

ADVICE SHEET

“Sensory Difficulties”

What are they?

A child’s basic awareness of their body and the world around them involves integrating information that is received from their senses.

The senses have to work together and for most children this happens naturally.

Information from the visual, auditory, tactile, vestibular (sense of movement) and proprioceptive (muscles & joints) systems must all come together to help a child to learn to dress themselves, to maintain balance, pay attention, copy a pattern or learn to read a book.

We all receive a lot of information from our senses.

We use this information to organise our behaviour and successfully interact with the world.

Our senses give us information about the world around us.

Dysfunction in Sensory Integration is when information from the senses gets jumbled, lost or processed incorrectly.

Typical areas of poor integration include:

- ✚ Touch
- ✚ Muscles & joints
- ✚ The movement system

The central nervous system constantly focuses, screens, sorts & responds to sensory information; both from our external environment and internal receptors in order to perform everyday tasks.

e.g. in order to put on a coat you will need to.....

- ✚ focus your attention on the person speaking to hear what is being said
- ✚ screen out other information that is going on around you
- ✚ see the coat and adequately plan the dressing process
- ✚ see the armhole and by sensing muscle & joint position, place your arms in the sleeves
- ✚ using your touch awareness, feel that the coat is on correctly
- ✚ rely on adequate motor planning, discrimination & fine motor skills to do up the buttons

From this example you can see how important the smooth running of the central nervous system is to our daily living.

How do you know when it’s not developing normally?

Sensory Processing undergoes normal variation in the course of a day and normally our bodies adapt to different situations and different sensory input.

Difficulties occur when the child is consistently unable to manage these sensations and either *over* or *under* reacts to the sensory input.

Children who experience these difficulties in sensory modulation will either be over reactive or under reactive to sensory input.

A child who under responds is described as sensory dormant and one who is over reactive is described as sensory defensive.

It is important to know (with the help of an Occupational Therapist) how your child is reacting as in some cases the behaviour can look very similar.

Your child may not appear over excited e.g. jumping around, but he may feel overloaded from all the sensory experiences and demands of the day. In this case, calming soothing, activities would be required to assist in the integration and therefore the modulation process.

In other cases, some children may need stronger, excitable sensations in order to attend and concentrate on a new or difficult activity.

What does it look like?

Children who experience difficulties with moderating their sensory input may result in displaying varying levels of stress and anxiety.

The child with sensory defensiveness may perceive the world as dangerous, alarming or irritating e.g. the feel of sand on his hands may feel like glass or the touch from another child may feel like a push.

The child with sensory dormancy may not be able to concentrate or attend appropriately. They may learn to seek out sensory sensations to increase their arousal levels...
e.g. fidgeting excessively on a chair to maintain their concentration

A child with sensory modulation difficulties may (unknowingly) seek out various sensory stimuli in an attempt to regulate themselves.

What will the child be doing?

Activities to inhibit / calm down include:

- ✚ Repetitive movements e.g. rocking
- ✚ Oral motor movements e.g. chewing, grinding teeth
- ✚ Finding an enclosed/own space to hide away in
- ✚ Deep pressure e.g. sitting close to someone or jumping around

Activities that may increase arousal:

- ✚ Rapid movements e.g. quickly & lightly brushing the skin
- ✚ Spinning around
- ✚ Fidgeting excessively

How can I help?

It is important to know what works well with each child as each child is different and therefore responds to sensory input in different ways.

For example if you see your child trying to calm himself down (they may be sucking/chewing their hand) you might be able to provide a safe, calm environment for them in the corner of a room with a book or squeeze ball. This would provide the child with a more acceptable way of managing his sensory needs.

When a child appears restless or agitated it is important to establish what might have contributed to this state. For example having a house full of family or friends may lead your child to making loud noises or hiding away & appearing unsociable. This way of behaving, helps the child to cope; they are seeking out activities or sensations which they find calming. If your child finds these situations uncomfortable, it would be appropriate to provide some specific stimuli before the potentially stressful event. For example; providing some deep, proprioceptive input to reduce the risk of sensory overload later.

Consistency & routine:

It is normal for children who experience modulation difficulties to also have difficulties in understanding and therefore structuring time. It will take them longer to adapt to changes in routine. It is important therefore to stick to a regular daily schedule to help the child make sense of her environment and the changes within it. If something different will be happening on that day the child may need extra preparation (sensory modulation techniques) to help them cope with the potential sensory bombardment e.g. extra hugs, noise etc

The practical activities to provide sensory modulation (sensory diet):





The sensory diet (devised by an Occupational Therapist) must be individualised for each child. It contains a selection of activities that can be implemented at home, at Pre-school and in school.

If the diet is successful the child will be more able to attend to task and more able to plan, sequence and carry out events.



The activities should be used on a regular basis and not just when things have become “out of control”.

The diet can target any of the senses and most activities will positively affect more than one of these.

A calming activity will involve the following:

-  heavy touch pressure
-  rocking movements
-  soft voices
-  natural warmth

An excitatory activity will involve the following:

-  fast, uneven, light brushing of the skin
-  fast rhythmical movements

It is crucial when carrying out these activities that the child should be able to determine when the activity should stop. It is important to monitor children’s responses to activities and regulate them as appropriate.

Activities that might be included in a sensory diet:

- ✚ jumping on bouncy surfaces (e.g. trampoline)
- ✚ climbing and crawling
- ✚ chill out zones
- ✚ soothing music
- ✚ ball pool
- ✚ firm pressure
- ✚ shoulder pressure
- ✚ swings
- ✚ rocking
- ✚ rolling

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