

# Supporting Children with Sensory Processing Differences in Early Years Settings

Touch

Taste

Sight

Hearing

Smell

Body Awareness

Movement and Balance

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## How to use this document

This document can be used as a stand-alone resource, providing information and suggestions to develop support strategies and to improve understanding for each of the seven sensory processing areas.

It can also be used alongside the Solihull Early Years Team's '*Sensory Processing Checklist*', which has been developed to support practitioners to identify if a child could be experiencing differences in processing sensory information from one or more sense.

This document does not determine the reasons or causes of the sensory processing difference.

## Where the information came from

### **The following sources have been used to develop this document:**

*Sensory Pre-Referral Graded Approach, Compiled by Alannah McKaskie, Specialist Occupational Therapist, Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust, April 2018*

*Sensory Processing Resource Pack: Early Years, Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust*

## What Are Our Senses?

Most people will be familiar with five external senses i.e., vision, smell, hearing, taste and touch, but often overlook of our internal senses such as vestibular (balance) and proprioception/interoception (body awareness). When looking at sensory processing, we need to think about all the senses, including things such as how somebody may process experiences such as hunger, pain, and the need for the toilet.

## What is Sensory Processing?

Sensory processing refers to how we use the information from all our senses. Our senses are collecting information all the time. Our brain chooses which information we should pay attention to and at what level of urgency.

Everyone processes sensory information differently, so no two people experience the world in the same way. For some people the environment is not set up to support the way they process the world. If we find out about children's sensory processing differences, we work towards changing the environment to support the child's individual needs.

## Over-Responsive (Sensory Avoiding) and Under-Responsive (Sensory Seeking)

Ideally, everyone's individual sensory world needs to be in balance, with their brains and bodies taking the right amount of sensory information from the world to be processed effectively, and to enable them to function as well as they can. If this does not happen, we adjust our behaviour to either seek out more sensory information that we need, or we avoid sensory information that is overwhelming to us. An example of this would be attending a children's birthday party in a large soft play area, and becoming so overwhelmed with the noise that you have decided to step outside.

Some children's sensory processing means they may be sensory seeking in some areas i.e., they need more sensory input and might shout or climb. They may alternatively be sensory avoiding i.e., overwhelmed in some areas, and may exhibit behaviours such as covering their ears when noises overwhelm them. People may experience sensory seeking and sensory avoiding needs at the same time with different senses being affected simultaneously.

Knowing what a child may need to balance their sensory world (also known as their sensory profile) means we can provide an environment where they are more likely to feel safe, calm, and comfortable, and can therefore best access learning. We automatically do this for neurotypical children, for example we identify that they need a play time if they become too fidgety and distracted to learn.

### **What is a sensory diet?**

A sensory diet is a list of sensory activities that a child completes at agreed times across their day to help a child feel regulated. The sensory activities might include movement breaks, sensory trails, or access to a quiet tent.

More recently we are able to observe a shift towards thinking about a sensory lifestyle. This means thinking about how to embed sensory regulation strategies through the individuals' day, this means making lifestyle changes which automatically include supports that they may need and ensures that sensory opportunities are available throughout the day.

# 1 Touch - Avoiding

- For some, light touch can feel like pain remember this at all times and ensure all staff know this.
- Some children prefer firm touch over light touch i.e. hands being firmly held rather than a light touch of the arm.
- Don't use touch to get a child's attention.
- Don't use touch to provide comfort and reassurance use the voice instead.
- Use dry (sand, rice) or wet (water) textures for play, avoid mixing textures i.e. wet sand.
- Allow the child to watch from a distance when their peers are taking part in hand holding games.
- Ensure comfort at nappy changing i.e. warm mat or use soft washable cover or try changing standing up.
- Build up fun interaction on a 1:1 with the child with no touching involved.
- Use objects instead of 'skin to skin' contact e.g., roll a ball over their hand/body and introduce new textures on the back of the hand.
- Allowing the child to go earlier or later during transition points, at busy times of the day.
- Seat the child towards the edge of a table or carpet so they are not bumped in to by others.
- Modify arts and craft or messy play activities to allow alternatives, i.e. using tools such as glue paddles and paint brushes. This may encourage the child to participate.
- Provide wipes or cloths by messy activities so they can wipe hands without leaving the activity.
- Use heavy work (proprioception) activities prior to busy times of the day to help reduce anxieties.
- Avoid approaching the child from behind as they may be startled if touched without warning.

## 2 Touch - Seeking

- Use light touch, soft objects such as feathers in sensory play and sensory trails.
- Hand or foot massage.
- Tactile toys and books.
- Barefoot tactile walking trails.
- Offer foods with mixed textures.
- Use sticky/slimy textures such as foam, wet sand etc. Games such as hiding objects for the child to find.
- Give a cushion to hug or squeeze.
- Use fidget toys and/or stress ball varying or firm textures.
- Encourage participation in messy play, sand/water play and finger painting.
- Use play dough with a range of textures.
- Encourage working with a range of material and textures; sandpaper, tissue paper, wool, cotton wool, pasta, and other dried foods.
- Use a feely box/bag – place objects inside. Ask the child to place their hand inside to feel the objects and guess what they are without visibly seeing.
- Build more gentle play sequences into usual rough and tumble play. Include a wind down period in this play and gradually increase this time.
- Practise gentle hands activities so they understand the difference.
- Create tactile key rings for the child to wear that help them self sooth.



## 3 Taste - Avoiding

- Don't mix food textures i.e. soup with lumps.
- Have a divider plate so food does not touch.
- Encourage child to eat slowly and closely supervise if they have an exaggerated gag reflex.
- Never hide foods they dislike in food they do like; this may result in children further limiting their diet .
- If they have a restricted diet, ensure the child is eating the recommended calorie intake even if it's all from the same food.
- Refer to a dietitian for a limited diet.
- Refer to SALT dysphagia team for swallowing, gagging issues.
- Never force children to eat food they dislike or punish children for not eating i.e. saying you can't get up until you've finished, or no pudding unless you eat all your dinner.
- Use mild or no flavoured toothpaste.

*\*Note: When relating to food it may be beneficial to liaise with a speech and language therapist (SALT) or dietician if already actively involved. If there is concern about poor diet or avoiding food which has resulted in loss of weight, then a referral would be recommended to a dietician. If there are concerns about ability to chew, swallow, coughing at mealtimes then a referral to SALT would be recommended. It would be advised to discuss further with the child's family and signpost to their GP.*

## 4 Taste - Seeking

- Be aware the child may eat non-food items such as sand, glue, play dough etc. and will need close supervision and care for safety. Replace and redirect child to safe alternatives.
- Child may still be exploring world by putting things in their mouth or licking things; provide a safe environment for this while encouraging the use of the other senses.
- Introduce sucking, licking or blowing activities, i.e. sucking drinks through straw, blowing a 'ping-pong' football or licking sugar off a lolly pop.
- Provide cold foods to suck or crunch on, i.e. ice flakes, ice lollies.
- Encourage and provide the opportunity to taste a wide range of different foods.
- Play taste lotto games or guess the food.
- Provide chew toys; you may need to experiment with the shape and size.
- Alternate textures of foods, i.e. crunchy & soft, hot & cold.

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## 5 Smell - Avoiding

- Be aware of strong smells in settings, for example the toileting area, and try to neutralise smells as much as possible (don't just mask with another strong smell).
- Use ventilation to disperse smells i.e. open windows or use extractor fans.
- Think about perfumes etc. staff are wearing keep them subtle, or at least keep them consistent; some children identify people by smell.
- Be aware smells you like may be difficult for the child.
- Find smells the child does like and use them in setting e.g. lavender.
- Provide smells that are comforting to the child by using a bracelet or wrist strap sprayed with a chosen smell.
- Think about presence of strong smells as a possible trigger for behaviour when doing ABC charts.

## 6 Smell - Seeking

- Use strong, altering smells in setting as a background.
- Use familiar smells, such as mum's perfume or home washing powder, to comfort when upset.
- Play smell lotto, matching different smells.
- Staff could consider each having their own signature smell to help the child identify you.
- Use a mixture of contrasting smells, tastes, textures.
- Use smelly pens or stickers.
- Include smells in sensory or messy play activities.
- Have different smells in different areas of the nursery or associated with different activities/routines.

## 7 Sight - Avoiding

- Store clutter and objects away in labelled boxes. Have clear surfaces.
- Use soft, neutral and non-contrasting colours to decorate rooms or displays. Reds and yellows are often difficult.
- The child could wear sunglasses and sun hats to reduce visual stimulation and sun exposure.
- Don't sit the child in bright light.
- Have blinds and dimmer switches.
- Don't wear highly visually stimulating clothes.
- Think about what's behind or around you when you want the child's attention.
- Busy environments may be difficult; you can allow the child to go first or last to avoid the busy times with most people moving about.
- Think about where they are sitting to avoid visual distractions from windows, displays or other people.
- Considering lighting in the classroom. Beware flickering strip lighting.
- Provide a dark sensory area for the child to access.
- Never insist upon eye contact as part of communication.

## 8 Sight - Seeking

- Use bold, contrasting colours to gain attention.
- Think about using bold lighting to highlight what is important.
- Provide visually stimulating toys, with colour movement and lights.
- Provide the child with access to a sensory room/area with lights and bubble tubes etc.
- Use visual information to support understanding i.e. objects of reference symbols photos etc.
- Teach using concrete objects and/or visuals i.e. teach concepts by sorting and matching.
- Show a child what to do rather than tell them.

## 9 Hearing - Avoiding

- Adults use lower voices with predictable tones.
- Ensure nursery is not too noisy; keep noise levels low.
- Avoid having background music on.
- Close doors/windows if there is a lot of external noise.
- Use familiar and calming songs, such as nursery rhymes.
- Find sounds the child find comforting, and that may help distract them from noise they find more difficult.
- Introduce ear defenders.
- Have a quiet area the child can access when needed.
- Visually identifying the sound source, with the child, can often ease the anxiety.
- Use natural sounds or rhythmic songs (similar to heartbeat sound, which calms the nervous system).
- Understand a noise may hurt the child's ears even if it does not hurt yours.
- Warn the child of potential noises, such as a fire alarm.
- Minimise distracting noises, i.e. use quiet clocks, use rugs on loud flooring to reduce excessive noise.
- Try to ensure one adult at a time talks to the child, as they may be trying to drown out too many sounds coming in at one time, and have difficulty processing them all.
- Provide the child with the choice to eat in a quieter room for lunch or snack times.
- Allow the child to go for lunch first to allow them to get used to increasing noises gradually.
- Use visual cues to support following instructions and minimise the number of verbal instructions given.

## 10 Hearing - Seeking

- Some children benefit from having background music playing.
- Expose the child to varying intonations – rise and fall in voices.
- Playing music with fast changing sounds.
- Call the child's name prior to speaking.
- Play listening games with the child i.e. guess the sound.
- Make sure the child is directly in front of an adult when giving instructions.
- Give simple instructions, do not use too many words and support with visual cues.
- Speaking clearly and try using a low tone.



## 11 Body Awareness - Avoiding

- Child may feel hungry more often or all the time they may eat non-food items (pica) or steal food off others; monitor the child's diet to ensure they don't overeat and ensure that the environment is safe from dangerous items they could eat.
- Child is likely to feel pain at a higher level than others; they may appear to make a fuss when it's what others would consider a light bump. Be considerate don't dismiss their pain.
- A child may be reluctant to join in any physical activity if small knocks and bumps cause pain. Provide opportunities to do physical activity in a safe environment i.e. soft play etc.
- Allow them to avoid busy environments where other children bump and jostle them.
- A child may find toilet training difficult if they can't distinguish when they need the toilet; a time scheduled toilet break system often helps.
- Be aware the child is likely to feel heat and cold more intensely; they may feel intense discomfort or pain long before other children and will find it harder to self-regulate their own temperature. They may need more support and monitoring.

## 12 Body Awareness - Seeking

- Child not aware of hunger and/or thirst so they will actively refuse to eat/drink unless it is a specific food or drink that they want. Please ensure children eat enough calories per day of their chosen food.
- May hurt themselves as in cuts, bruises, or even burns, but not show/feel pain sometimes this takes a long time to process. They may need more supervision and closer checking after an accident.
- No sense of danger as they haven't learnt from pain so needs closer supervision.
- Difficult to toilet train as not noticing need for toilet until it's too late. Being taken to sit on the toilet at regular times often works better than expecting the child to tell you when they need to go.
- As physical activities such as bumps pushes etc. don't hurt them, they may be unaware it hurts others; the child may need to be taught about gentle touch.
- They may not feel the cold or heat so don't protect themselves from it this will include weather but also hot food or hot taps etc. They may need more support and monitoring.

## 13 Movement and Balance - Avoiding

- Provide chairs with arms, to support balance.
- Always sit the child on chairs where the child's feet touch the floor.
- Provide regular activities that promote balance and core strength.
- Provide opportunities for slow, predictable movement in a linear pattern e.g., a swing., a slow rocking horse.
- Keep objects at, or above, the child's waist height to prevent unnecessary bending.
- Use a firm, supportive seat that does not tip, to maintain a feeling of safety and support for the child.
- Allow the child to lean against something at carpet time i.e. bookcase, wall, or allow them to sit on a chair rather than the floor.
- Avoid activities where the child's feet are off the floor, or which involve them rolling.
- Allow the child extra time, or adult support, when they are using steps or uneven surfaces.
- Allow the child to go first or last in a line of others.

## 14 Movement and Balance - Seeking

- Use a wobble cushion to provide additional movement feedback.
- Place objects nearer to the ground or below the child's waist level, to encourage bending (moving head out of midline).
- Provide opportunities for the child to jump on a trampoline, and use faster movements.
- Encourage the child to take part in activities/games that involve running, jumping, skipping, hopping, climbing etc.
- Provide access to larger outdoor apparatus i.e. swings, slides, climbing frames.
- Use a gym/peanut ball and support the child to roll over it, bounce on it from a seated position.
- Support the child to do wheelbarrow walks and walk on all fours.
- Promoting any physical activities in and out of the setting – sports, swimming.
- Support the child to do chair push ups, wall presses, 4-point kneeling, kneeling press ups.
- Encourage the child to wear a backpack with some weight in e.g., books, useful to use at transition times. (No more than 10% of child body weight).
- Provide obstacle, or circuits courses, that involve running, climbing, jumping etc.
- Use upper limb resistance activities with the child, e.g. press palms together, press open palms onto table in standing.
- Use play dough during warm up tasks (pressing, squeezing, and rolling).
- Provide fidget toys, especially during group or carpet times.
- Oral motor activities for proprioception relating to the mouth. i.e sucking, licking, blowing, chewing opportunities.
- Provide frequent activity breaks, i.e. wake and shake, daily mile.
- Use weighted blanket/lap weighted toys (no heavier than 10% of child's body weight).
- Have a beanbag area, or mats within the environment.

## Sensory Diet

### Early Years Team

Child's name:		DOB:		Setting:	
Date of plan:			Review date:		

Sensory system	Seeking or avoiding	Processing difference	Strategies and support

## Useful Links:

*In Solihull occupational therapy will offer advice and support for children with sensory processing difficulties*

Pathway for Referrals

<https://www.solgrid.org.uk/eyc/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2023/01/Pathways-for-referrals.docx>

Solihull Children's Community Therapies

[Solihull Children's Community Therapies – Solihull Children's Community Therapies \(uhb.nhs.uk\)](https://uhb.nhs.uk)