

# 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 for a referral to the Integrated Child Development and Disability Service at Seaside View or to a suitably qualified therapist.

### Ask about

- **Disabled Children's Occupational Therapy Service (health)** – works with children and young people with physical, developmental and sensory issues to develop and increase their everyday life skills. They do this through play and activities at home and nursery or school. Call the Seaside View Child Development Centre on: **01273 265806**.
- **Southdown Housing Association** – sensory studio available for hire to families or organisations. Call: **01273 405800**.
- **Otherworld** – multi-sensory and immersive theatre and cinema events for children with complex needs. Email: **ariane@samesky.co.uk** or ring Ariane on: **07711 717634**.

### Further reading and useful links

- *Building Bridges through Sensory Integration* by Paula Aquilla, Shirley Sutton & Ellen Yack (Future Horizons, ISBN: 978-1935567455).
- **Cerebra** – **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**.
- **The Out of Sync Child** – website: **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**.
- *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).

