

OVERCOMING SENSORY STRUGGLES

Information and advice on some of the biggest sensory struggles faced by children and young people

Improving Sleep

Tip 1 - Don't be afraid of an active bedtime routine:

Some children thrive on a low stimulation quiet routine before sleep and some DO NOT! Start with a un interactive child directed play for 10 minutes e.g. sensory play or pushing, pulling and heavy work are good to do.

Tip 2 – Embrace the darkness:

The darker the room the better. The darkness helps our bodies naturally produce melatonin (the sleepy hormone), exposure to light reduces the production of melatonin making us more likely to wake up. Cover up light sources. However, if the child is afraid of the dark using a red light will not interrupt the production of melatonin like other light does.

Tip 3 – Fill the quiet air:

Some children struggle to lay still and wait for sleep. Feeling scared from their thoughts/worries or sounds they hear can be an issue. Try using guided meditative stories for bedtime (available on YouTube or a podcast). Using white noise throughout the night will reduce the night waking – fans are good.

Tip 4 – Deep pressure:

The sensory input from deep pressure can help calm the body for sleep, bear hugs can be put into the bedtime routine. Increasing pressure whilst the child sleeps prevents waking, using weighted blankets, compression sheets, compression clothing can help. Techniques such as log rolls and squishes can also be used.

Picky Eating

What is picky eating?

- Eating a limited number of foods
- Aversion to foods with specific tastes and textures
- Avoiding an entire food group like protein
- Resist changing what they are used to eating
- Crave and really want to eat certain food or types of food

Why?

Sensory challenges which can be but aren't limited to:

- Textures
- Sounds
- Smells
- Taste
- Swallowing
- Chewing

Sensory challenges are common in picky eaters but there are other reasons. Other reasons include:

Addictions to foods and food additives and poor digestion.

Address sensory challenges

- Identify the foods that cause the most sensory defensiveness; crunchy (noise/texture), smooth (pudding), salty, sweet and which types can be tolerated.
- Once knowing what can be tolerated, identify nutritious foods that have the same texture, tastes and sounds or the ones that you can re-imagine (cook, puree or prepare in a different way) to create a sensory experience they can tolerate. Start to trial these.
- Involving your child where possible with food prep etc can help. Many children deal with the transitions of changes to what they are eating and are more adventurous when they have a hand in planning and preparing the food.

Attention and focus for older kids.

Sensory and attention

What do sensory and attention have in common?

The sensory system affects our ability to pay attention because of how it affects our arousal levels. Our sensory systems help keep our bodies and minds in a state of alertness for all situations. Helping us stay calm enough to listen, learn and engage with activities but not so calm we are falling asleep. The sensory systems help us stay alert enough to learn, keep safe and engage with others but not hyper so we cannot focus and pay attention. The right tools and strategies can help with this getting to the “just right” level.

The environment

The environment you are in can impact your attention and how you will need to try and focus. What strategies you will use will depend on how you are taking in the information needed to try and learn. For example, at school:

- Focussing whilst the teacher is talking at the front of the class
- Reading written instructions on the whiteboard, computer or handouts
- Doing something whilst trying to take in other information
- Alone reading information on the computer

Strategies

At school:

- Try sitting at the front of the classroom to limit distractions
- Talk to the teacher about what you may struggle to see.
- Sit away from friends that will likely distract you
- Extra time for working on tests or assignments
- Take notes during class
- Visual checklist to help with transitions in the classroom and for what you need to get done
- Pre organised movement breaks – clean the whiteboard, get a drink, run an errand for the teacher.

- A small fidget during instruction – pre organised.

At home:

- When working at home set up working environment in a way that works free from distractions where possible.
- Put phone away and turn off TV.
- Use visuals as a way to keep on track (sticky notes, notepad or checklist).
- Movement breaks – get a drink, use the bathroom or get a snack
- Try chewing gum
- Create a plan – 1-3 things that have to be done to keep focussed
- Short work times building to longer sessions, you could use a timer for 5 minutes and then reflect on how you did and continue to work your way to more time.

Visual Strategies

- Needing more visual input to help attend and focus:
- Use highlighters to draw attention to important information (also available on the computer)
- When working on the computer use sticky notes to write out goals/or to do list to stay focussed
- Make a list of what needs to be done
- Set a visual timer on phone, computer to help stay focussed.
- Brightly coloured learning materials to add more visual input bright, coloured sticky notes etc.

Auditory strategies

- Missing important details when presented verbally, making own noises such as humming or singing to help stay focussed.
- Tapping foot or fingers whilst working
- Humming when working alone
- Playing music when working alone or taking breaks to listen to music then going back to activity
- Noise cancelling headphones
- White noise to block out distracting sounds – fan etc.



Tactile strategies

- Learning from hands on experiences, learning through touch and feeling things.
- Rubber bands, paper clips, vibrating writing utensil.
- Fidget spinner, puzzle cube, coins in hands
- Stress ball, putty



- Rubbing something in hands, touching Velcro stuck on desk
- Touching fingers, jewellery, something soft
- Squeezing something – fist, stress ball, something soft
- Playing with/twirling hair.

Movement strategies

- Needing to move around and wiggle whilst sitting, find it hard to sit still.
- Wall or chair push ups.
- Jumping jacks.
- Sitting on a ball.
- Standing to complete work.
- Move and sit cushion
- Theraband on chair to push legs against.
- Make hands into a fist and then open out hands.
- Wiggle fingers.
- Place something heavy on lap, lap pad, heavy books weighted blanket.



Oral sensory strategies

Sitting still is difficult in class, needing to move around.

Chewing gum, sucking hard sweets, crunchy foods, chewy foods – liquorice/starburst, mints, sour foods/snacks.

Drinking water from a sports bottle or straw, thicker drinks through a straw – smoothie, favoured drinks.

Chewing tube or necklace, end of pencil.

What happens when you're over stimulated?

Getting overstimulated, having a hard time concentrating in class, visually distracted environment or noisy room.

- Try to identify what is bothering you
- Can you change what is bothering you – turn it off or take it down.
- If you can't change it how can you help yourself calm down?

Calming strategies

- Deep breathing: 3 deep breaths to slow heart rate
- Hands in pockets or sit on hands – helps body to become still
- Understand how body feels at the time – heart rate, increased breathing, sweaty hands, body feels hot. This can help better identify why you are upset, and also learn to identify what your body is doing to help you find ways to help the body calm down.
- Make a fist and then relax the muscles in the hand – the feeling of pressure in the hands can help you understand the feeling of relaxation.
- Hug or squeeze self – deep pressure throughout the body
- Counting – counting is a good technique to take the mind off the frustrating situation and help calm the mind and body.
- Physical exercises – a great way to help clam the body and get frustrations out. Can also provide deep pressure through the body.
- See the calm down toolkit on the next page

Timing of activities

Think about when you would need to use the strategies. Before, during or after an activity? Figuring out the timing of when to put a sensory strategy in place can be trial and error and also may depend how you are feeling certain days. Keeping track of when you completed a strategy will also help you have a better understanding of if this strategy helped keep your focus and attention.

Calm down tool-kit

Music player with headphones	Noise cancelling headphones	Stress ball	Colouring pages	Lavender essential oils
Lotion for massage	Yoga poses	Sensory brush	Preferred food items	Crackers
Hard sweets	Water bottle	Gum	Milkshake with straw	Notebook to write
Lego kits to build	Mini vibrating massager	Magazines	Dot to dots	Mazes
Word search	Crosswords	Sudoku	Card games	Puzzles
Brain teasers	Rubiks cube	Weighted lap pad	Weighted blanket	Heated blanket
Knitting	Audiobook	Punch bag	White noise machine	Lava lamp
Craft kit	Mad libs	Eye mask	Ear plugs	Compression clothes
Therapy ball	Chewy tube	Chewy necklace	Resistance bands	Theraputty
Slime	Squishy ball	Fidget toys	Scented candle	Pony beads with string
Nail polish	Head massager	Coloured lights	Items to squish	Foam roller
Mat to lay on or roll up	Oversized blanket/ comforter	Stuffed animal	Dumbbells for exercise	Travel sized games
Playdough	Paint	Hairbrush	Heavy rucksack	Books to read

Developing self awareness

Identifying strengths

What are you good at when it comes to learning? When learning something new it can feel overwhelming and frustrating. Finding areas of our lives that we are doing well can help us shift to a more positive mind-set in general. It may help to overcome feelings of frustration when trying new things.

Ask yourself:

- What is something you are good at doing right now?
- What do you feel your strengths are?
- What do you feel is a good quality about yourself?
- What is one way you enjoy learning something?
- What is something you enjoy learning about?
- Use the answers to help you feel good about yourself.

Making a plan

Keep a note of the following to help develop a plan that works for you.

Strategy - which strategy you used.

Timing - when did you try it.

Activity - you may not use this column but you could write out the specific activity you were doing whilst trying to focus and keep attention.

Setting – where were you.

Information – how were you learning (verbally, reading etc)

Outcome – did it work well or not, also how did it make you feel and if you would try again.

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