

Aspect Building Blocks

Understanding Sensory Processing

What is sensory processing?

Sensory processing is the ability to organise and interpret information we receive through our senses. This allows us to produce appropriate responses for particular situations, tasks and environments.

What are the senses?

- **Visual** (sight) processing is the ability to interpret information received visually.
- **Auditory** (hear) processing is the ability to interpret information that is heard.
- **Gustatory** (taste) processing provides information about different flavours. Sensors are in the skin around the mouth, inside the mouth and in muscles and joints of the face.
- **Olfactory** (smell) processing provides information about different smells.
- **Tactile** (touch) processing receives and interprets information about pressure, vibration, movement, pain and temperature. Sensors are located in the skin and internal organs (pain) and tell us what something feels like (e.g. rough or smooth) as well as protecting us from potentially dangerous tactile input (e.g. hot surfaces).
- **Vestibular processing** (movement) provides information about head position in relation to our body and environment.
- **Proprioceptive processing** (body awareness) provides information about where a body part is and how it is moving in relation to the body.

Common sensory difficulties:

Sensory processing difficulties are commonly reported and observed in individuals with autism and sensory processing challenges are now recognised in the new diagnostic criteria for autism (DSM-V)

There are two broad categories of sensory processing difficulties:

- Over-sensitivity
- Under-sensitivity

<p>Under-sensitivity</p>	<p>Sensory Seekers - require additional sensory input and actively seek this out e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be constantly "on the go" • May enjoy squeezing into tight places • May mouth or eat non-food items • May seek out and enjoy creating noises • May enjoy touching different textures • May enjoy watching toys/items intensely or out of the corner of their eyes and may be attracted by colourful/light/spinning toys 	<p>Low Registration Children - do not register sensory input and do not actively seek additional sensory input e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May appear lethargic and fatigue easily • May appear uninterested in tasks • May not register auditory input e.g. won't respond to verbal directions • May appear clumsy - falling frequently or bumping into people/objects
<p>Over-sensitivity</p>	<p>Sensory Sensitive children - register sensory input intensely but will not necessarily remove themselves from the situation e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be easily distracted • Have difficulty blocking out irrelevant information • May find certain sensations uncomfortable e.g. messy play, noisy activities, bright lights, movement etc. • May find self-care tasks uncomfortable • May develop rigid routines and rituals to manage sensitivities 	<p>Sensory Avoiders - register sensory input intensely and will actively avoid the sensation e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May become easily distressed by certain sensations e.g. loud noises, bright lights, messy play etc • May lash out in distressing environments e.g. may hit out or attempt to escape • Will avoid distressing situations/tasks e.g. self-care activities

NB: Children may fluctuate between being over-sensitive and under-sensitive for different sensations.

Sensory Seeking Strategies:

- Observe the child's behaviour to see what types of input they may be seeking.
- Try to provide the sensory input children are seeking in a more appropriate way.
- Find sensory activities which are calming or alerting and use these at appropriate times during the day.
- Create routine and predictability

Low Registration Strategies:

- Provide more intense sensory stimulation to awaken the sensory system to improve attention to tasks and engagement with others

Sensory Sensitive/Avoiding Strategies:

- Identify what sensory input the child finds distressing or is avoiding
- Respect the sensory stimulation the child finds distressing/uncomfortable and their need to limit this input
- Gradually (and carefully) broaden sensory processing experiences
- Encourage participation in calming and organising tasks
- Create routine and predictability

General Calming Sensations:

- Slow rocking in a rocking chair, or on a large bouncy ball
- Slowly swinging back and forth
- Soft soothing music
- Firm "deep touch" pressure such as:
 - Massage
 - "Sandwich" in between soft cushions
 - Hugs
 - Rolling up in a blanket
- Rhythmical vibration
- A "calming corner" e.g. a child's tent, corner with large cushions or beanbag

Calming Oral Activities:

- Sucking thick liquids through a straw
- Sucking on small lollies
- Blowing bubbles with wand, long straw, party blowers
- Chewy foods/crunchy foods
- Toys designated for chewing only e.g. chewy tubes, P's and Q's

If you are concerned about your child's sensory processing difficulties it is recommended that you contact an Occupational Therapist.

References

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