

SENSORY PROCESSING ISSUES

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



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, and learning disabilities, as well as conditions such as dyslexia. You can find fact sheets for many of these conditions on our website, see page two for details.

Some of the most common signs of sensory processing issues 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 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



SENSORY PROCESSING ISSUES



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, 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 your local children's disability assessment service or to a suitably qualified therapist.

Ask about

- **Amaze – the Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS)** offers impartial, confidential advice on anything to do with special educational needs and disabilities for 0 to 25 year olds. Parents, carers, children and young people under 25 with SEND living in Brighton & Hove or East Sussex can use the service. Email sendiass@amazesussex.org.uk, call **01273 772289** or visit our website at <https://amazesussex.org.uk>
- **The 'Just Right' programme** - created by SEND and health specialists in Brighton & Hove, the programme is built round a scaling system, with four colour 'zones' to help children understand and communicate the emotions they are experiencing and how they can go about positively managing them. Speak to the SENCO at your child's school or contact the BHISS Autism and Language Team at BHISS@brighton-hove.gov.uk or on 01273 293481 for more info.
- **Seaside View Child Development Centre** – this is where many children are diagnosed and where health professionals such as paediatricians and occupational therapists work together to support and treat your child. Assessments will usually be via a health or education professional but you can contact Seaside View directly on: **01273 265780**.

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.
- **Local Offer** – the local authority's online listing of all the services and support that are available to families with children with SEND in the area. Visit new.brighton-hove.gov.uk/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities
- **The National Autistic Society** – www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.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 (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).

