



Sensory Processing



Many children with autism will experience sensory processing differences.

These can affect the following sensory systems: Taste, smell, sight, touch, hearing (auditory), vestibular (balance), proprioception (movement) and interoception (internal senses). This is a complex relationship between the body, its sensory systems, and the environment. Put simply, it means a child may get too much sensory information or not enough sensory information and therefore will adjust their behaviour to meet their sensory needs.

Over sensitive (get less)

When a child gets too much sensory information they may do things to reduce or stop the amount of sensory information they are getting e.g. covering their ears to reduce sounds, squinting to reduce visual input such as fluro lighting or avoid touching certain items to reduce touch input.

Under sensitive (get more)

When a child doesn't get enough sensory information they do activities or seek items that give more input e.g. put inedible objects in their mouth to get taste or touch input, move constantly to get proprioceptive input, always holding, touching or squeezing an item to get touch input.

Sensory variability

The sensory experiences someone has are not set, this means they can change from day to day, week to week or even moment to moment, depending on a range of factors. An individual may have a combination of over and under sensitivities and may experience this for all or some of the 8 sensory systems.

Understanding and supporting the sensory system of a person on the spectrum is important as it can have an effect on behaviour and learning. When a person is getting the right amount of sensory information, they are more likely to be calm and be able to concentrate.

Sensory support ideas

Being aware of, and understanding, that a person with autism may experience the sensory world in a way that you do not, is the first step to supporting that persons sensory processing.

An Occupational Therapist can provide specific personalised information on the area of sensory processing.

There are also many things you can easily do at home. Please see the table below for some ideas.



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Sense	Under Sensitive (Get More)	Over Sensitive (Get Less)
TASTE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide strong tasting foods e.g. vegemite, sour lollies, sherbet• Provide a large range of foods with a variety of tastes and textures• Involve the child in cooking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep different foods and flavours separate (e.g. use a partitioned plate)• Provide preferred foods/brands
SMELL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scented texta's, scratch n sniff stickers• Scented oils on fabric/tissues etc• Soaps, bubble baths, hand creams etc• Perfumes, room sprays• Cooking strong smelling foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider air flow e.g. open windows• Allow personal space• Provide a preferred smell to block out unpreferred smells e.g. a tissue with lavender oil on it to block out the smell of other people's food
HEARING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Music• Instruments• White noise• Noisy activities e.g. Vacuuming	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ear plugs/headphones• Music or white noise to block out other noises• A designated calm/quiet space• Turn off/down background noise e.g. radio, TV
TOUCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shaving cream, Chewy toys ,sand/rice boxes, Slime, gloop, jelly, cooked spaghetti, play dough• Weighted items/wheat bags/ice packs• Wear tight clothing/hats, body sock• Fidget toys• Different fabrics e.g. fluffy/silky/plastic clothing, cushions• Touch and feel books	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seamless socks• Remove tags from clothing• Wear socks and shoes rather than barefoot• Wear gloves• Carry a cloth or wipes to be able to quickly and easily clean hands