

# Sensory information for schools and nurseries

## What is sensory integration?

See our leaflet or web page on sensory integration, [www.poole.nhs.uk](http://www.poole.nhs.uk) (search for 'sensory integration').

## How can school get a sensory assessment for a child?

**Please note: there is a very limited service at present in East Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole to assess children's sensory needs.** There is no service available to provide a sensory assessment for a child without a diagnosis of autism, significant mental health problem or learning disability.

- Children have to be referred by their paediatrician.
- They must have a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
  - AND Significant, complex sensory needs (for example, causing school placement or family life breakdown).
- OR
- Be undergoing an assessment for ASD where their sensory needs are unclear and complex.

You can read more about this part of the service by going to [www.poole.nhs.uk](http://www.poole.nhs.uk) and searching for ASD OT service.

The Occupational Therapists (OTs) in the main part of the team see children with motor coordination difficulties. They do not provide sensory assessments but can give advice on environmental adaptations to meet sensory needs.

There are OTs available who can provide sensory advice, often through the Sensory Parenting course, or in some complex cases, complete sensory assessments where there is a diagnosis of ASD (Children's Therapy Services), mental health difficulties (CAMHS) or a learning disability and challenging behaviour (Children's Learning Disability Service).

## What can school do to help?

There are lots of ways schools can help children with sensory needs. A key point is to use sensory activities before expecting them to concentrate and work. Sensory activities should not be used as a reward. For children with sensory difficulties, these activities are an important part of a child's needs and not something to be earned. Equally, removing play time and opportunities for children to move around are unlikely to be successful if a child requires this as part of their sensory needs.

Running Sensory Circuits groups are a great way of meeting several children's sensory needs for movement. There is a Sensory Circuits book ('Sensory Circuits: A sensory motor skills programme for children' by Jane Horwood, ISBN-13: 978-1855034716) available and no training is required, although some schools do have training in this.

If children also have motor coordination difficulties, the Learn 2 Move program is designed by therapists to help children improve. Training is run on the Learn 2 Move curriculum in Dorset.

There are a range of factsheets on our website here that can be helpful.

'The Zones of Regulation: A curriculum designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control' by Leah M. Kuypers (ISBN-10: 0982523165) is another great way of meeting several children's sensory needs. Further information is available on the following website: <https://zonesofregulation.com>. There is also the 'The

Zones of Regulation in Action' Facebook group available for teachers, professionals, parents or anyone using the Zones of Regulation Program to exchange ideas and shares successes.

Common sensory difficulties and strategies can include:

- **Distractibility:** Try to clear visual clutter away from children's work spaces. For children who really struggle to pay attention, having their own workstation with screens up (without lots of displays pinned to this) can help.
- **Hand fiddling and fidgeting:** Fidgeting actually helps some children concentrate and learn. We recommend having a fidget toy that is safe and appropriate to the child available (see 'general rules').
- **Difficulty sitting still:** Movement breaks! In general, children need a lot more movement than we think. The NHS guidelines is for children under 5 years old to have a minimum of 3 hours physical activity a day, and for children between 5 years and 18 years old to have a minimum of 1 hour physical activity a day.

Movement breaks can be anything that gets children moving such as yoga stretches, pretending to be an animal and walking that way, moving piles of books, pushing equipment, running, climbing or jumping. Some children may find fast movement is too alerting, so for these children, heavier tasks such as pushing tables or carrying books/ heavy items is more successful.

Movement options in seating can also be helpful. Move'n'sit wobble cushions can be great for some children, as long as their core strength supports it. For children with poor core strength, they will appear unbalanced and floppy, so a wobble cushion will make the child less focused. Gym balls or peanut balls are good alternative seating, or custom made options such as Zuma chairs and Hokki Stools can also be purchased. See our 'Movement' handout for more information on [www.poole.nhs.uk](http://www.poole.nhs.uk).

- **Chewing:** See our oral motor factsheet for further information. Chewing is calming and organizing, therefore it is not a behavior that needs to be stopped but instead can be redirected to an appropriate alternative, such as a chewable pen topper or ignored if not causing any harm.
- **Noise sensitivity:** Children can benefit from having a quieter space to work, or for short periods of time, using ear plugs, ear defenders or headphones with or without music. Devices such as ear defenders that block noise out should not be used for extended periods of time as this can make children more sensitive to noise when not wearing them, but can be useful for particularly noisy times such as lunch in the canteen or fire alarm practices.

**General rules:** when introducing a new tool or strategy, it is often chaotic at first. Try the new tool/ strategy on several different occasions at different times and note whether it helps over time, or continues to still be disruptive. If something is continuously not helpful, try another idea.

Not all behaviour is sensory! Although sensory strategies can be helpful, if they aren't supporting a student learn and be happy, it may be that sensory integration is not the root cause of the problem. A frequent cycle we see is a child becomes worried so they increase their sensory behaviour to help them calm down. Addressing their worries will be more successful than providing sensory strategies.

## Top Tips Checklist

Have you tried:

- Regular movement breaks (see 'Movement' handout on [www.poole.nhs.uk](http://www.poole.nhs.uk))
- Heavy muscle work (pushing, pulling, dragging, climbing, jumping activities. Asking children to carry heavy books somewhere can be a good strategy).

- Visually quiet work stations (only have the items you want the child to focus on their desk)
- Using ear defenders for short periods of time when child wants them
- Offering fiddle toys, theraputty, stress toys, hand strengtheners etc.
- Offering a chewable toy or chewable pencil or sports bottle ( see 'Oral Motor' handout on [www.poole.nhs.uk](http://www.poole.nhs.uk))
- Adding a wobble cushion to the chair, or try sitting on a gym ball, Zuma chair or Hokki stool
- Tying theraband in-between chair legs or wobble cushion under child's feet to fidget with
- Using timers
- Using a visual schedule consistently and with meaning to the child
- Having a quiet safe space to retreat to such as a pop up tent filled with cushions
- Visual calming toy such as 'calm down jars' or tubes of glitter.
- Change where a child is seated in the class – back to the wall/ door/ window, quieter spaces, being at the front of the class, can all help children in different ways.
- Allow children to work in different positions. Some children work better lying on the floor.
- When seated, make sure a child can touch the floor with their feet, else they will want to fidget to stabilise their body.

Please also have a browse of our handouts on [www.poole.nhs.uk](http://www.poole.nhs.uk) and search for 'handouts for parents' for a range of factsheets on various topics such as developing fine motor skills and sensory advice.

### Is there any training for school staff available on sensory needs?

Yes! We run a course about sensory integration for education staff from pre-schools, nurseries and schools twice a year. The course is called 'Learning through the Senses'. There is a small charge per person for this. Please see the twilight training section of our website or email the team on [cts@poole.nhs.uk](mailto:cts@poole.nhs.uk) for further details.

### Is there any training for parents available on sensory needs?

For parents who have children with significant sensory needs and a diagnosis of an autism spectrum condition, there is our 'Sensory Parenting' course. This is available via a referral from a paediatrician. Unfortunately we don't currently have any sensory training available for parents of children not on the autism spectrum, although CAMHS and the Children's Learning Disability Service also run similar course to Sensory Parenting.

## Contact details

### Children's Therapy Services

Telephone number: 0300 019 2936

For further general health-related information, please ask the relevant department for an information prescription or contact:

Patient Experience  
 University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust  
 Longfleet Road  
 Poole  
 Dorset  
 BH15 2JB

Telephone: 0300 019 8499

[www.uhd.nhs.uk](http://www.uhd.nhs.uk)

**We can supply this information in other formats, in larger print or have it translated for you. Please call the Patient Experience Team on 0300 019 8499 or email [patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk](mailto:patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk) for advice.**

If you wish to make any comments or to ask about any research evidence used to write this leaflet, please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0300 019 8499, write to the Patient Experience Team (address above) or email [patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk](mailto:patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk)

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