your child's reactions to sensory stimulation have become difficult for you (or them) to manage;
- your child's learning is affected as a result of their differences in sensory processing.



The Next Steps

There is no cure for sensory processing differences, but there are things that can be done to support your child, such as regulation techniques. Once your child has been assessed for sensory processing differences, the results should be shared with you and your child's school. From here, an education plan can be drawn up between school staff, your child and yourself. This will consider how best to support your child to manage and overcome challenges. This support might include extra intervention, different teaching approaches and adaptation of the classroom environment in order for your child to receive the best possible opportunity to make progress and thrive.

Classroom adaptations might include:

- extra time to complete activities
- regular movement breaks
- sensory breaks in a quiet, calm space
- consideration of seating within the classroom so that your child is head on to the teacher, in a distraction-free position
- use of fidget toys to focus attention
- the use of ear defenders
- visual and multi-sensory teaching opportunities
- appropriate work which will give your child the opportunity to be successful and develop self-esteem
- provision of opportunities for art, cooking and messy play
- social skills intervention programmes



Supporting a Child with Sensory Processing Differences

Work With Your Child's School



Communicate regularly with teachers and school staff to create a consistent approach. Forging strong relationships with your child's school will help to keep lines of communication open and enable you to share ideas about what is working for your child. You might need to explain your child's processing difficulties in more detail – every child with a processing difference will have a different experience and teachers will find what works for some children might not work for others.

Play Together



Depending on your child's sensory needs, it can be easy to set up some fun activities to do together which meet their needs:

- Play with modelling dough.
- Create a sensory path for your child to walk on barefoot.
- Make a sensory tray. Add items such as sand, dry pasta, uncooked rice, foam, shredded paper, small pebbles, leaves and acorns – you can also theme them with other small world figures, vehicles or tools.
- Do some finger painting.
- Do some cooking with your child – include recipes that require mixing with the fingers, kneading and shaping.
- Make a big obstacle course together and then challenge each other to complete it – encourage a range of movements including jumping, running, skipping, rolling and lifting.
- Give body massages, applying pressure on different body parts according to needs. Make sure to be careful and only apply deep pressure under advice from your child's occupational therapist.



Follow a Sensory Diet

Created in 1991 by Wilbarger and Wilbarger, a sensory diet is a plan of activities and adaptations for a child that meets their sensory needs. Usually, an occupational therapist will devise a sensory diet; you'll be able to follow this at home and teachers will be able to use this to make adjustments in school. These scheduled activities will form an important part of how your child manages the day to day routines of life and the activities will differ according to your child's individual needs. For example, activities might include fidget toys, having deep pressure applied, listening to music, having chewy snacks, squishing on a beanbag, bouncing on a trampoline or playing with toys that make noise.



Be Clear

Try to be aware of the sounds in the environment. Is the TV on when you're trying to talk to your child? Are you facing your child so they can see you talking? How long is the sentence you are saying? All these things can affect how your child processes what you are saying. Use simple, direct words and break down instructions to make them easier to follow. Instead of "Get up, go and get a cup and fill it with water," which has three separate instructions, break it down by giving your child one instruction at a time, offering the next when they're ready.

Use One Voice

Try to use one voice when giving instructions; multiple people talking at the same time can be confusing and overwhelming.

Allow for Processing Time

Some children may need more time to process something, for example an instruction. You might ask your child to do something and it might seem like they are ignoring you, but actually they are processing what you have said.



Use Visual Supports

Visual timetables, now and next boards and symbols can help support your child's communication and understanding, allowing them to express their thoughts and feelings.



Celebrate Every Success

Try to celebrate those small things that other parents might take for granted to build confidence.

Respect Your Child

There might be things that dysregulate or upset your child and they might seem insignificant to you. You might even think of them as 'silly'. They're not. They are extremely important to your child and they can't just 'get over' them. Children with sensory processing differences require respect for their needs and wishes and an understanding that their brain works in a different way. You're not there to judge their actions and reactions to things; you're there to support them.

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These resources are those which we have generally found to be of benefit to learners with SEND. However, every learner's needs are different and so these resources may not be suitable for your learner. It is for you to consider whether it is appropriate to use these resources with your learner.

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