

Sensory Integration Fact Sheet

This fact sheet provides information about sensory integration and some useful websites for further information.

What is sensory integration?

Sensory integration is a process that happens in our brain to put together sensory information we receive. We constantly receive sensory input through our five senses:

- **taste**
- **smell**
- **touch**
- **vision**
- **and hearing**

Our brains put these together to make sense of them and act on them.

We also have **two other senses** sometimes called 'hidden senses' that detect body position (**proprioception**) and movement (**vestibular**).

For example: you hear a sound, depending on what the sound it is (e.g. fire alarm or a car going past), your brain decides if you need to take action or ignore it. This process happens unconsciously (without us knowing) for most of us.

Our senses give us vital information that helps make sense of the world around us. Some people have some difficulties processing this sensory information. For example, they might scream if a loud noise happens, or feel very uncomfortable in clothes with a label that other people might not consciously notice.

Sometimes people might seek more sensation by jumping, rocking or biting to help them feel calm.

When to help?

We all have sensory needs and preferences and it is important to remember that sensory issues are on a spectrum. Being distracted by the sound from a noisy fridge or the scratchiness from a woolly jumper is a typical sensory response. However if someone is strongly affected by background noise or touch sensations that cause them to completely withdraw, become impulsive, or lash out as part of the 'fight-flight-freeze' response, help may be needed.

What can I do?

Understanding that someone is struggling with sensation is the first step in helping you shape an environment that is calming for them. It is also important to give children regular access to a safe space to climb, run, jump and swing.

Environment:

Create a cosy space in your home where noise and visual input is reduced. A simple 'den' between two chairs with a blanket and some cushions will help create a calm space where the individual can feel safe and help them feel less overwhelmed.

Having a look around your home with a new insight may help identify potential difficult areas. Lots of bright lights, pictures, ornaments and clutter can be overwhelming for those sensitive to visual input, where as some people may prefer this. Considering lighting, colour, background noise and amount of objects on display can be helpful.

Movement:

Heavy work activities, e.g. carrying a weighted backpack, provides input to muscles and joints which helps concentration, decrease defensive reactions to stimulation and help the individual stay calm. Some ideas include:

- Big muscle movements involving pushing, pulling, lifting, and moving
- Oral movements such as chewing, sucking, and blowing
- Tools for busy hands – things to squeeze, pinch, or "fidget" with
- Garden or park games which include running, jumping and climbing activities

Touch:

Tactile (touch) activities are those that provide input to the skin and help individuals gain awareness of their bodies. For those that dislike touch it is important to introduce touch on their terms, thereby avoiding a defensive reaction. Firm touch, also known as deep pressure, is less alerting and can be tolerated better by those who are sensitive.

Some touch activities include:

- Create cosy spaces with soft fabrics (and cuddly toys where appropriate)
- Messy play with different textures, e.g. writing in shaving foam
- Finding objects in a bucket of dry rice
- Play games on the carpet including rolling and crawling on the floor
- Deep pressure activities – being under a heavy blanket, having a hand or shoulder massage, having a heavy sack around shoulders.

Play:

Choose activities they are interested in, from here you can enhance the experience by increasing the sensory nature of the play. E.g. playing with a favourite toy in different positions such as lying down, or 'painting' with different textures such as, cornflower and water, shaving foam coloured with paint or chunky crayons on different materials.

Useful resources:

There are a huge range of sensory ideas available from books and the internet. Some sources are listed below.

Websites:

- 'Making sense of sensory behaviour' Falkirk Council PDF Booklet
- Sensory Integration network:
<http://sinetwork.publishpath.com/>
- 'Autistic spectrum disorder : a practical approach at home for parents and carers' Falkirk Council PDF Booklet

Books:

- 'The Out of Sync Child. Recognising and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder' by Carol Stock Kranowitz.
- 'Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration' Ellen Yack, Paula Aquilla and Shirley Sutton.
- 'Living Sensationally' by Winnie Dunn.
- 'Too Loud Too Bright Too Fast Too Tight: What to Do If You Are Sensory Defensive in an Overstimulating World' by Sharon Heller.