



Sensory

About sensory functioning

Sensory functioning describes how the body responds to sounds, textures, lights, smells, pain, temperature and other stimuli or information in the environment. Some children can have reduced sensory awareness, such as children who are Deaf, deaf or hard of hearing, or children who are blind or low vision. Other children may find some sensory input distracting or distressing, such as those with autism.

Some children may not like loud noises (e.g. they cover their ears or become upset in large crowds or when you raise your voice), while others may be sensitive to certain textures (e.g. fabrics, tags on clothing, sand, or types of food) or smells (e.g. perfumes). Particular types of lighting or another person maintaining eye contact can also be distressing for some children. Some children can also show an interest in sensory stimuli or find it comforting. For example, they might sniff toys or objects, or be fascinated by lights or movement. Some children can show under-responsiveness to some types of sensory information, like pain or temperature. This can increase their risk of getting hurt or being ill and others not being aware of it. All children will differ in the type and severity of sensory concerns they have.

Evidence-based strategies

Have a consistent routine

- Predictability and a consistent routine can help some children who find sensory input challenging.

Best practice tips

Be aware of students' sensory needs

- You could find out what colours, textures, sounds, or movements the student prefers or dislikes. You can support a child by working out which activities seem to most upset or bother them. A Health Professional such as an occupational therapist can help provide more support.

Provide choices

- Some children may find loud noises or specific textures distressing. If you know that a student may be distressed by an activity, tell them beforehand. Consider offering them different materials to work with or a different activity.

Consider uniform

- Don't be too strict about uniform if it is causing a child distress. Instead, consider working with parents to decide on another option – safe clothing that looks like the uniform but uses a different fabric or cut. Allow children to wear their hair in a way that is comfortable for them. The key thing is that they can participate, not their appearance!

Provide a quiet area

- Classrooms, playgrounds, bag/locker areas, and toilets or changing rooms can be very noisy. Consider providing a quiet area that a student can go to if upset by noise or other sensory input. If hand dryers are distressing to a child, consider ways in which this can be managed (e.g. sending them to use the toilets just before or after break times). Consider allocation of bag pegs or pigeon holes/lockers – positions on the end or in the quieter areas may be best suited to children who are distressed by loud noise.

Have a safe back-up activity

- A safe activity that a child can do if things become too difficult can be helpful. The activity could be used when the child needs a break or time to calm down.

Allow time to calm down

- Some children might need to take time out from the group and have more breaks to calm themselves when they get overwhelmed. Let them do this whenever they need to, and provide a safe space for them to retreat to. Sometimes children might become angry and upset and the reason for this might not be clear. A break and a safe place and time to calm down may help them. It can be helpful to have a clear code of behaviour that is known up front and put somewhere that all children can see.



Allow the use of noise-reducing headphones

- Noise-reducing headphones may help if children find the classroom too loud.

Other considerations

First aid

- Giving first aid to a child with sensory challenges may be difficult if a child is upset by particular smells or textures. Some children may be upset by blood or bandages, or refuse to have an ice pack or medication. Talk with their parents and support team about how to manage first aid.

Safety drills

- Noise-reduction headphones during an emergency drill may help if a child finds the noise of alarms upsetting.

Behaviour

- Sometimes when a child is being disruptive it is because they are feeling stressed by sensory information. Understanding the cause of a child's behaviour is key.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

Other co-occurring conditions

- Children with sensory challenges may also experience [autism](#), [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#), [blind or low vision](#) or [d/Deaf and hard of hearing](#).
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the student.

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. One particularly relevant resource supporting children with sensory input issues is:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist