

Paediatric Occupational Therapy and
Physiotherapy service

Sensory Processing

A Handbook for Parents and Carers



Introduction

As therapists we are interested in the way in which our ability to make sense of our bodies and the environment has an impact in what we do in areas such as play, life skills, relationships, self-care and learning.

We are often asked to explore sensory processing difficulties that limit an individual's ability to interact with others, their environment and to perform meaningful activities.

We give advice and raise awareness of how sensory issues can help individuals to perform and engage in activities.

The aim of this booklet is to provide information to parents/carers who have concerns regarding a child's ability to process sensory information. This booklet shares advice and provides strategies that can be implemented before a referral is required.

Understanding Sensory Issues

Our life is full of sensory experiences and we all respond to these in different ways. We touch, move, taste, hear, smell and see.

We may be AWARE or SUBCONCIOUSLY AWARE of where we are and how we interact with the environment.

- sometimes we seek sensory information to make us feel better (e.g. a cuddle)

or

- sometimes we retreat from certain types of sensory input if it makes us feel overwhelmed (e.g. very loud noise or bright lights).

Most people are able to interpret sensory information with ease and therefore the sensory experience and activity are completed successfully.

There may be people who have different reactions to sensory information but this does not interfere with their level of functioning in daily life. For example, your child may not like a particular smell, taste or texture on their skin but this does not interfere with their participation in daily activities.

In this case - YOUR CHILD DOES NOT NEED A REFERRAL TO OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST.

However there are some individuals who have difficulty interpreting sensory information and this can impact on how they feel, think, behave and respond.

This can interfere with how they perform in play activities, at school, in life activities, with self care tasks, learning and relationships.



When Processing Sensory Information becomes Challenging

To help identify possible difficulties in processing sensory information, it is helpful to carry out the following:

- Observe the behaviour.
- Look at the effects of the 7 senses:
Hearing, sight, taste, smell, touch, movement, proprioception (the information we receive from muscles and joints about the position of the body)
- Look at the possible build up of different sensory information over a period of time (e.g school day).
- Identify the individual's sensory preferences or sensitivities.
- Introduce sensory strategies to help calm the situation (refer to pg 9)
- Modify your approach or try a different strategy.

Identifying Sensory Processing Difficulties

There may be a pattern of how a person reacts to sensory information. The table overleaf describes different reactions to sensory information which may help to identify a pattern.

By identifying a pattern this will help you plan for inappropriate reactions and provide suitable strategies.

Table 1 - Reactions to Sensory Information

	HIGHLY SENSITIVE	LOW SENSITIVITY
HEARING	Noise levels feel magnified. Dislikes loud noise Is easily startled Like to “chew” to damp down noises Is anxious before expected noise (school bell) Talks loudly	Enjoys loud noise Fails to pick up expected cues (appears not to hear)
VISION	Dislikes bright lighting Prefers darker environment Is distracted by visual information	Takes more visual information to react Likes bright environment, reflective or spinning light
TASTE/ SMELL	Dislikes strong tastes Likes only bland tastes Tastes or smells objects, clothes, people etc Likes consistent temperature of food really hot or cold food Over reacts to new smells Gags easily	Eats non-food items Has lots of hard crunchy food in diet Craves strong tastes Under reacts to bad, strong or good smell
TOUCH	Avoids touch Loves or hates hugs Mouths objects Only likes certain textures of clothes Dislikes messy play Can react aggressively to an others touch Feels pain easily and is sensitive to temperature	Takes firm touch to respond to stimulus Is sometimes heavy handed Over-grips objects Is sometimes too close to others Does not seem to respond to pain or temperatures
MOVEMENT	Hates spinning, jumping Becomes dizzy easily Hates busy place full of movement (shops, playground) Avoids feet off the ground activities (swings)	Is always on the go Has difficulty sitting still Is constantly fidgeting and tapping Runs rather than walks Is fast but not well co-ordinated
BODY AWARENESS	Doesn't like others being too close Creates own boundaries (e.g needs to stand at the end of the school line) Removes self from crowds (e.g busy shops)	Bumps into or trips over things or people Stands too close to others Puts self in small spaces or corners of room Looks at feet when going down stairs

PRACTICAL APPROACH

When managing sensory processing difficulties it is important that all individuals involved with your child use the same methods or strategies and use a 24 hour approach.

Visual Support

When someone has difficulty communicating and listening to others or cannot focus to listen, a visual timetable or a written list may be helpful.

Environment

Consider the child's environment and what could be done to reduce possible triggers of stress and to help promote positive experiences. Consider if the room is too bright or too noisy or is there too much clutter in the room?

Routines

Making a list or organising a routine always helps us to feel calmer. After school and bed time routines are particularly useful and help to calm. Organisation can give a child a sense of control over how their day goes.

Table 2 - Calming and Alerting Strategies

Calming Strategies	Alerting Strategies
<p>When a child is over stimulated and feels anxious these activities and strategies may help them to feel calmer.</p> <p>Sitting under a heavy blanket. Hands on head and gently pressing down. Tucking legs up (knees towards chest) and squeezing. Deep pressure massage. Slow rocking (rocking chair). Give big hugs. Lavender scents (to be used with caution and not to be used if child has allergies). Squeezing and relaxing a small fidget toy. Snuggling into a small space. Sucking on a sweet. Sucking a thick yogurt or thick milkshake through a straw.</p> <p>Longer lasting ideas Walking home from school with a heavy backpack on. Press ups or chair press ups at regular intervals through out the day. Chill out time prior to homework. Help around the house with moving furniture and doing heavy work activities e.g pushing sofa, moving pot plants and hovering. Put a heavy coat or heavy blanket over the shoulders as part of chill out time. Make a sensory corner with favourite sensory toys/activities. Squeeze and rock against a gym ball.</p>	<p>When a child is not alert enough to pay attention to a task these activities and strategies may be helpful.</p> <p>Introduce up and down movements for a short period of time only. Jumping Jacks. Clapping activities and games. Making faces - open mouth and eyes wide or screwing up face. Stamping on the spot. Sucking a sour sweet. Eating crunchy food. Drinking cold drinks with ice in.</p> <p>Longer lasting ideas Include in daily routine regular bursts of activity including jumping or chair push ups. Alerting activities can also be carried out before the child has to pay attention and engage in a task.</p> <div data-bbox="1061 1473 1225 1854" data-label="Image"> </div>

In Conclusion

We hope that we have given you a greater understanding of the impact that sensory processing difficulties can have on daily life. Advice and strategies that have been suggested can be implemented at home, school, nurseries and will help to manage some of the sensory challenges faced by some children. For lots of children this is just the approach they need.

What Next?

If however sensory processing difficulties continue and affect your child's participation in daily living skills, then a referral to the children's Occupational Therapy Service can be made through a health professional, school or nursery.

If the referral is accepted, an assessment of your child's sensory processing ability will be completed, and advice will be given to you and to school to use every day.

Useful Resources

www.specialneedstoys.co.uk

www.sensoryplus.co.uk

www.sensorytoywarehouse.co.uk

www.backinaction.co.uk (for move 'n' sit cushion)

www.alertprogram.com

www.out-of-sync-child.com

www.sensorysmart.com

References

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