

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 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 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.

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 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

- **Adaptations** – everything from 'wobble' cushions, which give sensory feedback to a child who fidgets, to pencil grips to help with writing.
- **Play and Learn Plus** – is a friendly session held at Children & Family Centre hubs, for children under 5 years of age with additional needs, who would benefit from play in a small group. The session provides the chance for your child to access sensory areas and sensory toys. Sessions are also an opportunity for you to meet other parent carers. All sessions are wheelchair accessible and some also have hearing loops. Please visit: www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/special-educational-needs-and-disability-send/support-and-advice/support-for-children-under-5-with-send/help-and-support.
- **Sensory Integration 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 rooms** – available for individual and group hire at: Adur & Worthing (Boundstone, Durrington); Crawley (Bewbush, Broadfield, Langley Green), Horsham (The Needles & Springboard Project). Contact details for these facilities can be found here: www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/find-a-children-and-family-centre
- **Sensory story time** – West Sussex Library Service run a multi-agency Sensory story time session for children and young people with additional needs. For further details visit the website: www.westsussex.gov.uk/libraries.
- **Sensory toys** – sensory toys are available for loan through your local children and family centres. For more information go to: www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/support-for-families/toy-libraries.

Further information 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.
- **Building Bridges through Sensory Integration** by Paula Aquilla, Shirley Sutton & Ellen Yack (Future Horizons, ISBN: 978-1935567455).
- **Cerebra** – search for sensory integration therapy: <https://cerebra.org.uk>.
- **The National Autistic Society** – www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx.
- **The Out of Sync Child** – website: <https://out-of-sync-child.com>. Publishes various books including: *The Out of Sync Child* by Carol Stock Kranowitz (Perigee Books ISBN: 978-0399531651).
- **Sensational Kids; Hope and help for children with sensory processing disorder (SPD)** by Lucy Jane Miller (Penguin Random House USA ISBN: 978-0399167829).
- **The Sensory Integration Network** – 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 (Harper Perennial ISBN: 978-0060932923).

