

Inclusive support series: sensory processing

Our senses are on high alert when we are in any way anxious or uncertain.

General strategies

Reduce anxiety and uncertainty
Routines are predictable
Use visual timetables at child height
Trusted adult to help child navigate routines, changes and use timetables
Trusted adult to discuss any changes of routine
Observation of child in different tasks, at different times of the day

Proprioception

Proprioception is our sense of body awareness. It is the sense to use to prepare for tasks, to use throughout the day to stay regulated and should form the base for activities as it is an all-round regulator.

It is activated when we move our bodies, compress our joints or contract our muscles. It is the universal regulator.

Behaviours you may see in this area include: bumping into things, struggling to move from sitting to standing, hitting others, being unaware of own strength, pushing others.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Walking on textures – introduce one texture at a time – note preferences
Allow time to process or time to cope with activities
Allow child to remove shoes/socks
Allow child time to get from one area to another
Movement activities – at the child’s level
Swinging in a blanket
Pushing
Pulling
Squeezing
Walking
Climbing

For pupils who are hyposensitive and respond to strong stimulus in this area try:

Band on chair
Theraputty/playdough with things to find in it
Heavy muscle work, e.g. packing toys away, pushing water trolley, moving furniture, setting up or packing away PE equipment
Bike/trike/scooter
Playground games: running, stop start
Pulling/pushing
Monkey bars, climbing frames
Chewing appropriate items
Crunchy/chewy foods
Forest school – rolling tyre up hills
Walking up hills
Gym equipment/activities, e.g. rowing and weights
Hikes
Sport

See proprioception sheets on the CIT website for more ideas:
www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/cit/resources/sensory-strategies

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Vision

This includes visual clutter, e.g. people in a room, size, shape, depth, perception and recognition of symbols.

Behaviours you may see in this area include: hiding, squinting, covering face, headaches, nausea, holding objects close to their face, watching objects fall e.g. sand/water/flour. Being overwhelmed by busy or cluttered environments.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Timers: This is a visual support for the child to know when a task will complete	Calming activity: Consider oil and water toys – they allow the child to focus on one visual object
Visual timetable: Work with the child to create a personal one. Consider use of now/next or now/next/then board	Work sheets: Ensure these are in easy read format for all abilities. Font sizes should be a minimum of 12 on worksheets and a minimum of 18 on power points, paragraphs should have 1.5 line spacing. Avoid large sections of text, consider breaking up with boxes or pictures
Workstations: Use these to screen out excessive visual stimulation	Ruler guide for reading: Helps reduce visual overstimulation from text
Classroom lighting and whiteboard glare: Where possible use natural lighting, the student may require their own desk lighting. Reduce where possible any shiny laminated surfaces. Consider those with glasses and brightness of screens with fluorescent lighting	Colour overlays: These may support not just children with Dyslexia but with sensory needs as well
Reduce visual clutter: This includes movement of students within the class, be aware of busy times/free play/wet play and PE	Highlight: Use coloured pens/highlighters to show features
Patterns: Be aware of what staff are wearing and carpeting and soft furnishings	Text close to child: Provide a copy of what is on the board next to the child on a small white board
Defined spaces: Use carpets or furniture to define areas in the classroom e.g. the book corner and keep them consistent	Classroom displays: Use only two colours on displays as background and border and keep to those colours. Use one type of font
Playground and PE: Open spaces often have no visual cues for a child to understand so consider making a clear zone identifying where to stand for PE, a start and stop line for running, a roped off area to play ball games in, a quiet area for sitting	Text: Don't ask them to copy large sections of text, don't use only capitals for a paragraph, use bold text and clearly defined outlines
Time away: Timetable in opportunities for the child to be away from the visual stimulation, e.g. dark tent, darkened room	Objects of reference: A physical object that reinforces a child's understanding of the task or transition that is required, e.g. a cup represents a drink
	Touch: Some children support their vision with touch, allow children to touch objects to gain some tactile to support

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Sound

Sound is a protective sense. We use it with visual information to ensure we are safe and out of danger. We learn how far away a sound is and what objects make certain sounds.

Behaviours you may see in this area include: hands over ears, hiding, hood up, shouting, humming, whistling, singing and running away.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Classroom noise levels: Can these be reduced or timed to specific lessons?	Name: Use their name or a physical cue at the start of a sentence to know to listen to instructions
Reduce noise: Consider hard surfaces and softening these with carpets, cushions or curtains	Instructions: Only give one at a time.
Bells: Could alternative signals be used for change of lesson, could the child ring the bell so they have control of the stop and start of the sound?	Talking: Ensure only one person is talking at a time
Ear defenders: Make them available when in a noisy environment, they may need you to put them on and allow them to take them off when needed. Older children consider noise cancelling headphones or ear plugs	Hall/ canteen: Some areas of the school are more difficult, could they arrive last and leave first
Sports hall: Consider the vibration on the hall floor because this can add to the pain of sound some children experience	Dining: Can they eat away from noise?
Define areas: Have areas of the class for noise and those for quiet	Position in the class: Consider at the wall and back of class for sensitive and front of class for not registering sound
Time away: Allow time away from the noise in the timetable, this could be their safe space	Playtime: Can there be areas on the playground for quiet
Prepare: Agree strategies with the young person for supporting when unexpected loud noises like fire alarms or loud bells are hard to tolerate	Time to process instructions: Allow time to process instructions, perhaps come back to them for answers
Stories: Could the child have their own text to follow when a book is read?	Speaker's tone: Try to use a calm, quiet, steady voice, some children misunderstand shouting and who it is directed to
	Audio speakers: Use speakers with low vibration
	External sounds: If windows and doors are open, be aware of the impact on the child struggling

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Smell

Smell has a strong link with memories and emotions. Some people have great difficulty in tolerating certain smells and some have no awareness of smell.

Behaviours you may see in this area are: gagging, not eating, complaining of bad smells, poor personal hygiene, avoiding places, unable to concentrate.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Classroom: Can the smell in the classroom be controlled with the use of an agreed scent in a diffuser or room spray?
Essential oils: Allow the child to have a preferred smell on fabric
Fresh air: Open window or use extractor fans to allow clean air
Dining hall: Can they sit in an alternative location? Allow knowledge of the menu for the week, to prepare them for the smell in the hall
Changing rooms: Allow them to change in a separate area
Toilet: Allow children a separate toileting area
Deodorant and perfume: Be aware of the use of one's own or students' deodorant or perfume, this can be a negative memory trigger
Cleaning products: Be aware of the use of cleaning products and the effect on the children
Position in class: Seat away from toilets and bins
Smelling everything: Some children smell people and objects, consider a social story around what is safe and appropriate to smell
Prepare: Warning of predictable smells e.g., science, play dough
Smell of reference: e.g. if you are going to be using clay later in the afternoon, prepare the child for this by having a small piece of clay for them to smell

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Taste

Taste is about spicy or bland food. Eating food adds a tactile element which is often the cause for eating difficulties.

Behaviours with eating are: gagging, not eating, restricted eating, not knowing when to stop eating.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Don't force eating
Allow preferred food
Low distraction: Children with a difficulty eating need a quiet separate area to eat
Introduce zones for eating, e.g. snack time/lunch time
Provide opportunities to explore different flavours
Prepare: Activities that include proprioception can prepare a child to cope better with eating, e.g. blowing bubbles, whistling, cheek massage they do to themselves
Playing: Getting children comfortable with food through play will help, e.g. art – use food to draw with/paint patterns, tactile play with food items, e.g. yoghurt, spaghetti
Being around food: Allow them to serve their friends, with no expectation to eat the food, e.g. handing out fruit at snack time. Include cooking activities

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Touch

Touch helps us to discriminate between shapes of objects without using our visual system. We also have protective touch which stops us from touching hot surfaces. Light touch can be seen by the brain as a threat and so we respond with the protective side of our touch system.

Behaviours you may see in this area are: overreacting to others moving past them, not coping with lining up, shoving people if they perceive them as a threat. Over/ under responding to pain, touching everything.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Approach from the front. To gain attention, put your hand on their arm but avoid unexpected light touch
Uniform/PE kit considerations (changing and come in PE clothes)
Entry and exit from buildings: Is it possible for them to use a quieter/ separate door?
Prepare them for activities that require touching, e.g. some PE games or gymnastics in pairs
Lining up first or last to avoid unexpected touch
Temperature: Some children might not like long sleeves, be aware of their temperature
Seating position: Ensure there is enough spacing so that the child is not sitting too close to someone else
Predictable seating: So that they can feel comfortable where they sit without the worry of being touched or bumped
Opportunities for tactile/ messy play
Avoid insisting on them touching objects, allow cleaning of hands or wearing of gloves
Fiddle fidget supports can help aid concentration

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Vestibular

Vestibular is the sense of movement. It plays a key role in helping us understand our position as well as developing balance.

Behaviours you may see in this area include: constant movement, kicking their feet, shift in their chairs, or may need to run and are disruptive. Some need to move but are not always aware of the need and so may appear passive and slow.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Regular movement breaks tailored to child's needs e.g. run, march, walk
Leave class early to get more movement opportunities
Encourage movement: Allow regular trips to the bin to throw things away/ sharpen pencils
Space in class to allow easy flow between activities, furniture, and other students
Clear route to places: Is there a clearly defined route to their destination? It may be challenging to navigate obstacles
Time to move to destination/to move to position
Consider the amount of visual and auditory input. If there is too much going on they will be moving or needing to move more
"Come down" from busy play: It will require calming activities before being ready to listen and learn
Run before listening: Proprioceptive activity before having to listen to a set of instructions. This helps to calm the sensory systems and can aid concentration
Repetition of instructions: A child may have difficulty changing positions. The effort this takes means the instructions they were given when on the carpet will be lost when they get to the desk
Allow change of position at desk, e.g. sitting on knees/standing
Seating: Floor sitting can be difficult. Consider a wobble cushion/ half ball or gym ball/rocking chair
Band on chair to increase movement opportunities when seated
PE: Practicing balancing activities – adapt the task if too difficult

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Interoception

Interoception is the sense that gives meaning to our body's internal cues, like knowing one is hungry, thirsty or needs the toilet. It also plays a large role in understanding our emotions and how they feel.

Behaviours you may see include: not needing the toilet and then suddenly needing to go, not being aware of thirst, not knowing when they are full and overeating.

For pupils who are hypersensitive in this area try:

Visual timetable: Add in toileting breaks and food times to promote routine
Social stories for toileting, temperature, eating, drinking
Temperature control: The child may need prompting to remove or add a layer of clothing
Toilet breaks: Being unaware, they may have had opportunities to use the toilet and then suddenly need it in class. Some children may need a toileting routine
Structured eating/drinking times to encourage healthy habits
Emotional regulation: Children with interoception difficulties may find it difficult to describe or even recognise different emotions happening to them
Validate their own description of how something feels. How you feel when you are happy/angry/sad may not be the same as how someone else feels. Allow the child to use their own words to describe how they feel, e.g. like a volcano is going to erupt
Emotional check ins: Allow time to stop and think about how their body is feeling and what emotion they may be feeling. Using zones of regulation or a traffic light system may be appropriate