

# SENSORY ISSUES

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers.



## What are sensory issues?

Sensory 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 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 issues

Humans get sensory input from the world around them in seven ways. These are touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight, movement (also called the 'vestibular' system) and body awareness ('proprioception'). 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 issues

Here are some of the more common signs that a child may have sensory 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/hair-brushing, 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.

## 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. 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,



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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 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

- **Adaptations** – everything from 'wobble' cushions, which give sensory feedback to a child who fidgets, to pencil grips to help with writing.
- **Sensory Intergration Therapy** and a **Sensory diet** – this can be drawn up with calming and alerting activities for a child to do at home and school.
- **Sensory play** – a range of sensory activities, events and resources are included in the WSCC Short Breaks directory, for more information go to the West Sussex Local Offer: <https://westsussex.local-offer.org> and search for 'short breaks'.
- **Sensory rooms** – available for individual and group hire at: Activus Worthing: **01903 231117**); Bewbush children and family centre, Crawley: **01293 651760**; Boundstone children and family centre, Lancing **01903 276850**; Broadbridge Heath leisure centre: **01403 211311**; Broadfield children and family centre: **01293 651777**; Durrington children and family centre: **01903 276888**; Horsham children and family centre: **01403 224444**; Langley Green children and family centre: **01293 651747**; Phoenix leisure centre, Bognor: **01243 840075**; Springboard project, Horsham: **01403 218888** and Crawley: **01293 531963**.
- **Sensory toys** – sensory toys are available for loan through your local children and family centres. Further information can be found on the West Sussex Local Offer: <https://westsussex.local-offer.org>.
- **Time Aside** – provide sensory art workshops for children and young people with additional needs. Contact Sueloo Brown at: [sueloo@timeaside.com](mailto:sueloo@timeaside.com), tel: **07792 903236** or Andrew Baker at: [andrew@timeaside.com](mailto:andrew@timeaside.com), tel: **07967 828654**.

### Further reading and useful links

- **Making Sense of it All** – our handy parent/carer guide contains information and advice on benefits, support for your child at school, getting help from social services and accessing social & leisure activities – [www.reachingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk).
- *Building Bridges through Sensory Integration* by Paula Aquilla, Shirley Sutton & Ellen Yack (Future Horizons, ISBN: 978-1935567455).
- **Cerebra** – [www.cerebra.org.uk](http://www.cerebra.org.uk) – search for sensory integration therapy.
- **The National Autistic Society** – [www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/the-sensory-world-of-autism.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/the-sensory-world-of-autism.aspx).
- **The Out of Sync Child** – website: [www.out-of-sync-child.com](http://www.out-of-sync-child.com). Publishes various books including: *The Out of Sync Child* by Carol Stock Kranowitz (Perigree Books ISBN: 978-039953-165-1).
- *Sensational Kids; Hope and help for children with sensory processing disorder (SPD)* by Lucy Jane Miller (Perigree Books ISBN: 978-0399167829).
- **The Sensory Integration Network** – [www.sensoryintegration.org.uk](http://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk).
- *Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight: What to do if you are sensory defensive in an overstimulating world* by Sharon Heller (HarperCollins ISBN: 978-0-06-093292-3).

