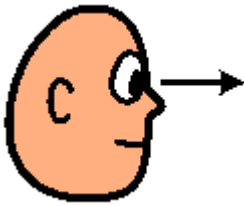




States of Guernsey  
Children and Family  
Community Services

Childs Occupational Therapy

# Sensory Strategies for Parents

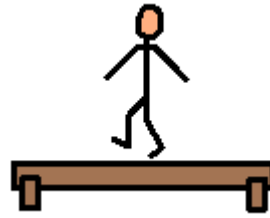




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## **What is sensory processing?**

The term 'sensory processing' describes how we understand information from the world around us – through our senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell.

There are also two other senses, 'proprioception' (body awareness) and 'vestibular' (balance and movement). Some children may show a heightened response to some sensations and this can very occasionally be a sign of a sensory processing difficulty. However, it is important to remember that having a sensitivity in one area, during certain times of the day, does not usually mean that your child has a sensory processing difficulty or needs to see an occupational therapist.

A great many children under the age of five, with no sensory processing issues, will find certain parts of their daily routine difficult. These often include bath time, hair brushing, visiting the supermarket and loud or unpredictable noises.

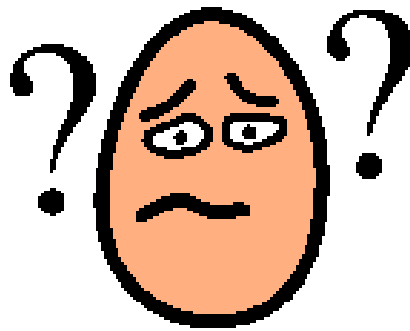
## Daily routines

Many children resist parts of the daily routine as a way of trying to exert greater control over their environment – and their parents! Try to work out if your child really dislikes certain sensations or activities, or whether they are experimenting with control.

Sometimes you may avoid certain situations, places or activities to avoid the reaction they bring out in your child. However, bear in mind that this means your child will not have the opportunity to experience the things they find challenging and it will be harder for them to learn to become tolerant of them.

Your child may become anxious about certain situations or environments. If this happens, you need to prepare them for the activity to help them cope better with it. Reassurance is very important and needs to be given in a way that your child can understand. Looking at pictures or photo stories about the activity, holding a familiar comforting toy, or using a picture timetable for the event that is happening can all be helpful.





## **Tips to manage common problems**

There are many common activities which children may find difficult.

Here are some tips on things you could do to help your child manage them better.

If the problem persists and these tips do not seem to help, you may want to ask for additional support from an occupational therapist.

## My child hates having their hair brushed...

- Use gentle yet firm brush strokes and try sitting your child in front of a mirror so they can see what is happening.
- Try using a song or rhyme as you brush. Finish brushing when the song ends so that your child knows how long the task will take.
- Try using a good detangling conditioner or detangling spray. Some hair brushes such as 'Tangle Teezer' seem to glide more easily through hair. And keep hair shorter if your child really dislikes hair brushing.
- Stickers or reward charts might be helpful.
- Keep it fun. Play 'hairdressers' with your child, where they brush and style your hair too, and encourage your child to brush their toys' hair.



## My child won't sit still...



- Young children often find it harder to stick with more structured activities, so keep activities short at first and change activity frequently to help keep them engaged.
- It will help to let your child use some of their 'energy' during active games such as trampolining, a trip to the playground or using a scooter, before expecting them to sit and play in a more structured way.
- Link activities to your child's interests. For example, colour pictures of a favourite television character and have puzzles that link to their interests.
- Try sitting next to your child, playing with a similar toy or drawing alongside them.
- Reduce any distracting clutter on the table top or where they are playing.
- Make sure your child is not too tired or hungry to play.



## My child dislikes noise...

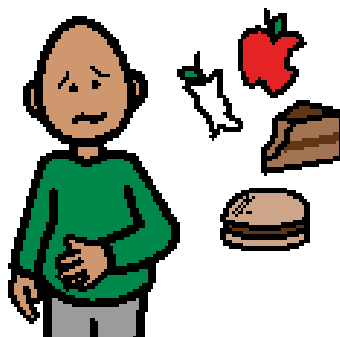


- Offer noise reducing headphones, earphones or earplugs: For school, use for assemblies, gym, cafeteria and in the community use at shopping malls, movie theaters, restaurants, birthday parties, etc.
- Make sure that you are talking to your child at their level, whilst they are looking at you. Use simple, age-appropriate language.
- Use play or songs to catch your child's attention, so they want to listen.
- Avoid calling to your child across a busy room if possible and approach them from the front, rather than behind.
- In the classroom, place child away from sources of noise and commotion such as the door, air conditioner, sink, bathroom, etc.
- Play a relaxation CD or a CD of nature sounds, "white" noise or soothing music.
- Prepare child for noisy situations ahead of time.
- Often times, knowing when something is going to happen (e.g., fire drill) helps the child to mentally get ready for it.



## My child won't eat that...

- Bear in mind that many children go through phases where they will and won't eat certain types of foods.
- It will help if your child is sat properly at a table, where possible, with their feet supported. If your child is very 'wiggly' try having an active play session before mealtimes.
- Try to keep mealtimes calm and fun, even if your child is refusing the food that you have made. Do not force your child to eat something, but try encouraging gently with games, reward charts, etc.
- You could try involving your child in the cooking as they are more likely to try something they have helped to make.
- Allow your child to experiment with different finger foods and textures. If your child does not like to touch food, try using a dip with a finger of toast, bread stick or raw vegetable stick.
- Give your child a baby wipe or flannel to wipe their hands and face if they get upset about being messy.



## Bath time is a nightmare...



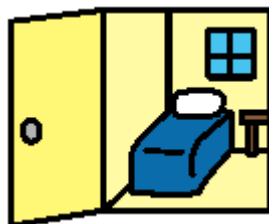
- Try to work out which part of the bath time routine is most stressful for your child, as this may help you to work out a way forward.
- A non-slip mat may help your child sit more securely and a step will help them get in and out of the bath more confidently.
- Stay calm and keep it fun. Try using play as a distraction. For example, hide toys in containers or under bubbles, use bath crayons, bath toys and squirty bottles. Singing songs about bath time may help.
- Read stories with your child about bath time so they understand what is going to happen.
- Try getting a sponge or flannel with a character that your child particularly likes, such as Thomas or Peppa Pig.
- Consider the temperature of the water, and use firm pressure when washing and drying your child as this can be more predictable and calming.
- Do not bath your child every night if they become very upset about it, and try keeping the time spent in the bath to a minimum.
- Try singing or playing a favourite song for the duration of the bath so that your child knows how long the task will take. A visual timer such as a stop clock or sand timer may be useful.
- You can buy shields that go around the head during hair washing to help reduce soap running over the face.

## Establishing Good Sleep Hygiene

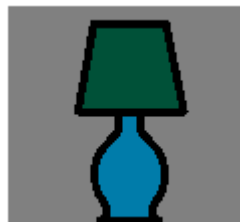
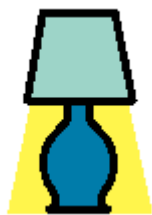
### Environmental Variables

After examining your child's sleep environment more closely, there may be some adaptations and modifications needed to assist your child's ability to relax at bedtime.

- Consider whether your child is too hot or too cold. Assess the temperature of the room, bedding and sleep clothes to decide what combination is best for your child. Remember that your child's sense of temperature may be different than your own. Recall what temperature your child seems to prefer and/or seek during the day, and consider when making decisions.
- Consider tactile sensitivities that may be affecting your child's ability to sleep. Certain textures can relax or arouse your child. Look at bedding and pyjama textures. Your child may prefer his/her feet covered or uncovered with footed pyjamas, socks and or even the covers themselves. How tight or loose the clothing fits, and whether or not there is elastic or seams can be an issue for some children. Also bedding should provide the optimum level of pressure, as this too can affect individuals with autism spectrum disorders.



- Consider noises and how they affect your child. At night, when trying to relax and fall asleep, the noises your child hears may be over powering and impossible for the child to filter out. These noises, such as water running or an animal scratching may not affect you or other household members but can be disrupting for a child with an autism spectrum disorder. Can certain household noises be monitored for the effect on your child? Sometimes a fan, air filter, TV or soft music in the child's room can help mask other noises and provide a consistent sound that is comforting and/or soothing for the child.
- Also consider visual stimuli that may be causing problems for your child at bedtime. Is your child afraid of the dark? Some children with autism spectrum disorders may seem to prefer dark places during the day but that is different than being expected to sleep in a big room in a bed at night in the dark. Streetlights, the moon, or car lights shining in the room at intermittent intervals may be affecting your child's sleep. Providing a room that is consistently light or dark may be very important, depending on your child's needs.



## Bedtime Routines

Bedtime routines and rituals are very important for most children in establishing positive sleep patterns, but are also essential for children with an autism spectrum disorder.

1. Your child will benefit from a set bedtime. Pick a time for bed that is reasonable for your child and which you can consistently provide.
2. Children with an autism spectrum disorder need to know what is going to happen next. Establish a bedtime routine that can provide predictability and a comforting, familiar pattern. For further understanding and structure, a visual bedtime schedule can help. The visual schedule can provide reminders and consistency for the whole family.
3. A good bedtime routine will help teach a child to calm down, relax and get ready to sleep. For example, if bathing is stimulating or frightening for your child, even though you may want him/her to bathe before bed, it may be best to bathe at a completely different time of the day. Likewise, there may be sensory integration activities that have proven to be relaxing to your child during the day that you can also use as part of the bedtime routine.



4. A bedtime routine should be the same every day and should include activities that are pleasant and relaxing as well as special and individualized to fit your child's needs and interests. A bedtime routine should realistically consist of 4 to 6 steps that do not take more time than is reasonable on a nightly basis.

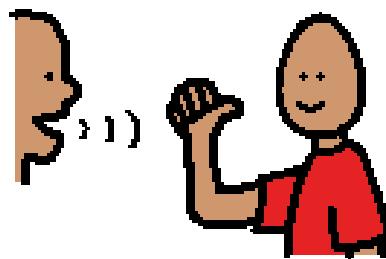
5. Some activities to consider as part of a bedtime routine or ritual include looking at the same book or story each night, saying good night to favourite objects, toileting, bathing, getting pyjamas on, brushing teeth, having a glass of water, singing a favourite song or prayer, listening to calming music that the child enjoys, hugging and kissing family members and/or engaging in a calming sensory integration activity.

6. On days when you are away from home and/or get home late, it is still important to follow bedtime routines and rituals. You can shorten each step significantly and potentially eliminate nightlong frustrations due to the change. If your child is away from home for a night or two you may see old sleeping patterns emerge. Even in a temporary new environment, routines may help. Upon returning home the bedtime routine will continue to be effective, though the excitement from the change may take a night or more to fade depending on your child and how long you have been away.

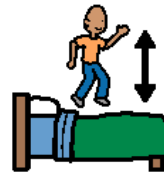


## **My child doesn't listen to me even though I know they can hear me...**

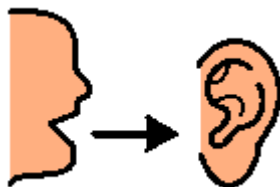
- Make sure that you are talking to your child at their level, whilst they are looking at you. Use simple, age-appropriate language.
- Use play or songs to catch your child's attention, so they want to listen.
- Avoid calling to your child across a busy room if possible and approach them from the front, rather than behind.
- Having visual cue-cards of photos or pictures that are relevant to their daily routine may help.



## My child finds listening difficult...



- Wake your body up and prepare for the day ahead by jumping on the bed first thing in the morning!
- Help wake up the auditory system by playing fun sing a long music in the mornings.
- Gain the child's attention before speaking, speak slowly and clearly.
- Give one instruction at a time in simple language so that they can understand.
- Pair instructions with gestures or visual demonstrations whenever possible.
- Allow extra time for the child to process the information and respond.
- Position child away from sources of noise such as the doorway, air conditioner, sink, bathroom, etc.





## My child dislikes tooth brushing...

- Reading your child stories or showing them books that feature tooth brushing or pictures of the sequence of brushing may be helpful.
- Ensure that your child is sat or standing securely while they are brushing their teeth.
- Different children prefer different flavours of toothpaste so try a different variety. You could also try different types of toothbrush. A rubber type of brush such as Nuk may be helpful initially and character toothbrushes may be more motivating for some children.
- Let your child brush their own teeth for part of the routine.
- Keep it fun and encourage your child to role-play 'brushing' a toy's teeth or your teeth.
- Reward charts may be helpful.
- Have a visual timer or sing a favourite song for the duration of the task, to let your child know how long brushing will take.



## My child will only wear...

- Children often have preferences about the types of clothes that they like to wear and may have a favourite item, outfit, or colour.
- Try giving a choice of two outfits. This lets your child feel more in control but lets you keep clothing suitable for the weather and activities of the day.
- Consider the texture and feel of your child's clothes. Some children can be sensitive to certain types of material or labels. If your child does not like seams on clothes, underwear can be worn inside out. Use unscented detergent and conditioner if you feel your child might be sensitive to these.
- Encourage your child to sit while dressing.
- Stories about dressing, or using photos and pictures, can help your child learn about getting dressed.



## My child bites...

- Children often bite when they are upset or angry. It is important to try to work out why they have bitten because this is often the way to identify a solution.
- Children who bite might need to have crunchy snacks at certain times of day, or when teeth are coming through. These snacks should be appropriate to their age and dietary needs and could include toast, pretzels, apple, raw vegetable sticks or bread sticks.
- Having a piece of fabric to chew may also be helpful, but check they can't bite through it and that it doesn't fray.
- Some children use a 'chewy tube' which can be bought over the internet.
- Any child who bites persistently may need a check-up from their dentist to look at their teeth, or a doctor to check their ears are not causing discomfort.
- Behavioural strategies can be helpful when dealing with biting, once the reason for biting has been established.



## My child seeks or avoids movement

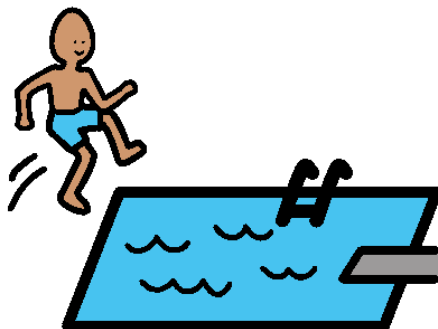
Most children develop a strong vestibular (movement) sense simply through engaging in everyday play activities that allow for exploration and movement. There are many activities that can help promote the development of a healthy vestibular system. Here are some of our favourites:

Any and all things playground related!

- Slides are also beneficial for providing fast movement.
- Hanging upside-down from playground equipment (with supervision only!) Or if your Dad holds you by your feet and carefully plonks you on the bed or sofa (remember safety first!)
- Rocking! Fast, slow, or to the rhythm of your favourite song!
- Cardboard Box Race Cars- let Mum or Dad push you down the passage or around the house in your cardboard racing car whilst you navigate.



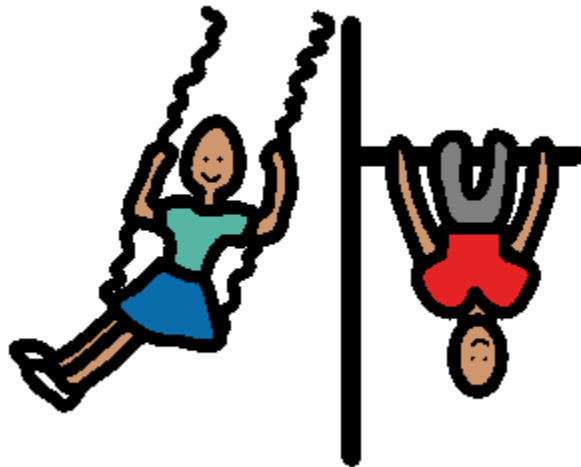
- Or try family fun Ring a Roses, Row- Row -Row Your Boat, 5 Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed and Roll Over Roll Over...
- Spinning: Office-style swivel chairs are perfect. Or try a sit and spin toy, log rolling across floors or down hills, somersaults, or cartwheels. Other ways to spin: tire swings, scooter boards, and merry go rounds. Please stop before you feel you dizzy or queasy.
- Jumping: On a trampoline, bed (if appropriate), up/down off curbs or other surfaces, jumping jacks, jump rope, hopscotch or bouncing on a space hopper ball.
- Running: Set up an obstacle course with options to go over/under, climb up/down, run backwards from one point to another, etc. Try a game of hide and seek or tag.

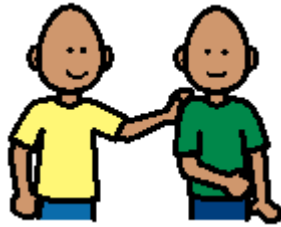


Balance activities: walk on the curb or a balance beam, walk across the bed without falling, stand on a half inflated beach ball, walk while balancing an item on your head, play Twister, or Kids Yoga.

Swings are great for encouraging all sorts of movement (front to back, side to side, circular) Allow kids go at their own speed: fast and high, or slow and low. It's all great vestibular experience! Not at the park? Try a blanket or sheet held by two adults for a makeshift swing!

Visual motor activities that require balance and movement: dribbling a ball, catching a ball, flashlight tag will also help promote good vestibular functioning.





## **My child avoids touch or my child has to touch everything...**

You may have heard terms such as "sensory defensive" and "sensory seeking." When someone is defensive, it means that a particular sensation is noxious or uncomfortable to them.

They resort to avoidance behavior. A child may refuse to touch something gooey or may become upset when entering a place that is too noisy or where the lights are too bright.

An individual who is seeking sensory stimulation may be under-sensitive to stimuli to a degree or may, for some reason, crave more of a particular sensation. An example is the child who sucks and chews on his shirt collar. There are some who need to touch everything.

Listed below, are some strategies that help get to that "just right" level of sensory processing organized by sensory system.

## **My child is over sensitive to touch...**

- In general, begin by encouraging play in dry, non-messy media rather than in gooey or sticky textures. If the child still won't touch anything, have him/her use sticks to poke, containers to scoop and pour the materials.
- Always approach a child with tactile sensitivities from the front (no surprises) and use a firm touch, never use light touch.
- For the least offensive sensory play, try dry, clean media: use both hands to locate small toys hidden in a bucket filled with bird seed, sand, beans, pasta, rice, etc. Practice pouring from one container to another.
- Progress to water play and later add soap for sudsy water: use lots of containers for pouring. Progress to handling Play-doh and other non-gooey media such as Crayola Model Magic, Sculpey clay, Play Foam or Moon Sand. Gradually explore different messy media: start with finger paint bath bubbles in the bath tub and progress to real finger paints, smear shaving cream on a mirror or smooth surface, finger paint with pudding, whipped cream and other mushy foods.
- Allow the child to brush his/her own arms and legs with a soft hair brush, surgical brush or corn silk brush, then progress to letting you brush him or her.
- Allow your child, to rub lotion onto arms, legs, hands, feet, etc.



- Food play is great for increasing a child's interest in touching different textures. Make, for example, pretzels together and spend a lot of time kneading the dough and forming it into different shapes.
- More food play: make jewelry by stringing pop-corn, Cheerios, Fruit Loops, etc.
- Provide deep pressure and weighted garments, blanket or weighted lap toys in school (speak to your OT about these resources).
- Define personal space with carpet squares or tape on the floor in school, and allow the child to sit or stand in the periphery of a group so that others are not behind him/her.
- In the cafeteria, arrange for the child to sit close to a wall or pillar to feel safe.



## My child wants to touch everything....



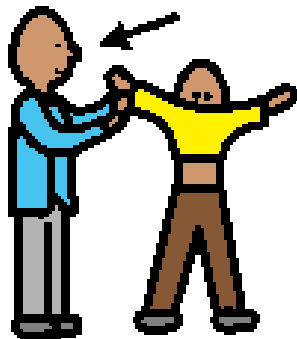
- Interestingly, most of the same sensory activities that help a child tolerate touching or being touched, also help the child who is a "sensory-seeker" (has to touch everything). To diminish this behavior, try the activities in the list above.
- Play games like "What's in the Bag": hide familiar objects that the child has to identify by feel.
- By only using touch, identify objects hidden in a bucket filled with bird seed, sand, beans, pasta, rice, etc.
- Encourage discriminating among various textures and states: feel and describe objects that are soft vs hard, smooth vs rough, wet vs dry vs slimy, cold vs warm, small vs large, round vs cornered vs curvy, degrees of vibration, etc.
- Keep a fidget toy nearby when the child is expected to pay attention, something sticky, squidgy, spiky or elastic works best. (Available at [www.sensorytoywarehouse.co.uk](http://www.sensorytoywarehouse.co.uk))
- Provide regular deep pressure tactile inputs throughout the day. Deep pressure touch is very calming and regulating (please see attached sheet for activity ideas).

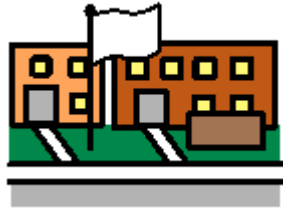
Please keep your occupational therapist informed about progress made or where your child still requires more support.

Please contact your therapist should you require further details or have additional concerns.

Regards

The Children's Development Services Occupational Therapy Team





Contact Us

Child Development Service

Children's Occupational Therapy  
Team

Le Rondin School and Centre  
Rue des Landes  
Forest  
Guernsey  
GY8 0DP

Tel  
01481 213600

