

Making Sense of
Your Sensory Behaviour

Sensory
approach
for parents
and carers



Falkirk Council

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This booklet is for parents and carers to look at their own sensory preferences and sensitivities.

About 8 years ago we wrote the first of our booklet on sensory issues. Many who work with children have found the booklets useful. They have allowed parents and carers to become detectives in making sense of children's sensory experiences, and in understanding the impact on their lives.

Exploring sensory issues with families and carers has made apparent the vital truth that we are all affected by our sensory experiences which can affect the quality of our interactions with others. Supporting the children we are caring for in a range of environments can be helped by being at our 'sensory best'. Being calm, but not too chilled out, helps us be effective. We need to be detectives to recognise our own sensory selves.

This booklet has been designed to allow you to look at your own sensory world, to let you be more aware of your sensory likes and dislikes. It hopes to help you to see sensory ideas that help you become calm or be more alert, to be your best sensory self. This will help you understand and help others, especially children, with sensory issues.

"What are we like"

We all respond to sensory experiences. From someone who needs the music turned off in the car when they are not sure where they are going in order to concentrate more (sense of hearing); to the

pregnant mum who notices she is not as good at judging the space she needs to get between objects as her body has changed quickly (body awareness); to the teenager who loves roller coasters (developing movement and body awareness senses in a growing body). Finally, at the end of a hard day you might feel the need of relaxing in a hot bath with your favourite bubble bath and scented candle (touch, smell, vision senses).

It may be useful to be more aware of our own sensory likes and dislikes. By looking at what we enjoy or don't, we begin to see our sensory preferences or sensitivities. As we learn to read ourselves we can build into our lives things that help us stay calm or makes us alert as and when that is required. It will also help us stay calm while helping a child calm down, or support us to be more alert to pay attention to the details of the child's needs.

Finally, it can help us be more aware that our sensory likes and dislikes might be totally different from our children's and inform us to be aware, leading to calmness when we might overreact.

Reading your signs

You may already have an idea of your sensory preferences. Some people know that they need a break when it's too loud and busy or the lights too bright. More careful examination of your senses might give you a way of looking at what you might need to add or remove from your day to make it more balanced and make you better able to help others.

Hearing

Highly Sensitive	Low Sensitivity
Feel noise levels magnified. Do not like loud music. Do not like going into noisy room. Hate sudden loud noise. Overloaded easily with lots of people talking.	Love loud noise or music. Loud music in car might help you feel good. Don't notice sounds easily. Need someone to repeat something to catch your attention. Not easily distracted by noise or busyness.

You are more likely to jump if someone touches you on the back if you are uptight than if you are calm and relaxed.

Vision

Overly sensitive to light	Under-sensitive to light
Dislike bright lights. Prefer darker, dimmer lighting. Prefer candlelight. Notice and bothered by glare. Easily distracted by light.	Need a lot of light. Like lots of different lights, reflections. Feel good with bright lights, flashing disco lights. Enjoy bright sunlight.

Taste/Smell

Over-sensitive to Taste/Smell	Under-sensitive to Taste/Smell
Do not enjoy strong tastes. Prefer more plain food with less spice etc. Over-react to new taste or smell. Can react to smell/taste by retching or feeling sick.	Love crunchy food. Enjoy strong flavours and smells. Not easily affected by strong or bad smells. Might not notice if food is off by taste or smell.



Touch

Our sense of touch is all over our body. If we are anxious, we are especially prone to overreact to touch. We can find we feel startled and respond in a 'fight or flight' type of reaction to any touch and this can be very wearing.

We may find when we are anxious, we cannot discriminate objects by touch easily. For example feeling for keys in our bag seems more difficult. We seem to rake around and feel panic rising that we cannot find the key, then more anxious as we think it is missing.

These are our body's reactions to touch. They are different if we are calm or uptight. You are more likely to jump if someone touches you on the back if you are uptight than if you are calm and relaxed. We also have memories of past experiences of touch. Our reaction to a wasp or ladybird might be very different although their touch is the same on our arm.

Oversensitive to Touch	Under sensitive to Touch
<p>Fussy about feel of clothes/textures. Avoid touch if possible. Don't like getting hands dirty or messy. Overreact to someone's touch. Very sensitive to pain. Very sensitive to temperature change.</p>	<p>Enjoy lots of deep touch. Like hugs or like to put on a heavy jacket. Can find you are heavy handed or grip too tight. Can stand too close to do things. Do not notice temperature change. Very high pain threshold.</p>



Three other senses are sense of movement, body awareness and also our internal senses.

If you are sitting still for any length of time you might begin to lose concentration and need to move (sense of movement). You might touch your finger on to your thumbs with your eyes shut because you are very much aware of where your body is all the time (sense of body awareness). The least well known sense is internal sense in our body including organs. For example, eventually you won't be able to concentrate any more unless you go to the toilet (internal sense).

Movement

Oversensitive to Movement	Under sensitive to Movement
Hate swings, spinning. Feel dizzy very easily. Hate lots of busy places full of moving people. Avoid escalators or struggle stepping on/off them.	Always busy, needing lots of movement. Very fidgety when sitting (tapping foot, moving around). Enjoy a lot of movement exercise. Love moving fast but not always well co-ordinated.

Body Awareness

Oversensitive to Body Awareness	Under sensitive to Body Awareness
Don't like others too close. Aware you make your own boundaries eg how close you sit to others. Don't like crowds. Don't like crowds or people in queues touching you. Don't like people touching you as they talk eg really touchy people. Always aware where you are in the room relative to others.	Always bump into things. Stand too close to others. Trip over your feet. Need to look at your feet going downstairs. Like to touch things as you pass. Like pressing back into a chair or couch. Some days poorer handwriting (but variable). Need to look closely for fine motor tasks, find them hard and frustrating.

The least well known sense is internal sense in our body including organs.

Internal Sense

Oversensitive to Internal Senses	Under sensitive to Internal Senses
<p>Can easily be aware of your own heartbeat.</p> <p>Very aware if you are slightly unwell.</p> <p>Irritable or agitated easily if you are slightly hungry or thirsty.</p> <p>Overly sensitive if thinking you need the toilet (maybe feel a bit obsessed with it).</p> <p>Easily 'fearful' e.g. aware if your muscles tense or heart races.</p>	<p>Not aware when you are unwell.</p> <p>Maybe don't easily read how hot/cold you are.</p> <p>Maybe don't read how tired you are.</p> <p>Not easily aware you are 'full' when eating.</p> <p>Leave going to the toilet until the last minute without being aware you are doing this.</p> <p>Don't 'feel' signs of fear e.g. tense muscle tone or heartbeat.</p>



Would we benefit from strategies?

We would all benefit from being at the right level of attention needed at the right time. We want to be calm enough to notice changes in children to respond to their needs.

We want to be alert enough to pay attention to the details, becoming detective to support them.

Calming/ Alerting ideas

We might benefit from a list of ideas when we are over-stimulated or anxious. These can be just a quick fix or longer term ideas to build into our lives. You might want to tick the ideas you could try.

Quick Fix

Calming	Alerting
Wrap a heavy blanket around you.	Take a quick, brisk walk.
Find a body/hand moisturiser you like the scent of and massage in slowly.	Take a quick jog on the spot or a few star jumps or squats.
Place your hands on your head and press down.	Clap to a loud piece of music.
Give yourself a hug.	Dance (with the blinds shut!)
Play with squeeze ball.	Transfer your weight side to side quickly.
Get a cup of tea/coffee sit and chill	Eat crunchy food.
Use lavender room spray.	Suck a sour sweet.
Try an aromatherapy defuser.	Chew chewing gum.
Ask someone to give you a deep hug.	Have a really 'alerting' hand moisturiser smell and rub in quickly.
Stroke a pet	Open the windows and cool down
Take a deep breath and slowly release.	



Longer Term Ideas

Calming	Alerting
<p>Make a calm room you can retreat to filled with things you like, decorated with calm colours,.</p> <p>Have a calm treasure chest of activities in the room (regularly change the activities in it).eg nice candles, soft blanket, nice body cream</p> <p>Reorganise the furniture in your room (lots of deep pressure pushing).</p> <p>Dig up the garden you keep meaning to get round to or have a digging plan you can go back to again and again.</p> <p>Have an exercise routine you enjoy in your week (e.g. swimming, gym).</p> <p>Try yoga exercise (or hot yoga).</p> <p>Have a lot of planned breaks for short walks in your day if it is to be a busy day or in your week if it is a busy week.</p> <p>Take a relaxing bath, in soft lighting, with sweet or favourite bubble bath and dry yourself afterwards with a soft, warm, fluffy towel.</p> <p>Have a short gym ball activity routine you can do for a few minutes.</p> <p>Organise a box of relaxing smelly things you enjoy (bath bombs, candles, music). Keep box topped up.</p> <p>Regularly slowly hand massage with a moisturiser you enjoy.</p>	<p>Take a needle point shower.</p> <p>Use citrus or mint shower gel.</p> <p>Use an exfoliating scrub.</p> <p>Towel dry with a rough towel.</p> <p>Have a regular routine of movement breaks.</p> <p>Have regular exercise routine of movement.</p> <p>Include in your diet crunchy foods, strong tastes.</p> <p>Timetable in your enjoyable alerting 'quick fix' ideas into your day.</p> <p>Sit on a gym ball while doing activities.</p>

General Supports

If we know what is happening and feel organised we tend to feel calmer. If we don't enjoy a task but we know we get something back when its completed, we get through it more easily and more calmly if we are already relaxed.

If we look after our internal needs (for example make sure we get enough sleep) then again our sensory anxiety or lethargy is affected. More general strategies can also help to be in the right sensory place to help others.

Try:

- Become a little more organised - you might not like too much organisation but work out the right amount for you, so you don't get too anxious or overwhelmed and give up.

- Try a visual plan. Make it unique to you. You might want to decorate it with things that make you smile or colours you enjoy.
- Take a minute - remember just to stop and breathe.
- Make use of 'to do lists' - tick off or erase or scrub out. Do what is more satisfying for you to complete.
- Work/life balance is always on everyone's agenda. Maybe just get round to looking at any changes you can make when you feel able. Small steps, not giant leaps. Regularly revisit to review if you have the right balance.
- Sometimes simply 'now' and 'next' strategy that you may use with children is good for you too. Stops you looking too far ahead.



Activities of Daily Living

Building independence skills in young people, especially with disabilities, requires time, patience, routine. It requires a lot of determination persistence and repetition. It requires a calm, positive support from the carer - that's you. Eating, drinking, personal hygiene are all essential life skills, but in our busy lives we need to face up to the fact that there are no quick answers to building skills.

In our first booklet we looked at ideas for the young person. In this booklet these are some ideas for you to try.

Personal Care Support

- Intimate care can cause strong reaction in us from a sensory view - smell, touch, visual reactions to mess can all be an issue. Take time to recognise your own reaction and plan ways to support your own reactions.
 - Take a moment to relax and breathe before you start a task.(get in the right zone for the task)
 - Recognise your tendency is just to get something over with quickly if you dislike the task.
- Recognise the need to build time to allow independence in toilet routines.
 - Recognise that sometimes you need to prioritise time to stay at home to get personal care skill started with the least amount of changes of environment. Plan for this as a family.
 - With intimate care let the young person see what you are doing, say what you are doing. Say if something is wet or soiled, hot or cold. This will build their own understanding of intimate care support for future.

More general ideas:

- Decide when you are ready to tackle a task. Is it better in holidays when you have more time, or evening when you are not rushed?
- Do you need to change your routine?
- Is a visual support helpful?
- Do you need a 'motivator' of a reward when there is success?
- Remind yourself of what support is needed and be honest when you realise you are doing too much just to be quick - then slow down.

Dressing

- Think about your reaction to touch, smell, colour, pattern of clothes. Make sure you are not irritated by child's choice this will reduce conflict over what is actually not important.
- Are you better sitting or standing to support? You may have pain or discomfort. Choose what's right for you . Often, we don't notice our patience might be limited simply because we need to move while helping with a task.
- Are you tired or hungry? Just let yourself be aware of this. Addressing it can take the edge off your reactions, giving you more calm resources to draw on.

Eating/Drinking

We find that this is the most highly stressful thing we find for parents and carers.

To feel your child does not have a wide enough diet or is not eating or drinking enough can make you feel a failure. Eating difficulties are anxiety provoking for carers or parents and this in turn affects how they support young people with eating difficulties.

First, recognise all of us find eating and drinking difficulties stressful. The anxiety is very acute and we need strategies to feel calm.

Our reactions can affect children's own already-sensitive reactions and can end in a challenging cycle of difficulties.





Think about messy play in jelly or slush.

Think about crunch foods to crumble by hand or tool.

Think about building blocks of cheese or carrots, or triangle or circle pictures.

Think about ideas with seeds or lentils.

Some suggestions to think of:

- Recognise if you have food sensitivities or preferences yourself. Are you a fussy eater? Is it challenging for you if visually touching food or certain textures causes a reaction in you? Perhaps you are extremely sensitive to smell. All this knowledge about yourself can give you an insight and help you relax instead of reacting subconsciously to the sensory sensitive activity.
- Are you the right person to assist each meal?, draw on family support?, a different person can help you and sometimes change dynamics to help change things
- Recognise your anxiety affects you. Use your calming strategies from the 'quick fix list' before mealtimes.
- Try creating a calming atmosphere generally in the room you are eating in - music you enjoy or quietness with screen time removed. Look at the room and make sure it feels calm to you as well as the young person. Make sure you have plenty of time.
- Create sensory snack times to enjoy the activity together but not necessarily to require eating at the table. eg a picnic in the garden
- Spend time playing with food together, just building the joy of connecting with the young person and food

Activities in Garden to share sensory experience

- Think about growing food together e.g. tomato plants, carrot patch, potato plants. .
- Think about digging/ planting. Look at pictures of what you planted. Water and weed together and watch as they grow. Harvest your crop together. Cook and put on plate. Share these moments, building the trust of working with food when you cook. Be ready to touch, smell, look at and even bring to lips. But do not be anxious to insist on taste - that's a bonus. The building of sharing food experiences is the first priority.



'Me Time'

- The phrase 'me time' is familiar to us all. We want time to relax or build our inner resources. Think about your sensory experiences in 'me time'. Try to widen your sensory experiences using more resources.
- Try a walk (movement, natural sounds, visual experiences, smells).
- Try exercise (body awareness and movement).
- Try music (either to relax or to become more alert. Music with words can be very alerting).
- You may enjoy reading but try listening to a story or podcast again to vary the senses.
- If you enjoy puzzles etc. try changing the environment when you do them. In the garden or a different room from normal.
- Build yourself a summer house or area in the house especially for down time with no screens or social media and see if a short time there is helpful.
- 'Me days' e.g. spa or massages etc. can be relaxing and multi-sensory but coming home can bring challenges. Try planning the 'ending' of your time positively e.g. arrive home when the children are in bed or mid-afternoon to get organised (not at tea time!).

- Look at the type of activities you enjoy. Are they 'calming' or 'alerting' types of activities? You might want to widen the range of activities but of the type you enjoy best.

Technology

We can all be guilty of looking at phones or tablets too much. Vision and sound stimulation is enjoyable but remember:

- Take a break to let your other senses get a chance to work too.
- Stop using social media or a game before you are desperate for the toilet - it might be adding to your stress.
- Looking at your child and listening to them is more important as they grow and thrive - your phone doesn't need your time to grow and thrive!
- Your sense of movement and body awareness can make you calm and organised or can alert and make you more observant - much more than sitting at a phone or tablet.



Connecting Moments

Relationships are always at the heart of our time with children. If we build really enjoyable moments it's relaxing and builds positive memories and is fun!

Connecting in sensory activities with your child can help us relax or be alert and enjoy the time. They might take the stress out of a life skill and we are supporting a child to develop. They are also a very positive way to build our relationships. Here are some simple areas related to daily living tasks:

- Try turn-taking with the young person with shower gel, making a mess or pattern on your child or bath or shower.
- Try turn-taking with bath/shower crayons or blowing bubbles in bubble bath or splashing in bath water.
- Try dotting your fingers and child's fingers on your hand with scented moisturiser.
- Try exploring together a sensory basket of washing type activities e.g. clothes, soap, bath scrubber etc.
- Try exploring a sensory basket of other daily life skills e.g. dressing, dressing up dolls, buttons, studs and zips, pairing socks and sock puppets.
- Try copying what the child might enjoy playing with e.g. water, bath toys, bubbles.

We can also
build positive
sensory
memories for
us and our
children.

Out and About

Make walking more sensory, provide connected movements and encourage movement.

- Go for it - jump in a puddle (with your wellies on!).
- Get wet in the rain together and enjoy it - explore the concept of wet/dry afterwards with your child (you could ask: if you get wet what might you do etc.)
- On a walk, stop and both of you close your eyes to listen to sounds, feel wind etc.
- On a windy day feel the wind, look at movement in trees etc. Let the wind blow you both down or up a hill.

These are just some of the ways which might help you think/connect with sensory enjoyment times together.

Memories and Senses

We all build our sensory memories. Some are good and some stressful. You might remember the smell of your gran's house as a child and flashback to your childhood when you smell the same scent. You might see a coat that reminds you of a time you went on a nice holiday.

We link all our senses to memory especially our sense of smell.

We can look at our senses and be aware if they are colouring us to be more strained with the care of our child because of a past sensory memory, a sight or sound or smell etc. it might evoke in us. We can also build positive sensory memories for us and our children. We can begin to replace old memories with new happy sensory memories.

My Sensory Day

Take time now to fill in what would be a 'good sensory day' for you. Feel free to extend it, change examples to better suit your sensory preferences. Build the day that feels just right for you (tick the best option for you if you start with the day opposite).

(Screen time is not mentioned but you can see if visual / auditory while sitting with very little movement is part or too much of your evening sensory experience. Maybe adding other senses is needed.)

We hope this sensory approach is helpful.

We hope you will be more sensory-aware in a way that helps you, your family life and supporting your child with sensory needs.

Getting up I like	Curtains closed to keep it dark. Curtains open to bring in light.
I feel best in the morning	A needle point shower. A soft rain shower. A bath.
I like	Vanilla or sweet scented shower foam. A strong citrus or mint scrub. A rough hand scrub, no preference to scent.
I enjoy a	Fluffy warm bath sheet to wrap inside. A quick towel dry.
I go for breakfast	Like to sit at table. Like to sit on soft couch. Stand at breakfast bar.
I enjoy	Crunchy breakfast cereal. Soft, warm, sweet or salted porridge. First coffee (enjoy smell). Cold, fresh juice.
I am at my best working	In the morning. By mid-morning. Afternoon.
At lunch time	I like a seat and chat. I like to go for a walk. I like to read a book.
Mid afternoon	I like a movement break. I like a hot drink.
When I come home	I like to sit e.g. with a hot drink. Like dinner as soon as possible.
In the evening	I like a quiet night sometimes in the bath or shower. I enjoy a different routine every night. I like exercise or hobbies.

Notes:



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