

SENSORY STRATEGIES

PARENT INFORMATION PACK

Information and tips for parents of children with sensory processing difficulties



What is sensory processing?

The term '**sensory processing**' describes how we understand information from the world around us – through our senses – **sight, hearing, touch, taste** and **smell**. There are also two other senses, **proprioception** (body awareness), **vestibular** (balance and movement) and **interoception** (our inner body sense, such as hunger, thirst).

Some children may show a heightened response to some sensations and this can very occasionally be a sign of a sensory processing difficulty.

However, it is important to remember that having a sensitivity in one area, during certain times of the day, does not usually mean that your child has a sensory processing difficulty.

A great many children under the age of five, with no sensory processing issues, will find certain parts of their daily routine difficult. These often include bath time, hair brushing, visiting the supermarket and loud or unpredictable noises.



Daily routines

Many children resist parts of the daily routine as a way of trying to exert greater control over their environment – and their parents!

Try to work out if your child really dislikes certain sensations or activities, or whether they are experimenting with control. Sometimes you may avoid certain situations, places or activities to avoid the reaction they bring out in your child.

However, bear in mind that this means your child will not have the opportunity to experience the things they find challenging and it will be harder for them to learn to become tolerant of them.

Your child may become anxious about certain situations or environments. If this happens, you need to prepare them for the activity to help them cope better with it.

Reassurance is very important and needs to be given in a way that your child can understand. Looking at pictures or photo stories about the activity, holding a familiar comforting toy, or using a picture timetable for the event that is happening can all be helpful.



TIPS TO MANAGE COMMON CHALLENGES

There are many common activities which children may find difficult. The following pages have some tips on things you could do to help your child manage them better.

If the problem persists and these tips do not seem to help, you may want to ask for additional support from a professional.

Hair brushing

- Try giving them a head massage first to desensitise the scalp.
- Use gentle yet firm brush strokes, holding the hair as you brush to reduce pulling, and try sitting your child in front of a mirror so they can see what is happening.
- Try using a song or rhyme as you brush. Finish brushing when the song ends so that your child knows how long the task will take.
- Or you could agree how many brush strokes there will be and count together with your child
- Try using a good detangling conditioner or detangling spray. Some hair brushes such as 'Tangle Teezer' seem to glide more easily through hair. And keep hair shorter if your child really dislikes hair brushing.
- Stickers or reward charts might be helpful.
- Keep it fun. Play 'hairdressers' with your child, where they brush and style your hair too, and encourage your child to brush their toys' hair.



Bath time

- Try to work out which part of the bath time routine is most stressful for your child, as this may help you to work out a way forward.
- A non-slip mat may help your child sit more securely and a step will help them get in and out of the bath more confidently.
- Stay calm and keep it fun. Try using play as a distraction. For example, hide toys in containers or under bubbles, use bath crayons, bath toys and squirty bottles. Singing songs about bath time may help.
- Read stories with your child about bath time so they understand what is going to happen.
- Try getting a sponge or flannel with a character that your child particularly likes, such as Thomas or Peppa Pig.
- Consider the temperature of the water, and use firm pressure when washing and drying your child as this can be more predictable and calming.
- Consider undressing and dressing in the bathroom, if space allows, to limit the transition from room to room and changes in air temperature, which can be distressing for your child.
- Do not bath your child every night if they become very upset about it, and try keeping the time spent in the bath to a minimum.
- Try singing or playing a favourite song for the duration of the bath so that your child knows how long the task will take. A visual timer such as a stop clock or sand timer may be useful.
- You can buy shields that go around the head during hair washing to help reduce soap running over the face.

Hair cuts

- Find a friendly hairdresser who understands your child's difficulties.
- Take a hand held fan with you to blow the trimmed hair away.
- Use distraction techniques like taking a tablet computer with you.
- Make an I-Spy sheet for all the things you'll see in the hairdressers.
- Agree a time limit with the hairdresser and make sure they keep to it.

Nail care

- If your child is anxious, stay calm. It will help your child feel calmer too.
- Try cutting nails while in the bath or under water when they are softer.
- Try holding each toe or finger firmly as you trim the nail.
- If the clipping sound upsets your child, encourage them to wear ear defenders or play their favourite music through headphones or speaker.
- To reduce anxiety, let your child hold the clippers and pretend to trim their own nails. They don't have to cut if they're not able to.
- Before cutting nails, try massaging your child's hands and feet with cream first to desensitise them. Better still, your child could do this for themselves.

Tooth brushing

- Reading your child stories or showing them books that feature tooth brushing or pictures of the sequence of brushing may be helpful.
- Ensure that your child is sat or standing securely while they are brushing their teeth, especially if their balance is compromised.
- Different children prefer different flavours of toothpaste so try a different variety. Mint flavour can be very alarming to a child with oral sensitivities. Flavourless, non foaming toothpastes are available.

- You could try different types of toothbrush. A rubber type of brush such as Nuk may be helpful initially and character toothbrushes may be more motivating for some children.
- 2/3 headed

toothbrushes are available to cover both/all sides of the teeth thereby limiting the amount of time and coordination required to clean the teeth.

- Let your child brush their own teeth for part of the routine.
- Keep it fun and encourage your child to role-play 'brushing' a toy's teeth or your teeth.
- Reward charts may be helpful.
- Have a visual timer or sing a favourite song for the duration of the task, to let your child know how long brushing will take.

Eating and mealtimes

- Bear in mind that many children go through phases where they will and won't eat certain types of foods.
- It will help if your child is sat properly at a table, with their feet supported. You could use a step to support feet or a child's table and chair.
- If your child is very 'wiggly' try having an active play session before mealtimes.
- Try to keep mealtimes calm and fun, even if your child is refusing the food that you have made. Do not force your child to eat something, but try encouraging gently with games, reward charts, etc.
- You could try involving your child in the cooking as they are more likely to try something they have helped to make.
- Allow your child to experiment with different finger foods and textures. If your child does not like to touch food, try using a dip with a finger of toast, bread stick or raw vegetable stick.
- Give your child a baby wipe or flannel to wipe their hands and face if they get upset about being messy.

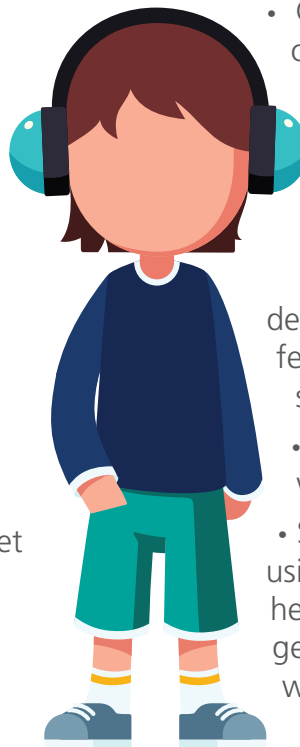


Bedtime

- Have a set bedtime that is reasonable for your child and which you can consistently provide.
- Establish a bedtime routine that provides a comforting, familiar pattern. A visual bedtime schedule can help provide reminders and consistency for the whole family.
- Bedtime routine should consist of 4 to 6 steps that might include looking at the same book each night, saying good night to favourite objects, toileting, bathing, getting pyjamas on, brushing teeth, having a glass of water, singing a favourite song or prayer, listening to calming music that the child enjoys, hugging and kissing family members and/or engaging in a calming sensory integration activity, for example using a fidget toy to squeeze, wrapping themselves in a blanket.
- Try to follow the same bedtime routines when you are away from home and/or get home late. If your child is away from home for a night or two you may see old sleeping patterns emerge. Even in a temporary new environment, routines may help. Upon returning home the bedtime routine will continue to be effective, though the excitement from the change may take a night or more to fade depending on your child and how long you have been away.
- Assess the temperature of the room, bedding and sleep clothes to decide what combination is best for your child.
- Certain textures can relax or arouse your child. Look at bedding and pyjama textures, whether feet are covered/uncovered, how tight or loose clothing fits, elastic or seams and check that bedding provides the optimum level of pressure.

Clothes and getting dressed

- Children often have preferences about the types of clothes that they like to wear and may have a favourite item, outfit, or colour.
- Try giving a choice of two outfits. This lets your child feel more in control but lets you keep clothing suitable for the weather and activities of the day.



- Consider the texture and feel of your child's clothes. Some children can be sensitive to certain types of material or labels. If your child does not like seams on clothes, underwear can be worn inside out. Use unscented detergent and conditioner if you feel your child might be sensitive to these.
- Encourage your child to sit while dressing.
- Stories about dressing, or using photos and pictures, can help your child learn about getting dressed (how and in what order).

Dealing with noise

- Offer noise reducing headphones, earphones or earplugs (when required only). For school, use for assemblies, gym, dinner hall and in the community use at shopping centres, cinemas, restaurants, birthday parties, etc.
- Make sure that you are talking to your child at their level, whilst they are looking at you. Use simple, age-appropriate language.
- Use play or songs to catch your child's attention, so they want to listen.
- Avoid calling to your child across a busy room if possible and approach them from the front, rather than behind.

- In the classroom, advice that your child is placed away from sources of noise and commotion such as the door, sink, bathroom, etc.
- Play a relaxation CD or a CD of nature sounds, “white” noise or soothing music.
- Prepare your child for noisy situations ahead of time.
- Knowing when something is going to happen (e.g. Hoover, hair dryer, fire drill) can help your child to mentally get ready for it.

Learning to sit still

- Young children often find it harder to stick with more structured activities, so keep activities short at first and change activity frequently to help keep them engaged.
- It will help to let your child use some of their ‘energy’ during active games such as trampolining, a trip to the playground or using a scooter, before expecting them to sit and play in a more structured way.
- Link activities to your child’s interests. For example, colour pictures of a favourite television character and have puzzles that link to their interests.
- Try sitting next to your child, playing with a similar toy or drawing alongside them.
- Reduce any distracting clutter on the table top or where they are playing.
- Make sure your child is not too tired or hungry to play.

Listening skills

- Help wake up the auditory system by playing fun singing a long music in the mornings.
- Make sure that you are talking to your child at their level, whilst they are looking at you.



- Give one instruction at a time in simple language so they can understand.
- Pair instructions with gestures or visual demonstrations whenever possible.
- Allow extra time for the child to process the information and respond.
- Position child away from sources of noise such as the doorway, air conditioner, sink, bathroom, etc.
- Use simple, age-appropriate language.
- Use play or songs to catch your child’s attention, so they want to listen.
- Avoid calling to your child across a busy room if possible and approach them from the front, rather than behind.
- Visual cue-cards of photos or pictures that are relevant to their daily routine may help.

Getting ready for a day out

- Allow plenty of time to get ready.
- If your child appears sluggish/lethargic try bouncing or rolling over on a therapy ball.
- If your child appears over excitable try engaging them in some heavy muscle work such as carrying heavy bags to the car, chores that involve going up/down stairs to collect items, etc. Weighted items may help, lap pad, wrap in blanket, gently squash under a large therapy ball.
- Offer chewy/crunchy cereal and a drink with straw or in a sports bottle.
- Give your child a countdown before leaving. Use visual timers and/or cue cards

to help to support what you are saying as an anxious child will find it very difficult to “listen” to any instructions.

- Take ear defenders or headphones to dampen chatter in the car. Maybe play some of their favourite music through them.

- If your child struggles with too much visual input, use window blinds on both sides to limit the amount of peripheral visual input.
- Using a weighted shoulder hug or lap pad may be helpful in the car and during the day.
- Have plenty of chewy/crunchy snacks available for times when there may be lots of waiting.
- Give your child time out of the main activity by sitting in a quieter area or going for a walk outside. Having a hand fidget such as a koosh ball may be useful here too. This may be needed more than once during the day.
- Try giving your child, if appropriate, plenty of bear hugs and/or deep pressure before the journey home again (offer weighted item you may have with you, deep massage).
- cope with and reduces time spent there.
- Ask your child to help find items and try and make this fun like hunting for treasure. Encourage your child to push the trolley/carry a shopping basket with a few items.
- If your child struggles with lighting in supermarkets or shopping centres, wearing a peaked cap will offer deep pressure and limit visual stimuli which may help them relax.
- Wearing headphones or ear defenders can help them cope with noise levels on shopping trips. A distraction toy may also help.
- Encourage your child to help pack and carry bags, load the car, and put items away at home.
- Be patient and reassure your child, give lots of praise throughout the trip and thank them for their help.

Taking an anxious child shopping

- Try and plan additional time when shopping and to involve your child as they are able in the activity.
- Prepare your child beforehand by explaining where they are going shopping. Try and limit the items you need to buy so that the task can be kept manageable for your child to cope with.
- Opt for quieter/calmer times of the day to take your child shopping, Small shops can be easier to



Biting

- Children often bite when they are upset or angry. It is important to try to work out why they have bitten because this is often the way to identify a solution.
- Children who bite might need to have crunchy snacks at certain times of day, or when teeth are coming through. These snacks should be appropriate to their age and dietary needs and could include toast, pretzels, apple, raw vegetable sticks or bread sticks.
- Having a piece of fabric to chew may also be helpful, but check they can't bite through it and that it doesn't fray. Some children use a 'chewy tube' which can be bought over the internet.
- Any child who bites persistently may need a check-up from their dentist to look at their teeth, or a doctor to check their ears are not causing discomfort.
- Behavioural strategies can be helpful when dealing with biting, once the reason for biting has been established.

Movement/active play

Activities that can help promote development of a healthy vestibular (movement) system...

- Slides are beneficial for providing fast movement.
- Hanging upside-down from playground equipment (with supervision only!) Or being held by feet and carefully plonked on the bed or sofa (remember safety first!)
- Rocking! Fast, slow, or to the rhythm of a favourite song.
- Cardboard Box Race Cars – push your child down the hall or around the house in a cardboard racing car whilst the child navigates.
- Try family games of Ring a Roses, Row-Row-Row Your Boat, 5 Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed and Roll Over Roll Over.
- Spinning: Office-style swivel chairs are perfect. Or try a sit and spin toy, log rolling across floors or down hills, somersaults, or cartwheels. Other ways to spin: tire swings, scooter boards, and merry go rounds. Stop before you feel you dizzy or queasy.
- Jumping: On a trampoline, bed (if appropriate), up/down off curbs or other surfaces, jumping jacks, jump rope, hopscotch or bouncing on a space hopper ball.
- Running: Set up an obstacle course with options to go over/under, climb up/down, run backwards from one point to another, etc. Try a game of hide and seek or tag.
- Balance activities: walk on the curb or a balance beam, walk across the bed without falling, stand on a half inflated beach ball, walk while balancing an item on your head, play Twister, or Kids Yoga.
- Swings are great for encouraging all sorts of movement (front to back, side to side, circular). Allow kids go at their own speed. Not at the park? For younger children, try



a blanket or sheet held by two adults for a makeshift swing!

- Visual motor activities that require balance and movement: dribbling a ball, catching a ball, flashlight tag will also help promote good vestibular functioning.

Touch

Sensory defensive is when a particular sensation is noxious or uncomfortable.

Sensory seeking is when a person may be under-sensitive to stimuli to a degree or may, for some reason, crave more of a particular sensation.

Below are some strategies that help get to that “just right” level of sensory processing.

Sensory defensive

- Begin by encouraging play in dry, non-messy media. If the child still won't touch anything, try using sticks to poke, containers to scoop and pour the materials.
- Always approach a child with tactile sensitivities from the front (no surprises) and use a firm touch, never use light touch.
- Try using both hands to locate small toys hidden in a bucket filled with bird seed, sand, beans, pasta, rice, etc. Practice pouring from one container to another.



- Progress to water play and later add soap. Use lots of containers for pouring. Progress to handling Play-doh and other non-gooey media such as Crayola Model Magic, Sculpey

clay, Play Foam or Moon Sand. Gradually explore different messy media: start with finger paint bath bubbles in the bath and progress to real finger paints, smear shaving cream on a mirror or smooth surface, finger paint with pudding, whipped cream and other mushy foods.

- Allow the child to brush his/her own arms and legs with a soft hair brush, surgical brush or corn silk brush, then progress to letting you brush him or her.
- Allow your child to rub lotion onto arms, legs, hands, feet, etc.
- Food play is great for increasing a child's interest in touching different textures. Make, for example, bread together and spend a lot of time kneading the dough and forming it into different shapes. Make jewellery by stringing pasta, pop-corn, etc.
- Provide deep pressure and weighted garments, blanket or weighted lap toys in school.
- Define personal space with carpet squares or tape on the floor in school, and allow the child to sit or stand in the periphery of a group so that others are not behind him/her.
- In the lunch room, arrange for the child to sit close to a wall or pillar to feel safe.

Sensory seeking

Interestingly, most of the same sensory activities that help a child tolerate touching or being touched, also help the child who is a sensory-seeker (has to touch everything). To diminish this behaviour, try the activities in the list above. You can also:

- Play games like "What's in the Bag?" Hide familiar objects that the child has to identify by feel.
- By only using touch, identify objects hidden in a bucket filled with bird seed, sand, beans, pasta, rice, etc.
- Encourage discriminating among various textures and states: feel and describe objects that are soft vs hard, smooth vs rough, wet vs dry vs slimy, cold vs warm, small vs large, round vs cornered vs curvy, degrees of vibration, etc.
- Keep a fidget toy nearby when the child is expected to pay attention, something sticky, squidgy, spiky or elastic works best. (Available at www.amazon.co.uk)
- Provide regular deep pressure tactile inputs throughout the day. Deep pressure touch is very calming and regulating.



Additional resources

The Out of Sync Child. Carol Kranowitz

The Out of Sync Child had Fun. Carol Kranowitz

The Out of Sync Child Grows Up. Carol Kranowitz

Raising a Sensory Smart Child. Lindsey Biel

Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight: what to do if you are sensory defensive in an overstimulating world. Sharon Heller

Sensitive Sam: Sam's sensory adventure has a happy ending. Marla Roth-Fisch

Yes I can! Activities to promote success (3–6yrs). Amy Baad

Early Intervention Games. Barbara Sher

**For further enquiries or support contact
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