

Sensory Snapshot

Looking at what happened before the behaviour

When a child becomes overwhelmed, we tend to remember the end of the story: the refusal, tears, argument, shutdown or explosion.

The useful clues often come earlier.

This snapshot helps you look back at one difficult moment and ask what else may have been going on. It is not a behaviour chart, and it is not something you need to complete every time things go wrong.

Use it when a reaction surprises you, seems much bigger than the immediate trigger or when you begin to wonder whether there is a pattern.

1. What actually happened?

Start with what you saw or heard, without interpreting it yet.

- Instead of: Had a meltdown about getting dressed.
- Try: Pulled off school shirt twice, said the collar hurt, covered ears when I spoke, then cried and refused to get dressed.

What did you notice?

2. What had already happened?

Think beyond the few minutes immediately before things became difficult.

- Poor or interrupted sleep
- A rushed start
- A change in routine
- A busy or noisy environment
- Several transitions
- A difficult learning task
- A test, presentation or other pressure
- Conflict or social difficulty
- A long period of concentrating or sitting still
- An unfamiliar person, place or expectation
- More people or activity than usual

What had this child already had to manage?

3. What was the environment asking of them?

Look around the child, not only at the child.

Sound: Talking, music, bells, traffic, appliances, scraping chairs, sudden noises, several sounds at once?

Light and visual activity: Bright lighting, screens, clutter, movement, a visually busy room?

Touch: Clothing, shoes, labels, people brushing past, unexpected touch, crowded spaces?

Smell and taste: Food, perfume, cleaning products, unfamiliar smells or strong tastes?

Movement and body position: Too much sitting, standing or queuing? Too little opportunity to move?

People and space: Crowds, close physical proximity, little privacy or nowhere to step away?

Anything else?

4. What was happening in their body?

Sensory tolerance does not sit separately from the rest of the child.

- Hungry or thirsty
- Tired
- Too hot or cold
- Unwell
- In pain or uncomfortable
- Needing the toilet
- Physically restless
- Recovering from a demanding day
- Affected by a change in medication or medication wearing off

Anything worth noting?

5. Were there earlier signs?

The point where things fall apart is often easier to see than the build-up.

- Became quieter or stopped responding
- Became louder or more restless
- Started moving, rocking, chewing or touching more
- Covered their ears or eyes
- Wanted to leave
- Became unusually silly
- Started arguing about small things
- Became rigid about how something had to happen
- Struggled to make a simple decision
- Repeated questions
- Stopped engaging with a task
- Sought more physical contact or more space
- Said something hurt, felt wrong or was “too much”

What did you notice, if anything?

6. What happened next?

What did the adults around the child do? There is no judgement here. Most of us respond differently when we are rushed, tired or worried ourselves.

- Repeat the instruction
- Explain or reason
- Increase the pressure because something had to get done
- Ask several questions
- Offer reassurance
- Reduce the demand
- Give the child space
- Change the environment
- Offer food, water or movement
- Help with the first step
- Allow the child to leave
- Simply wait

What happened after that?

7. What helped?

What seemed to make things easier?

Did anything seem to make things harder?

Now look at the whole picture

You do not need to find one cause.

What had this child already managed?

What may have added to the load?

Were there signs before the difficult moment?

What seemed to help?

Is there anything we could change earlier next time?

If you use this more than once

Don't count incidents. Look for patterns.

- Particular times of day
- Particular environments
- Certain transitions
- Combinations of hunger, tiredness and demand
- Social situations that take a lot out of the child
- Sensory input that repeatedly causes difficulty
- Early signs that tend to appear before overload
- Strategies or environmental changes that consistently help

You may also discover that there is no obvious sensory pattern. That is useful information too.

The aim is not to prove that a behaviour is sensory. It is to understand more about what may be happening before deciding what the behaviour means.

One question to take away

What was this child having to manage before I saw the part that worried me?