

Sensory Sensitivity

When we talk about sensitivity, we are referring to a child having a bigger reaction to sensory input compared to what is typical. This relates to a child's sensory integration (please see leaflet 'What is Sensory Integration?' on www.poole.nhs.uk for more information).

It is important to bear in mind an overreaction can have various causes, which are not always sensory. Examples of this are:

- Worried thoughts (e.g. that a hand dryer could burn you, rather than not liking the noise of it).
- Underlying medical condition/ pain, e.g. ear infection can result in children pressing their ears.
- Attachment difficulties.
- Attention from others.
- Previous unpleasant, upsetting or traumatic experiences (linking the sensory trigger to memories)
- Learnt behaviour – e.g. when I run, mum chases me and it's fun!

If the sensitivity is caused by sensory integration difficulties, it could be either:

- Over sensitivity - sensing everything too intensely, e.g. someone brushing past and being able to feel exactly where they touched, feeling too intense, possibly painful and needing to rub the area to make it feel better.
- Perception - not knowing the quality of the sensory information, e.g. someone brushing past and not knowing where you've been touched and whether it was safe or harmful.

In general, it is best to try and help your child become more comfortable with sensory input, but choose your moments carefully. By avoiding experiences completely, it is likely this will make your child more sensitive when something does happen. It is a careful balance of allowing your child to manage their sensory needs, whilst helping them challenge themselves when feeling safe enough to do so.

Touch

Touch sensitivity signs

Children often dislike:

- Hair washing, teeth brushing, hair cutting and nail clipping.
- Particular clothing fabrics, clothing tags or sock seams.
- Messy play and becomes upset if hands or face become wet or dirty.
- Walking barefoot and avoids walking on grass or sand.
- Being measured for shoes or having shoes put on.
- Being touched by others unexpectedly and does not like to be held or hugged unless on their own terms.
- Light, tickly touch
- Particular textures of food

Children may:

- Appear anxious or controlling
- React aggressively to being touched
- Rub the spot that has been touched
- Prefer to be naked or need to be fully covered, e.g. long sleeves over hands.

Touch sensitivity ideas:

- Buy clothing you know your child is comfortable with, often soft cotton, elasticated or baggy clothes. Avoid rough textured clothes and pyjamas if these bother your child, check seams for thread, cover elastic and remove tags.
- Try deep pressure activities such as weighted products or deep pressure touch, or a firm rub down with a towel before tasks such as washing and dressing.
- If socks are an issue, turn them inside out so the seam is not touching the feet. Seamless socks can also be purchased.
- Use heavy, downward strokes when washing and towel drying.
- Ensure bath water is at a temperature that your child is comfortable with.
- Tell your child when you are going to touch them during daily tasks, or when about to touch him/her with a face cloth or toothbrush for example, and use firmer pressure which can be less distressing.
- When hair brushing, use firm strokes with a large headed brush, brush in front of a mirror so your child can predict the touch, see if your child prefers to brush their own hair. Try massaging the scalp prior to hair brushing. Vibrating hair brushes or tangle tease brushes can be helpful.
- Try a cushioned toilet seat or cover the seat with a towel with a hole in if your child is sensitive to the temperature of the seat.
- At home and school, think about where your child sits. Try to position them so that it minimises potential touch by others.
- If your child dislikes messy play, encourage them to participate using a tool or wearing gloves, or seal messy ingredients such as paint into a ziplock bag initially. Try deep pressure touch on the hands prior to messy play. Select play materials of a temperature and texture that your child is comfortable with.
- Teach your child how to wipe their hands if they don't like something, and that they can self-manage this. Keep a hand towel or kitchen roll hands when trying messy play so your child can independently wipe their hands when needed.
- If children dislike having their hair rinsed, give them the shower head so they are in control. Lying down to rinse hair can be less stressful than someone rubbing their head upright.
- For children who don't like hair brushing – using lots of conditioner and a brush such as a Tangle Tease to help gently get knots out of hair. If possible, allow child to have control and brush their own hair.

Sound

Sound sensitivity signs:

- Disliking or being scared of particular sounds. Example noise triggers are:
 - Vacuum cleaners
 - Hand dryers
 - Hair dryers
 - Fire Alarms
 - Noisy crowds
 - Fireworks
 - Motorbikes/ lorries/ cars
 - Loud music
 - Particular pitch of noise (e.g. low vibrating noises or high pitched noises)
- Distracted by background noise such as fans, noise from outside a window, or electrical humming (fridge, lights etc.)
- Trying to block out sounds (e.g. Putting hands over their ears, fingers in ears, humming to make own noise).
- Difficulty relaxing or getting to sleep due to noise
- Not being able to listen to an instruction when in a noisy environment.

Sound sensitivity ideas:

- Use ear defenders or ear plugs. These should be used for short term events where there are known noise triggers (e.g. 20 minutes at a time, not to be used continuously (for hours at a time) as this could make children more sensitive to noise when they take them off.
- Use headphones or ear buds with or without music. Young people and older children often prefer this option or ear plugs as they can be used more discretely.
- Put on favourite background music to drown out other noises. Sometimes white noise can be helpful.
- If you need someone who is sensitive to noise to concentrate, use a quiet environment where possible.
- Head movement (vestibular) and noise is processed through the same nerve in the brain. There is some anecdotal evidence that using head movement activities like swinging and trampolining consequently helps decrease noise sensitivity.
- Check your child/ young person understands what the noise is and mention it if you can see they are bothered. If you hear a noise and aren't sure where it is coming from or what it is, it can be very disorientating.

Smell

Smell sensitivity signs:

- Dislike/ overpowered by certain smells such as foods; perfume counters; fish counters; shops that sell heavily scented products; toilets; washing powder; flowers; cigarettes.
- Behaviour changes noted when products are changed, e.g. washing powder, shower gels, shampoos, and parents changing to a new perfume. This can be hard to identify sometimes!
- Commenting on smells that may not always be noticed.

Smell sensitivity ideas:

- When appropriate, if your child finds bathtime or personal care tasks stressful, let your child choose their products. You can let them smell the various ones in the shop to help make a choice about preferred scents.
- Be aware of your choice of products as this can be overwhelming for some children.
- Scented playdoh can be made at home or purchased that is a useful tool exposing children to different scents.
- There are board games such as Parfum Master that can help children work on tolerating smell in a fun, relaxed atmosphere.

Taste

For food sensitivity, please see 4 'Picky Eaters' leaflets on our website, www.poole.nhs.uk and search for 'handouts for parents'.

Visual

Visual sensitivity signs:

- Overwhelmed in busy environments
- Dislike lots of patterns/ bright colours
- Sensitive to lights, squints, blinks, wears sunglasses, keeps hood up or wears a peaked cap.
- Distractible in busy environments, e.g. classrooms.
- May focus on tiny details that others wouldn't notice, like a small piece of fluff.
- Particular about own clothes with regards to prints or patterns, disliking marks on clothing.
- Unusual response to pain where children can fall over without complaint but if there is a small scratch or something 'looks' wrong rather than 'feels' wrong, visual sensitivity can sometimes explain this.

Visual sensitivity ideas:

- Sunglasses, hood up or peaked cap are all helpful to block out some visual input
- Visually quiet environments (school and home) – think about child's bedroom if they have difficulty sleeping. Is it simple or are there lots of things around that could be distracting?

Head movement

See also 'Movement' handout on www.poole.nhs.uk under 'Handouts for parents'.

Head movement sensitivity signs:

- Gets travel sick
- Dislikes being tipped backwards, e.g. for hair washing
- May have very good, or poor balance
- Becomes overstimulated compared to other children their age on playground equipment such as swings or roundabouts (giggly, pale, flushed, nauseous, dizzy).
- When bending down, keeping head upright. In general, keeping head still.

Head movement sensitivity ideas:

- Be aware that movement may cause your child to feel unwell. Plan for long journeys with travel sickness remedies.
- Pair movement activities with heavy muscle work, such as swinging whilst pulling themselves using a rope or length of stretchy fabric
- When rinsing hair, let them choose whether they lean backwards or forwards, or stay upright and hold a flannel over their eyes.

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:

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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 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

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