

Schools Therapy Resource Pack

Section 6 –

Skills for living and learning

Section 6a –

Sensory differences and challenges

SENSORY DIFFERENCES AND CHALLENGES

Introduction

We all take sensory information from our environment and from our bodies and use this information to adjust what we do and how we respond. All people, adults and children, may respond to sensations (sensory information) in different ways.

Information is registered through the different senses: -

- Sight
- Hearing
- Touch
- Taste
- Smell
- Position in space (proprioception)
- Balance (vestibular sense).
- Body function (hungry, full etc)

We need to be able to put this information together so that we can respond appropriately. This occurs in our brains as part of the nervous system. The nervous system operates through a system of 'excitation' and 'inhibition'. Excitation (switching on) results in an active response while inhibition (dampening down) lessens or blocks a response. When a balance between the two is achieved, it can be described as 'modulation' and it is this balance that means we can respond in the right way. It means that children get used to regular, everyday sensations, so they can get on with usual activities.

As children and young people's nervous systems are less mature than adults their responses to sensations is often more extreme than adults. This is why children tend to run around and like playground activities that many adults find very challenging, for example roundabouts.

Getting the balance right.

Sometimes people may appear to be over-responsive to sensory stimuli which others can usually ignore e.g. loud sounds, buzzing lights, bright lights, the touch of clothing, particular tastes and smells. Children can appear very distracted in the classroom and find it difficult to follow a lesson as over active.

Other children may seem unaware of ordinary sensory stimulation and appear to under-react and be unresponsive, e.g. Don't hear their name, clothing in disarray, food left on their face after lunch, don't know how they have bruises or cuts. These children can be day dreamy finding it difficult to follow a lesson as 'switched off'.

A range of strategies can be tried to help children respond more appropriately to sensory inputs in the school environment.

Strategies to help with the balancing act.

Children who are over-responsive:-

- Children who have difficulty processing sensory information are more likely to become overloaded by some environments or circumstances. When this overload occurs, children benefit from a change in sensory environment. It may help to gradually grade exposure to more challenging situations.
- Consider placement of the child within the classroom e.g. do not seat him/her in areas with lots of 'traffic' (which may provide too much visual or tactile stimulation, causing discomfort and interrupting concentration).
- It is important to acknowledge the feelings of children who react aggressively to touch (e.g. lashing out when standing in line). It may help to place them at the end of the line. Ensure that time in crowded areas is minimised e.g. consider how to help them deal with coming through a doorway with the rest of the school after play time.
- Provide 'time out' opportunities.
- If an older child appears to overreact to a situation e.g. is upset or buries their head when the fire alarm goes off, it may help to review the event subsequently with them and discuss that it is normal to experience strong emotions, possibly by sharing some of your own experiences. Encourage them to think through different ways of responding.

Children who are under-responsive:-

For children who have difficulty 'tuning in':

- Place them at the front of the class, close to the teacher to improve focus.
- Provide clear visual contrasts e.g. place white paper for drawing/writing on a larger piece of dark paper
- Reinforce verbal instructions with visual demonstration
- Provide movement breaks to improve arousal (see Attention Section).

Be aware that a child who has a fear of movement or heights may find it hard to carry out activities such as climbing on apparatus off the ground, particularly in a busy, overwhelming environment. Encourage him/her to take small steps towards e.g. climbing the wall bars, perhaps choosing own goal:

- Side stepping, hand held if needed, along the narrow side of a gym bench

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- Forward stepping, hand held if needed, along the narrow side of a gym bench
- Walking up a gym bench that has one end hooked onto chosen rung of the wall-bars

Please see tables below for strategies for the different sensations

Over Responsiveness

| | What it looks like | Strategies |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Hearing | Noise levels may feel magnified Dislikes noise Is easily startled Is anxious before expected noises (school bell) Likes to 'chew' to damp down noises Talks loudly | Consider placement within classroom e.g. not near the door/busy work areas Pre prepare for loud noises e.g. fire alarm, music and singing Use social stories to help explain need for fire alarms etc Provide chewy items Demonstrate to the child how to regulate their volume |
| Vision | Dislikes bright lighting Prefers dark environment Is distracted by visual information | Consider placement within the classroom e.g. away from window Use of privacy screens Reduce amount on work sheets |
| Taste and smell | Dislikes strong tasks like only bland tasks Tastes or smells objects, clothes etc Smells people Likes consistent temperature of food or really cold or really hot Over reacts to new smells Gags easily | Respect the child's anxieties over food. Present new foods gradually. Being involved in activity without tasting is still useful and inclusive Introduce food in an exploratory way where children can smell, touch foods. For a child who seeks to smell use smelly sachets/objects to smell. Use sensory stories to assist a child to understand when it is appropriate to smell something. |
| Touch | Fussy to touch and avoids Hates hugs Only likes certain textures Dislikes messy play Can react aggressively to another's touch Feels pain and is very sensitive to temperature | Respect the child's anxiety towards touch. However, continue to offer opportunities for new tactile experiences. Enable a child to be able to vocalise how much touch they can tolerate. Prepare children for touch by only touching when approaching from the front. Avoid unnecessary and light touch. Encourage to be at the front or at the back or in line or queue. Acknowledge but do not give unnecessary attention to 'pain'. |
| Movement | Hates spinning and jumping and becomes dizzy Hates a busy place full of movement. | Respect child's anxiety to dislike of movement. However, continue to offer movement opportunities. Unstructured times e.g. playtime/lunchtime ensure the child has a quite area of a safe place to play. Offer alternative suggestions of games to play For children who fear feet off the ground |

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| | Avoids feet off the ground | practice on low level apparatus. They may need more physical and verbal support. |
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Under Responsiveness

| | What it looks like | StarategiesStrategies |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Hearing | Enjoy really loud noise Fails to pick up expected cues | Help the child to use volume appropriately. Model good volume control. Ensure to use child's name prior to giving an instruction, to use gestural prompt. Repeat back instructions |
| Vision | Takes more visual information to react Likes bright environment reflective or spinning light. | Use bold colours, boundaries to help to focus the child Monitor the child and provide time limited apparatus within play. |
| Taste and smell | Eats non food items Likes to eat hard crunchy food in diet, craves strong tastes. Under reacts to strong bad or good smells. | Provide safe alternatives for child to chew. Be vigilant to pica. Continue to allow child to each crunchy hard snacks e.g. raw fruit and vegetables. |
| Touch | Likes firm touch to respond to stimulus. Has difficulty responding to pain/temperature. Is sometimes heavy handed/over grip objects. Sometimes stands too close to others. Seeks messy play. | Be aware that child who bump/bang into furniture etc may not register an injury or hurt themselves and may not tell an adult its happened. Be aware of the temperature of water/radiators and caution and protect children appropriately. The child may have difficulty grading force of movement and pressure e.g. handwriting, throwing, grasping items. Use arms length rule. Practice good modelling to demonstrate appropriate distance. Provide regular opportunities for messy play sessions. |
| Movement | Is always on the go. Difficulty sitting still. Constantly fidgeting and tapping Runs, rather than walks. Takes excessive risk Is fast but not always coordinated. | Allow to take movement breaks. Try using a move n'sit cushion. Provide fidget toys particularly for periods of transition. Be aware that the child needs extra supervision with the school environment. Teaching a child to perform motor task more slowly and that performance is likely to improve. |
| Body Awareness | Bumps or trips over things/people. Stands to close to others | Be aware of the child's environment and place them on the edge of the mat during circle time. Position at the beginning end of the |

| | | |
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| | <p>Puts self in too small spaces or pushes against corners of the room</p> <p>Look at feet when going downstairs. Performance deteriorates when using vision.</p> | <p>line. Reinforce the arm's length rule. Use soft play opportunities and obstacle courses. These children need to use vision to visually monitor what their body is doing. Encourage these children to move classes before others so that they are safe on the stairs and do not feel hurried.</p> |
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The following strategies are different strategies that may be useful for the child who finds it difficult to focus in class and maintain in seat behaviours without disturbing themselves or others.

| Calming | Alerting |
|---|---|
| <p>If a child is in a situation that you know is challenging for them and/or behaviour starts to deteriorates e.g. pacing, rocking, shouting out and grimacing</p> | <p>When a young person is not alert enough to pay attention instructions or a task, consider the following strategies in a 1:1, small group or whole class approach.</p> |
| <p>Consider the following:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Adapt/stop the task/activity 2) Change/adapt the environment. 3) Consider child's internal well being e.g. hungry, unwell/pain, temp <p>Then try calming strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use walk don't talk • Encourage child to slow down. • Encourage child to give themselves a hug, or an adult to give a firm hug. • Squeezing a small fidget toy • Snuggling into a small space • Sucking a 'sweet' sweet • Sucking on a water bottle <p>If a child is really agitated remove child to a safe/quiet space and allow time to completely calm before reinterring into class.</p> | <p>Consider the following:-</p> <p>Quick fix</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up/down movements, juggling/running, fast movement(for short periods only) • Stamping feet • Eating crunchy/chewy foods (snack and lunch time: chat to parents about providing healthy snacks e.g. dried fruit, carrot sticks etc) • Cold drinks (water bottle in the fridge). <p>Longer lasting ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular routine for jumping and chair push ups • Timetable the 'quick fixes' that works into the child's regular routine. |

If a parent reports that the child is experiencing difficulties in carrying out self care tasks at home such as getting dressed, cleaning the teeth it might be useful to refer them to websites such as www.falkirk.gov.uk 'Making Sense of Sensory Behaviour' which has some useful strategies.

Resources

Further information can be found from the following:

Books

Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration (2015) by Paula Aquilla and Ellen Yack

Raising a Sensory Smart Child (2009) by Lindsey Biel

When Kids Fly: Solutions for Children with Sensory Integration Challenges (2015) by Sally Fryer Dietz

Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight (2004) by Sharon Heller

Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorders (2014) by Lucy Jane Miller, PhD, OTR; and Doris A. Fuller

The Sensory Team Handbook (2009) by Nancy Mucklow

Making Sense – A Guide to Sensory Issues (2016) by Rachel Schneider

The Out-of-Sync Child (2005) by Carol Stock Kranowitz

Understanding Your Child’s Sensory Signals (2011) by Angie Voss

Websites

www.childrensdisabilities.info/

www.sensoryintegration.org.uk/

www.spdfoundation.net/ - includes the “Do You Know Me” poster

www.sensory-processing-disorder.com/

www.sensorysmarts.com/

Products

www.rompa.com