

3. Sensory Strategies: Video Script

Welcome to the Warrington Occupational Therapy service training on sensory processing. In this final video you will learn about sensory strategies or sensory activities which you can put in place to help your child or young person at home, in school and in the community. You will also learn how to make a sensory diet or daily sensory plan.

You can also watch our other videos to learn about sensory processing and our eight senses. We recommend that you watch the videos in the order that they are numbered to help with your understanding.

This video will tell you about changes you can make to the environment or the activity to help your child or young person.

This could make it easier for them to join in with activities they want or need to do. We will also talk about activities which may calm or alert your child so that they can be ready to learn or pay attention to tasks.

There are lots of different strategies which might be useful. We will talk about a few which might be useful for each of the senses and then talk about how you can set a targeted goal for you and your child.

Vision:

We'll start with the visual sense and strategies you can use to help your child: If your child doesn't like bright lights, try letting them wear sunglasses or a hat to help them filter or block out light. Dimmer switches on lighting can also be helpful to help calm and relax.

If your child is distracted by lots going on around them, think about what changes you can make to the environment. Having an area at home or at school with no clutter or distractions can be useful for doing homework or playing.

If your child seeks lots of visual input and watches items spinning, their reflection, or bright lights, allow periods of play which provide increased visual stimulation for example using fibre-optic lights and mirrors. Ensure that the play is time limited so that your child does not become over-stimulated.

Hearing:

If your child is easily upset by sounds such as the Hoover or hand-dryers, it can be helpful to tell them before the noise happens. This will give them time to prepare themselves, move away, or cover their ears.

If your child becomes upset by an unexpected noise, provide them with reassurance. Let them know you understand they are finding things difficult. It's always best to have a plan for these situations.

Have a think about what might help before you go out. You could have earphones with music playing which they like, you could have ear-defenders ready for them to use or show them how to put their hands over their ears. Small earbuds such as Flare audio calmers can also be helpful for teenagers or older children who can tolerate the feeling of earbuds. These earbuds reduce sound however still allow you to hear what is happening around you.

If your child struggles to go to places which are busy, see can you go during quieter times, such as during quiet supermarket times, or specific quiet cinema sessions. It may also help to plan shorter outings as a practice run. This way, if you need to leave, you can, without the stress of trying to shop at the same time.

If your child is humming or singing with their hands over their ears, this may be their method of blocking out unwanted sounds in the environment and they may be using this strategy to self-soothe/self-regulate. It may help to see can you identify what noise is causing this response.

If your child has a high threshold for noise and does not respond to their name being called or appears to 'tune out', you may need to have your child's hearing checked first before considering if it is a sensory issue. If their hearing is fine, try to touch them on the shoulder gently before talking to them. Try to work on a 1:1 basis with them or in small group. Using visual pictures may also support their understanding of instructions.

At the bottom of the slide, you can see a picture of a small pop-up tent. This, or a similar enclosed safe space can be helpful for children with sensory difficulties. When your child is overwhelmed, they can retreat to their sensory safe space to help reduce sensory information. In the tent, the lighting is reduced, the sound is reduced, and you can also have access to soft furnishings and sensory toys to help relax and re-set the child's system.



Some schools now have these in the classroom, with a system in place for the child to access this space, such as showing a card to indicate to the teacher that they need time to unwind.

Touch:

Children who are very sensitive to touch sensations can become very upset by things such as clothing textures, getting their haircut, or brushed, having their teeth brushed or nails cut. What can you do to help?

First think about the activity: can you change the activity in some way to support your child? Can you cut out the labels in their clothes, try putting their socks on inside out to avoid the feeling of the seams, or buy soft clothing or clothing with no seams? Then think about the environment: is there a lot of sensory information in the environment? Can you complete the task in a quieter room, away from siblings? Can your child sit down somewhere with their feet flat on the floor to feel more secure and safe?

Then think about the type of touch you are using. Light tickly touch to the skin can trigger our fight or flight response. We want to stop this response from happening.

To do this, we will need to use deep pressure touch to the skin. Instead of using your fingers, use the palms of your hands. Try giving your child's skin a massage with rough strokes of the palms of your hands to desensitise their skin before putting socks on or squeeze each finger tightly before cutting their nails. Rub their head roughly with a towel or the palms of your hands before hair-brushing, and brush the hair using quick almost rough strokes with the brush. Before brushing teeth, can you rub the child's cheeks and lips with a face cloth, and use your finger to rub along the gum lines?



Allowing the child to have control over the activity can also help. Can you show them how to rub their own face and gums before brushing their teeth?

Having a definite beginning and end to the activity can also be helpful. Tell your child or young person that you will be finished by the time you count to 10 or by the time

you finish singing a song. You could also use a visual timer so the child can see when the activity will end.

Some children will want to touch and fidget with objects all the time. Take note of this and try to identify if your child NEEDS to fidget in order for them to pay attention or to feel less anxious. In this case, provide them with a fidget tool. It may take a while to see which fidget tool works best for your child. Some fidgets may be noisy and cause distractions for other children in class.

Some may be very visually stimulating and also cause distraction. Be creative and think of other ways for your child to fidget. Could they have a discreet ball of blue tac in their hands, or a bracelet on their wrist?

Taste / Smell:

It can often be difficult to control smells or odours in the environment. But some suggestions to help are; allowing the child to have a favourite smell on an item of clothing, tissue, handkerchief or a soft toy which they can carry with them and use to block out the offensive smell. Try to use odour free products for washing clothes, household cleaning and school cleaning. And if your child is sensitive to food smells, show them the food or meal being cooked, or encourage your child to help prepare the food or stir the pot to help get them used to the smell.



For taste, if your child dislikes foods with strong flavours and prefers bland foods, try to understand that this is their preference. Never force them to eat something they do not want to. Gradually introduce your child to new foods with different flavours and make it fun and relaxed if possible. Games using food may help, for example, building towers with crackers, or making pictures using different coloured foods! Any interaction with new foods is positive. Think of the texture of the food, your child may



prefer to touch dry foods first, and work up to wet foods.

If your child over-fills their mouth when eating, they may not be sensing food in their mouth until it is full. Make sure you supervise meals for safety and limit the amount of food on their plate/cutlery. It may also help to play games which provide sensory awareness to the mouth such as blowing bubbles, sucking through a straw, or chewing food such as dried fruit or cereal bars.

Proprioception:

As we said in the previous video, the proprioceptive sense is very important because it helps us change how alert we feel.

This sense is closely linked to our emotions and can help us to feel calm. The more we use our muscles and joints, the more proprioceptive input our body receives.

These muscle-use activities can be used with your child throughout the day to help them feel calm and focussed. Proprioceptive activities can include:

- Carrying shopping bags
- Playing games which involve crawling or jumping
- Digging with a spade or carrying watering cans in the garden
- Doing warm-up exercises such as pushing against a wall
- Or playing with weighted items such as stacking or packing food packages

Some children hold their pencil too tightly or lean too hard on the pencil. This may mean that they can't feel how much force they are using.

To help with this, try playing with play dough or Theraputty before doing writing activities. This will give lots of feedback to the hands, so that your child will feel how much force they're using.

Wearing a backpack with some weighted items in it can give extra feedback to the muscles and joints. This can feel grounding and calming for some children. Weighted back-packs can be used for short periods during the day such as going for a short walk, walking to school, or having a movement break.



Sitting with a heavier toy or a weighted lap pad on their lap can also be useful. This will provide your child with some proprioceptive sensory feedback so that they don't have to seek it themselves. Make sure



these weighted items are not over 10% of your child's body weight, and that your child or young person can easily remove them if they need to.

Some children may chew on things throughout the day, like the end of a pencil, their water bottle, or clothes.

This might mean that they are looking for more feedback from the proprioceptors in their mouths. It is important we don't tell them to stop this chewing unless we give them a suitable replacement. If your child is chewing a lot on items, try to engage them in more movement games throughout the day; movement activities which they need to use their muscles and joints for!

This may reduce their chewing. Otherwise, you can offer them alternative oral-motor activities such as drinking out of a water bottle or drinking a thick liquid like a milkshake through a straw. Eating crunchy or chewy foods can also help. Some people use a chew toy which you can buy online.

This is made for people who need to chew a lot and can be useful to ensure that what they are chewing is safe. There are lots of different types of non-toxic chewy items and you can wear some as necklaces or bracelets. These are called 'Chewlery'.

Vestibular:

Some people process vestibular (or movement and balance) information differently. If your child has a high threshold for movement, they will need lots of opportunities to move during the day to help them feel 'just right'.

You can get movement from walking, running, or jumping. You can also bounce on a trampoline or space hopper.

Going to the park is a great way of getting lots of different vestibular input or movement. Swings, slides and climbing frames all provide vestibular input.

In general, movement in one direction such as going on a swing or a hammock is calming. Whereas movement that is fast and in lots of different directions, is alerting, like going on a rollercoaster!

You may need to think about whether you want your child to calm down, or become more alert, before you choose a movement activity to do with them.

Some children sit on an air-filled cushion or “wobble cushion” in class or to do homework. This gives the child some movement while they are sitting and can help with concentration.

You can buy these online but some of schools have them to try. We would recommend that your child only uses a wobble cushion for a short period, for example when doing a small piece of schoolwork or eating dinner. Otherwise, your child will get used to the movement sensation and the cushion will have no effect!

Interoception:

If you remember, the interoceptive sense is the sense that allows us to notice internal body signals like a rumbling stomach, racing heart, or full bladder. When we notice these body signals our brain uses them as clues to our emotions.

It can be difficult to notice what is happening inside our bodies. The key is to take time during daily activities to pay attention to our body signals. It can be easier to notice a body signal when you’re doing an activity that causes a strong sensation in the body. For example, it can be easier to notice how your heart feels during active play/exercise or how your mouth feels when sipping a cold drink.

To help your child become more aware of their body signals, we recommend using **‘Interoception Talk’**: Label the way your body parts feel during daily activities (e.g. “My hand feels warm when you hold it; My cheek feels wet when you kiss it; My breathing feels fast when I run with you.”).

Encourage your child’s **‘Interoception Attention’**: Encourage your child to notice how various body parts feel during daily activities (e.g. “How do your hands feel when you are holding a glass of ice water?; How do your eyes feel at bedtime?; Look at the goosebumps on your skin; Put your hand on your chest and feel your heart beating fast.”).

You can take time with your child to **notice** the body signal (for example your tummy is rumbling or you feel low in energy), talk about what that might mean to help them **make sense** of it (for example this might mean you feel hungry) and then talk about **what they can do** (for example you can go and eat something).

These activities take practice and will be unlikely to work first time. Practice for short periods of time (for example, a few minutes). Try and do this at the same time every day such as first thing in the morning or before bedtime. This can make it easier to fit into a busy routine, so you are more likely to keep doing it.

Sensory Diet / Sensory Plan:

We will now talk about sensory diets and how you might create one for your child. To begin, what is a sensory diet? A sensory diet is a daily plan of activities and adjustments designed to meet your child's needs.

Often, we use the word "diet" to describe what we eat in the day; however, a sensory diet refers to what sensory activities we consume with all of our senses throughout the day, including our sight, taste, hearing, touch, movement etc.

Engaging a child in sensory activities on a regular basis can help to keep them engaged, focussed and in more control. When the child appears disorganised these activities can help them to 'find themselves again'. It is suggested that sensory activities should be done every 90 minutes, however some children may require sensory breaks more frequently depending on their needs and presentation.

A sensory plan can help your child:

- Play and learn in their environment with greater success and ease.
- Tolerate sensations and situations that are challenging.
- Regulate their emotions, level of alertness and support their attention span, and
- Reduce unwanted sensory seeking and sensory avoiding behaviours.

A sensory diet or plan helps to ensure that your child's daily routine provides opportunities for them to get the sensory input that they need. By having regular sensory snacks or activities throughout the day, this can prevent your child from becoming overloaded.

Some key principles of a sensory diet include:

1. Engage your child in **calming activities** when they appear over-stimulated or when your child appears overly excited or 'wound up', when they have difficulty focussing, appear irritable, upset, stressed or anxious in their environment. Examples of calming activities include: dimming the lights, engaging in activities which require muscle use such as crawling activities, having a drink through a straw, or using deep pressure tactile input such as a back massage/squeeze using a large therapy ball. These activities provide calming visual, oral, proprioceptive, and tactile inputs.



2. Engage your child in **alerting activities** when they appear under-stimulated or when your child appears tuned out, can't focus on tasks or appears tired. Examples of alerting activities include: playing games which involve fast movements such as jumping on a trampoline or space hopper, dancing with loud fast music playing, playing with a large ball, or playing with cold water.



3. **Observe** your child and see are they already trying to self-regulate? What strategies do they use?

- Are they jumping and moving all the time? Maybe they need more movement in their day to help them focus?
- Are they hiding under tables? Maybe they need time out or reduced sensory input in the environment?
- Are they chewing on everything? Maybe they are trying to calm down? Do they need more heavy-work in their day to help calm down?

Observing your child can help you see what your child may need to regulate themselves during the day.

Children with sensory needs often find it difficult to know when it is time to stop seeking certain sensory information, therefore, supporting adults will need to guide them. If you observe your child watching a spinning toy and they begin to become upset or over-excited, stop the spinning toy and encourage your child to engage in a more calming activity, such as jumping on spots on the ground.

This will provide them with heavy work (or proprioceptive input) which may help them to calm down, before returning to the spinning if they wish.

4. Identify **when and where your child is experiencing difficulties**.

By keeping a diary, you may identify patterns of behaviour, times of the day or activities which are difficult for your child or cause your child to become upset.

For example, you may notice that when you go to the supermarket straight after school, your child often becomes very upset and wants to leave straight away.

You may begin to realise that your child's level of alertness and stress is too high after school, and therefore the supermarket feels overwhelming for them.

Your strategy to target this may be to have a break in between school and the supermarket, to provide your child with a crunchy snack in the car, or to walk to the shop instead of driving so that they have a movement break to help calm down.

In this next slide, you will take some time to stop and think about your child or young person. Think about a goal which you would like them to achieve. What do you want your child to learn or tolerate better?

Then think about what is preventing them from doing the task? Are they too alert and need to calm down? Do they present with sensitivities in one or more of their sensory systems?

And finally, what strategies could you use to help your child before or during the task? Try to think of how you could change the environment, the activity or support the child or young person to do the task differently.

On the next few slides, we will talk through some examples which parents have volunteered to discuss during previous sensory training courses run by the Occupational Therapy service.

In this first example, the parent would like for their child to be able to wear socks without becoming upset. They feel that the child appears sensitive to the feeling of the socks and the seams on the socks.

The strategies which they thought of to target this difficulty were: to use deep pressure massage on the child's legs first to desensitise any light touch sensations, to buy socks that are larger so that they are loose, to turn the socks inside out, and to make sure the environment is quiet when their child is getting dressed.

You can see in this example how the parent thought of how to make changes to the child's experience, the activity and the environment.

On the next 2 slides, you will see more examples of goals set by parents. Press pause on your video to stop and read these in your own time. Then take some time to write a goal of your own and think of strategies which may help your child or young person achieve this goal.



Remember: you know your child or young person best! You know what they like and dislike, what environments they work best in, and their personality. Work together with your child to make changes to their everyday lives and see do sensory breaks, activities or sensory tools help them to feel better and perform their daily activities better.

Every child is different, therefore different strategies will work for different children. You will need to try out sensory strategies consistently over a few months to see if they have an effect; changes will not happen overnight.

Feeling overwhelmed and stressed makes it difficult to learn or take part in activities. Are you trying to get your child to do something when they are not in the right level of alertness yet? Make changes to your child or young person's day to help them feel calmer and less overwhelmed.

Change your daily routine, add in sensory breaks, give your child time to relax when they come home from school and see can they perform better throughout the day.

Stop, listen and observe. Work together with your child to try and find the right strategies for them. Listening to their needs or watching their behaviour can tell you a lot about what they need.

Further Information:

These three videos contain a lot of information. Please re-watch the videos if you feel you need to. There is also more information on our website about sensory needs and how to support your child or young person. Please refer to the Sensory Information Pack, sensory advice sheets and the useful reading list for more information on sensory processing and how to support your child or young person.