

# SENSORY NEEDS

Everyone has sensory needs, though Neurodivergent people are often more affected by these than others. People experience and process sensations in different ways. There are eight different senses in our sensory system:



Our senses take in information from inside and outside of our bodies. Our brain then processes the information that our body receives from our senses. This is called sensory processing.

When our sensory system works together, it allows us to interact with our environment purposeful and meaningful ways.

People experience and process sensations in different ways.  
For example, some people are extremely sensitive to:

**NOISE**

**LIGHT**

**TOUCH**

**SMELL**

**MOVEMENT**

Others may under-respond to these sensations. The sensory needs of a person change with time, and sensory processing matures as children get older. Some people have difficulties processing sensory information, which may be a factor that causes difficulties in managing daily life. The two different types of difficulties that people may experience are;

## **HYPERSENSITIVITY**

Being over sensitive to information that comes in through the senses

(they are taking in too much information)

## **HYPOSENSITIVITY**

Being under-sensitive (they are not taking in enough information). Some people who are under sensitive to certain senses actively seek more sensory input from that sense. This is referred to as sensory seeking.

Some people are hypersensitive or hypo sensitive to information coming from all of their senses. Others may over-respond to some senses and under respond to others.

When a person can not process sensory information correctly, they can become overwhelmed. This causes stress and anxiety and can lead to a change in behaviour, and the person may experience a sensory meltdown.

Because a sensory 'overload' is not always visible, it can be difficult for others to understand why the behaviour has changed.

It is essential to consider a person's sensory needs so that strategies can be put in place to help and support.

We have put together a list of the different senses and how information from these senses may affect a person. You may find it helpful to use this to understand your child and their behaviour a bit better.

# SIGHT

## Hypersensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ React strongly to bright light, fluorescent lighting or sunlight
- ▶ Struggle when they are in a room with walls with a lot of colour or posters and pictures on them
- ▶ Experience a lot of headaches, or they rub or squint their eyes frequently
- ▶ Get distracted by patterns on walls or flooring.

You may want to try the following to see if it helps your child:

- ▶ Keeping the light low
- ▶ Using sunglasses outside
- ▶ Keeping walls in plain colours and uncluttered
- ▶ Avoiding patterned flooring
- ▶ Avoid multicoloured rugs and carpets at home.

## Hyposensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Difficulty telling differences between puzzles, words, or pictures
- ▶ Difficulty tracking moving objects
- ▶ Difficulty matching or sorting objects
- ▶ Be unaware of bright lights or sunshine.

## Sensory Seeker

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Sit close to the TV
- ▶ Hold their phone or tablet close to their face
- ▶ Be drawn to strobing or flickering lights
- ▶ Stare into bright lights.

Things that may help children that are hyposensitive to sight or are sensory seekers:

- ▶ Use colourful walls
- ▶ Have brightly lit rooms
- ▶ Let them play with visually stimulating toys with flashing lights or light projectors
- ▶ Give them extra support and time to process when matching or sorting objects.



A child wearing a blue jacket with a colorful geometric pattern is reaching up towards several large, iridescent bubbles. The bubbles are filled with various colors like pink, purple, and blue. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene.

# SOUND

## Hypersensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Cover their ears when they hear loud noises,
- ▶ Cover their ears when there are multiple different noises
- ▶ Cover their ears when several people speaking at the same time
- ▶ Hum, sing or make noises to block out other noise
- ▶ Be easily distracted by noises
- ▶ Dislike crowds or busy places
- ▶ Have difficulties with specific frequencies of sound.

You may want to try the following to see if it helps your child:

- ▶ Offer them noise-reducing ear defenders when they are around different noises or in noisy places
- ▶ Avoid noisy or busy areas.
- ▶ Use headphones that play familiar or favourite music .

## Hyposensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Not respond when you say their name or call to them
- ▶ Speak quietly
- ▶ Not notice sounds
- ▶ Not be able to hear whispers
- ▶ Need verbal instructions repeated frequently
- ▶ Find it difficult to see where a sound is coming from
- ▶ Look to others before responding to a question.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Stand next to your child or in front when speaking to them
- ▶ Use visual cues as well as verbal ones
- ▶ Give them longer to respond to you.

## Sensory Seeker

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Talk a lot and speak loudly
- ▶ Listen to music loudly
- ▶ Want the volume on the TV or tablet up loudly
- ▶ Want to go to loud and busy places.

## SOUND continued

Things that may help:

- ▶ Playing with noisy shakers filled with rice, or other materials
- ▶ Try noisy activities with instruments
- ▶ Try games where you need to call out to each other.



## SMELL

### Hypersensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Be repulsed by strong smells or avoid strong smells
- ▶ Be able to smell things that others may not notice
- ▶ Avoid certain fabrics because they may smell differently
- ▶ Appear to be a picky eater
- ▶ Avoid going to certain places because of the smell there.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Respect your child's choice not to eat certain foods
- ▶ Don't insist that your child wear certain clothes.
- ▶ Do not use air fresheners or perfumes in the rooms where your child eats and plays.
- ▶ Keep the room where your child or young person eats and plays free of air
- ▶ Keep windows open while cooking and when they are eating. This may reduce any strong odours from lingering.

## **SMELL Continued...**

### **Hyposensitive**

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Not notice strong or unpleasant smells
- ▶ Have difficulty telling the difference between two different smells.

### **Sensory Seeker**

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Want to eat very smelly food
- ▶ Spend time smelling a strong smell, even if it is an unpleasant one
- ▶ Smell toys or resources before using them.

Things that may help children that are hyposensitive to smell or are sensory seekers:

- ▶ Playing with scented playdoh or pens
- ▶ Use aromatherapy oils
- ▶ Cook strong-smelling food.

## **TASTE**

### **Hypersensitive**

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Avoid strong tasting food
- ▶ Avoid trying new foods
- ▶ Struggle with the taste of toothpaste or gag when brushing their teeth
- ▶ Only drink very weak drinks.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Respecting your child's avoidance of strong-tasting food
- ▶ Use mild toothpaste,
- ▶ Introduce new foods very slowly and only one at the time
- ▶ Allow your child to smell or taste a tiny amount so that they can get used to new food.

### **Hyposensitive**

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Not be able to recognise flavours.

## **TASTE Continued...**

### **Sensory Seeker**

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Frequently want to eat intensely flavoured food
- ▶ Try to chew or eat non-edible items
- ▶ Taste resources (by sucking, chewing or licking) before using them.

Things that may help children that are hyposensitive to taste or are sensory seekers:

- ▶ Introduce different intense flavours to stimulate their sense of taste.

## **TOUCH**

### **Hypersensitive**

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Respond negatively to physical contact, especially gentle or soft touch
- ▶ Dislike being approached from behind
- ▶ Dislike being washed or using a shower
- ▶ Dislike having their hair brushed or washed or fingernails cut
- ▶ Struggle with clothes labels, certain fabrics and seams in socks
- ▶ Be very ticklish
- ▶ Have a low pain threshold
- ▶ Avoid food with certain textures
- ▶ Dislike having dirt or anything on their hands
- ▶ Avoid touching certain surfaces, fabrics or textures
- ▶ Avoid crowds
- ▶ Avoid using their whole hand during activities, preferring to use their fingertips
- ▶ Dislike walking barefoot on specific textures, like grass, sand, etc.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Only use firm touch – not light touch
- ▶ Avoid approaching or touching your child from behind
- ▶ Make a note of what fabrics cause your child distress. Avoid buying clothes made from these fabrics
- ▶ Put their socks on inside out so that the seam is on the outside
- ▶ Encourage them to use a natural sponge to clean themselves in the bath.

## TOUCH Continued...

### Hyposensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Not notice touch unless it is intense
- ▶ Not be aware of having a dirty face or anything in their hair (sand, dirt, etc.)
- ▶ Not notice if their clothes are bunched up or wet
- ▶ Not detect temperature unless extreme
- ▶ Have a high pain threshold
- ▶ Handle things or pets too roughly or squeeze them too hard.

Help your child become more aware by telling them if;

- ▶ They have a dirty face
- ▶ They have something in their hair
- ▶ Their clothes are bunched up or wet.

### Sensory Seeker

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Want to touch everything in their environment
- ▶ Ask for deep pressure cuddles, tickles, or back rubs
- ▶ Rub certain textures, fabrics or their skin excessively
- ▶ Walk barefoot on surfaces that others may find painful to walk on
- ▶ Seek out messy play or other tactile experiences
- ▶ Enjoy very hot or icy baths
- ▶ Ignore other people's personal space, and touch them to the point of annoying them
- ▶ Cram food into their mouth.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Give your child deep pressure hugs
- ▶ Your child may enjoy using a weighted blanket
- ▶ Let your child play opportunities with different textured objects, foods, or materials. Teach your child about other people's personal space.





# PROPRIOCEPTION

## Hypersensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Avoid stretching or contracting their muscles
- ▶ Have poor body awareness and coordination
- ▶ Avoid physical activities, like running, jumping
- ▶ Be a picky eater where they avoid food that needs a lot of chewing.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Give your child something to squeeze. You can use something like a stress ball or playdough to help them relax
- ▶ Sing body part songs like Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes. This will help your child build awareness of their body parts
- ▶ Try gentle yoga is a relaxing way to help relax muscles.

## Hyposensitive

- ▶ The child/young person may:
- ▶ Have difficulties with their posture
- ▶ Not notice that they have been sitting in an uncomfortable position for a length of time
- ▶ Not be bothered by the sensation of 'pins and needles'
- ▶ Have difficulty dressing themselves
- ▶ Have difficulty knowing how much pressure to use when drawing, writing, etc.
- ▶ Have difficulty with fine motor skills.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Deep pressure
- ▶ Activities that involve using your muscles, such as pushing and pulling heavier objects
- ▶ An energy band tied around the legs of a chair to bounce their feet or legs off may give helpful proprioceptive input.

## Sensory Seeker

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Frequently throw themselves around and into furniture, people or the floor
- ▶ Crave rough and tumble play
- ▶ Love deep pressure squeezes
- ▶ Bang their heads or other body parts against walls or the floor
- ▶ Bite or kick, appearing to be aggressive
- ▶ Try to climb things frequently.

## PROPRIOCEPTION Continued...

- ▶ Seek movement to the point that it interferes with daily function
- ▶ Chew on pencils or other objects or fabrics
- ▶ Use excessive force when drawing or writing
- ▶ Rock while sitting or will sit on their knees or ankles

## VESTIBULAR

### Hypersensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Avoid using any playground equipment where their feet are not on the ground
- ▶ Dislike being upside down or walking backwards
- ▶ Have a poor sense of balance
- ▶ Avoid spinning
- ▶ Have an intense fear of falling
- ▶ Dislike being in a moving car, train, bus, etc.
- ▶ Move slowly and carefully
- ▶ Dislike being picked up.

Things that may help:

- ▶ Ensure your child has something to put their feet on flat while eating, travelling, or using the toilet
- ▶ Understand that your child may not want to use certain equipment and may not like being picked up.

### Hyposensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Not catch themselves when they fall (putting arms out, etc.)
- ▶ Spin for a long time and not get dizzy
- ▶ Appear clumsy and fall over frequently.

### Sensory Seeker

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Frequently be on the move, preferring to run and jump than walk
- ▶ Love to be thrown in the air and caught
- ▶ Love playground equipment and rollercoasters
- ▶ Climb and jump on furniture frequently.

## VESTIBULAR Continued

- ▶ Be a 'thrill-seeker.'
- ▶ Enjoys sudden or quick movement, like going over a bump in the car
- ▶ Frequently changing position while sitting or rocks while sitting.

Things that may help children that are hyposensitive to vestibular stimulation or are sensory seekers:

- ▶ Try activities that involve swinging or jumping
- ▶ Provide a safe space where your child can throw themselves around or against without hurting themselves or others.



# INTEROCEPTION

## Hypersensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Eat more than other children to avoid hunger pangs
- ▶ Use the toilet frequently as they don't like the sensation of a full bladder
- ▶ Have a low pain threshold with internal pain, stomach aches, headaches, etc.
- ▶ Be more aware of their heartbeat

Things that may help:

- ▶ Offer your child healthy food, not junk food snacks, if they are frequently eating.
- ▶ Make sure your child is drinking enough some children avoid drinking because they dislike the feeling of a full bladder

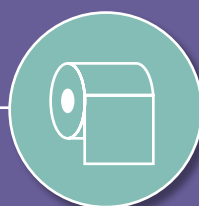
## Hyposensitive

The child/young person may:

- ▶ Not know when they are hungry or thirsty
- ▶ Not knowing when they need to use the toilet, leading to accidents, or difficulty with using the toilet
- ▶ Have a high pain threshold for internal pain

Things that may help:

- ▶ Make sure your child is eating and drinking regularly
- ▶ Remind your child to use the toilet soon after they have eaten or have had a drink.



The agreed school's guidance that can be found on the Southend Learning Network, including Southend SEND: Shared Expectations and Provision Guidance, makes reference to sensory needs, gives examples of provision and arrangements and what is expected in schools. An excellent website for further information on sensory needs is:

[www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/sensory](http://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/sensory)