

# Understanding and supporting Sensory Differences



# Objectives

To understand what we mean by 'Sensory Differences'

To explore how sensory differences may affect neurodivergent children/young people.

To understand the link between sensory differences and behaviour.

To share strategies and adjustments to support sensory differences.

To know where to get more help.



# Activity



Close your eyes.



What can you smell?



Can you taste anything?



What can you feel?



Is there anything else you notice?



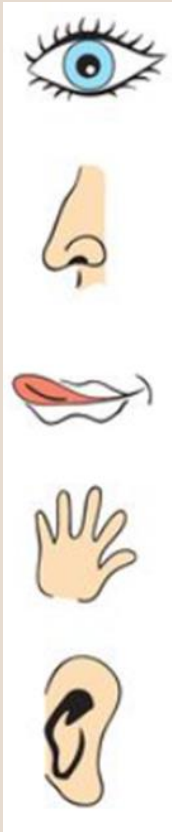
# What do we mean by sensory?

Sensory processing helps us make sense of the world and respond accordingly.

- Receive: we receive information about the physical world around us through our senses.
- Process: our brain processes this information and decides if a response is needed.
- Respond: if response is required, our brain responds with an emotion, thought or action.
- Regulate: increasing/decreasing stimuli helps us maintain a sense of feeling 'just right'.



# 8 basic sensory systems!



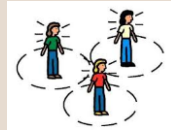
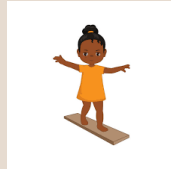
Sight (visual)

Smell (olfactory)

Taste (oral)

Touch (tactile)

Hearing (auditory)



Balance (vestibular)

Spatial awareness (proprioceptive)

Interoception (internal)



# Why are sensory differences important?

- What is a 'normal' sensory experience?
- Neurodivergent sensory systems are very different.
- Majority-serving environments are often very hostile.
- Sensory chaos impacts on everything.
- Sensory distress can lead to shutdown or meltdown.



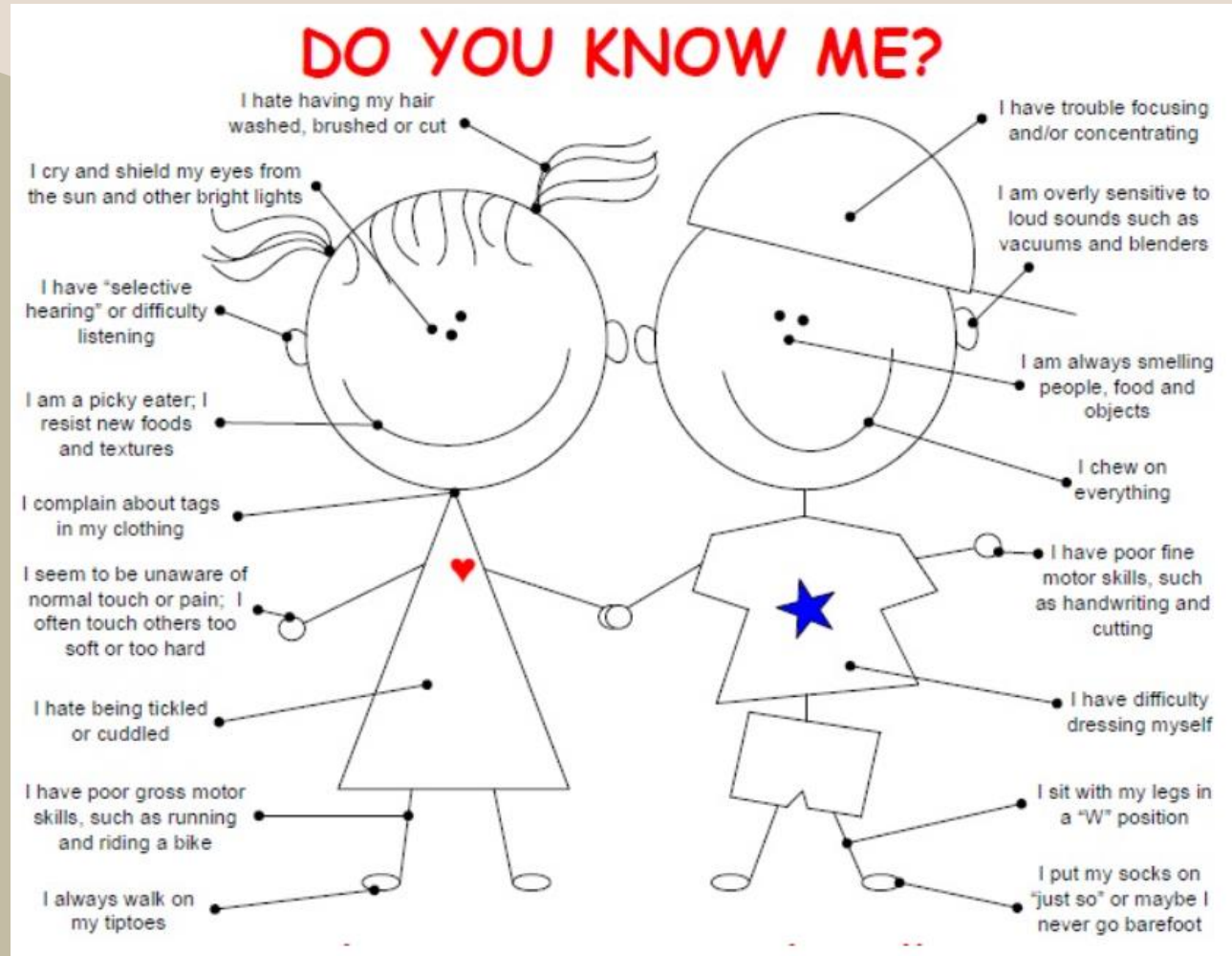


## SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- Sensory avoiding
- Sensory seeking
- Filtering sensory information
- Level of arousal
- One sensory input at a time
- Synesthesia: blending of senses.



# Sensory differences and behaviour.



# Too much information.



# CAUTION!

## Sensory overload!



# How does it feel?

*“If I get sensory overload, I just shut down; you get what is known as fragmentation....it’s weird, like being tuned in to 40 TV channels.”*

*“Smells like dogs, cats, deodorant and aftershave are so strong to me I can’t stand it, and perfume drives me nuts.”*

*“Every time I am touched unexpectedly it hurts; it feels like fire running through my body.”*



# How can we help?

## SENSORY PROPS

- Ear defenders/headphones
- Sunglasses/hoodie
- Inflatable cushion/wobble board

## DISTRACTION

- Cereal bar/crunchy apple/cold drink
- 'Important' job/responsibilities
- Fiddle toy/comfort toy

## COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

- Visual charts and/or visual aids
- Timers
- Secret signal



# What should we do?

## General strategies

- ✓ EXPLORE THEIR SENSORY PROFILE
- ✓ EXPERIMENT WITH SENSORY ADJUSTMENTS
- ✓ DEVISE A SENSORY DIET
- ✓ PROVIDE STRUCTURE TO REDUCE ANXIETY
- ✓ CREATE A 'SAFE SPACE'
- ✓ ENCOURAGE THEM TO COMMUNICATE
- ✓ ACTIVELY TEACH 'SELF REGULATION'



# Observe and evaluate using...

NHS Advice and Support  
[NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde website](#)

NAS resources  
[National Autistic Society](#)

Books and online articles  
[Resource list](#)



# Experiment with sensory adjustments



# Devise a sensory diet

Provide a mixture of sensory stimulation throughout the day to help the child feel 'just right':

Alerting activities - to help the child become more energised e.g. spinning, bouncing.

Organising activities - to help the child become more focused and attentive e.g. heavy work like chair pushes, wobble cushion, standing desk, fidget toys.

Calming activities - to help a child who is overwhelmed or anxious e.g. retreat to a safe place, breathing exercises, bubbles, favourite object, slow rhythmic movement e.g. swinging.



**When I feel wiggly, I can...**

- crawl through the tunnel
- walk carefully
- do a job for a friend
- wash water vessels
- roll books on the bookshelf
- blow bubbles
- unload and wash
- roll out the play-doh
- stretch long under the table
- feed the books of the party
- go for a walk wearing the space suit
- play obstacle

**How's Your Engine Running?**

| Time    | Key Events in the Day | Routines and Sensory Diet Activities  |
|---------|-----------------------|---|
| 7:00am  | Wake Up               | Jump on bed, crawl down to retrieve laundry basket, push laundry basket down hallway, and pull self back up onto bed or couch, repeat 5x (Proprioceptive and vestibular)  |
| 9:00am  | Breakfast             | Weekday: Eat crunchy cereal or other food item with weighted blanket on lap<br>Weekend: Play with tactile sensory item (i.e. clay, shaving cream, silly string, whipped cream, pudding, etc.) at table (Proprioceptive, taste, touch, and sight)  |
| 11:00am | School                | Movement breaks, fidgets, and chew necklace as needed at school (Proprioceptive, vestibular, and touch)   |
| 2:00pm  | Afternoon             | Playground routine (zip line, slide, swing, climbing wall obstacle course), repeat 5x (Proprioceptive, vestibular, and touch)<br>Routine (crab walk, hop like a bunny, log roll back to beginning), repeat 5x (proprio, vestibular, and touch)<br>ream in bathtub (occasionally); Bath with plenty of thick bubbles (sight) |

**Time for a movement break!**

**10 jumps**

**5 star jumps**

**crab walk**

**10 toe touch**

**BUILD YOUR OWN SENSORY PATH**

fun sensory play.com

**Supporting Self-Regulation – Sensory aspects**

| Date | Describe the task/activity | Was my child too calm or too alert | What sensory strategy was tried | What was the outcome? | Was it helpful? | How can it be improved? |
|------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
|      |                            |                                    |                                 |                       |                 |                         |
|      |                            |                                    |                                 |                       |                 |                         |
|      |                            |                                    |                                 |                       |                 |                         |



# The ZONES of Regulation®

Actively  
'teach'  
self-regulation


| The BLUE zone   | The GREEN zone  | The YELLOW zone  | The RED zone  |
|---|---|--|---|
|         |                              |                               |                                        |
| How might you feel?   | How might you feel?   | How might you feel?  | How might you feel?   |
| sad<br>tired<br>bored<br>moving slowly  | happy<br>okay<br>focussed<br>ready to learn   | nervous<br>confused<br>silly<br>not ready to learn   | angry<br>frustrated<br>scared<br>out of control   |
| What might help you?  | What might help you?  | What might help you?   | What might help you?  |
| Talk to someone<br>Stretch<br>Take a brain break<br>Stand<br>Take a walk<br>Close my eyes | The goal of this exercise is to get to the GREEN zone.<br>What can you do to be happy, calm and ready to learn? | Talk to someone<br>Count to 20<br>Take deep breaths<br>Squeeze something<br>Draw a picture<br>Take a brain break | Stop what I'm doing<br>Make sensible choices<br>Take deep breaths<br>Ask for a break<br>Find a safe space<br>Ask for help |

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

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# A final thought...

A landscape photograph of mountains at sunset. The sky is filled with orange and yellow clouds, and the mountains are silhouetted against the bright light. The quote is centered over the image.

The senses, being the  
explorers of the world, open  
the way to knowledge.

Maria Montessori

quotefancy

# Thank you

