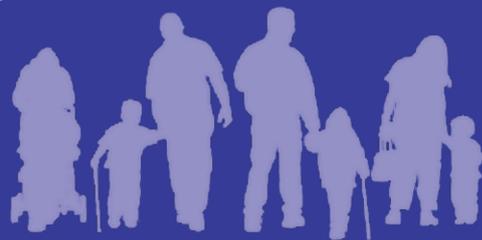


# SENSORY PROCESSING ISSUES

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers.  
Clinical information has been approved by West Sussex practitioners.



## What are sensory processing issues?

Sensory processing issues can be a stand-alone condition. They are also common in children with disabilities such as autism, ADHD, developmental delay, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities and learning disorders such as dyslexia. Some of the most common signs include: sensitivity to loud noises; poor posture and problems with motor skills; difficulty learning new tasks; disliking 'messy play'; being very fidgety and unable to sit still; mouthing or chewing things and spinning. When sensory processing issues cause problems with daily living, behaviour, social skills and schoolwork, this may lead to a child getting a diagnosis of 'sensory integration disorder' or 'sensory processing disorder'.

## Causes of sensory processing issues

Humans get sensory input from the world around them in eight ways. These are touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight, movement (also called the 'vestibular' system), awareness of the body's position in space ('proprioception') and the brain's sense of what's going on inside the body ('interoception'). In children with sensory processing issues, the brain is unable to organise the information it receives as well as it should, so people may be over or under-responsive to stimuli. For example, a child who is over-responsive to sound will try to avoid loud noises. A child who is under-responsive will actively seek out noise. It is possible for some children to be over-responsive in some senses and under-responsive in others.

## Characteristics of sensory processing issues

Here are some of the more common signs that a child may have sensory processing issues:

- **Movement (vestibular)** – spinning, rocking, flapping, being fidgety.
- **Sight** – may be sensitive to lights and busy places with lots of movement, or may seek out colours and light.
- **Touch** – may not like being touched (also called being 'tactile defensive') and dislike haircuts/ hairbrushing, dislike clothes or certain fabrics, may also dislike messy play and getting their hands dirty. Or they may like touching people, things, wearing tight clothing or squeezing into small spaces.
- **Taste** – may be a 'picky eater' and dislike certain tastes or textures. Or they may put objects in their mouth, or chew things such as sleeves or pens.
- **Hearing** – being sensitive to loud noises such as hand dryers, easily distracted by background noise. Or they may like repetitive sounds or making loud noises.
- **Body awareness (proprioception)** – being 'clumsy', difficulty balancing, problems with handwriting and other fine motor skills such as doing up clothing, using cutlery.
- **Awareness of internal body sensations (interoception)** - can make it harder to identify and label emotions. This can affect emotional regulation & mood if a child is getting fewer 'warning signals' from the body about emotional distress (e.g., heart-beating rapidly, tight fists etc.).

## Types of therapy

Sensory integration therapy can help children to overcome sensory processing issues by helping the brain to change its response. For example, in a child who is over-sensitive to noise, the aim will be to tone down the response. In a child who is under-sensitive, the aim will be to increase the response.





## SENSORY PROCESSING ISSUES

Every child's needs are different, so their sensory processing difficulties and needs will be assessed before a programme of therapy is designed for them. Depending on what a child needs help with, therapy may be one-to-one with specialist equipment, or the therapist may look at ways to adapt the environment at home and school. A therapist may also draw up a 'sensory diet' of activities that can be done at home and school to help your child.

Sensory processing issues can be identified by Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists or Speech and Language therapists with a relevant post-graduate qualification in Sensory Integration. Ask your GP or a paediatrician for a referral to a suitably qualified therapist.

### Ask about

- **Autism and Social Communication Team (ASCT)** – Specialist teachers that schools can refer to for expert advice about the educational, social and emotional development of pupils with Autistic Spectrum Conditions or Social Communication Difficulties.  
See: <https://westsussex.local-offer.org/services/114-autism-and-social-team-inclusion>.
- **Disability Living Allowance (DLA)** – your child may qualify for DLA, a state benefit that will help with their care. For further information visit: [www.gov.uk/disability-living-allowance-children](http://www.gov.uk/disability-living-allowance-children).
- **Reaching Families** – provides training, information & other fact sheets related to this topic. See especially our workshop on *Understanding Sensory Processing Differences*. We also offer benefits advice, peer support, a Facebook group & handbook (see below) for parent carers of children & young people with SEND in West Sussex. Go to: [www.reachingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk).
- **Sensory circuits** – Ideas about how to make a sensory circuit can be found at: [www.wyevalley.nhs.uk/media/679313/sensory-motor-circuits.pdf](http://www.wyevalley.nhs.uk/media/679313/sensory-motor-circuits.pdf).
- **Sensory toys** – sensory toys are available for loan through local family hubs and libraries. Go to: [www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/support-for-families/toy-libraries](http://www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/support-for-families/toy-libraries).
- **West Sussex Children's Services** – support from health and social care. If your child is under 18, contact the Integrated Front Door (IFD) for West Sussex Children's Services. Tel: **01403 229900** or email: [WSChildrenservices@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:WSChildrenservices@westsussex.gov.uk). The IFD is also an entry point for the Children with Disabilities (social care) service for children & young people with severe and/or complex disabilities. Eligibility criteria apply – See: <https://westsussex.local-offer.org/services/265>. For over 18s call the Adults' CarePoint: **01243 642121**, or email: [socialcare@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:socialcare@westsussex.gov.uk).

### Further information and useful links

- ***Making Sense of it All: From Birth to Adulthood*** – Reaching Families' handbook for parent carers of children and young people with SEND in West Sussex. This provides essential information on money matters, including claiming DLA and PIP, as well as social care, health, leisure, travel, education and employment. Go to: [www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/guides.html](http://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/guides.html).
- **Cerebra** – search for their parent guides on sensory processing: <https://cerebra.org.uk>.
- **Sensory Integration Education** – website with lots of information about books and resources: Go to: [www.sensoryintegrationeducation.com/pages/what-is-si](http://www.sensoryintegrationeducation.com/pages/what-is-si).
- **West Sussex Libraries** – For books on this topic available to borrow for free, go to: <https://arena.westsussex.gov.uk/welcome> and search the catalogue for 'sensory integration' or 'sensory processing'.
- **West Sussex Local Offer** – go to: <https://westsussex.local-offer.org> for local services, support and details of *Short Breaks* providers for children & young people aged 0 - 25 years with SEND.

