

Understanding Your Child's Needs: Sensory and/or Physical



Sensory and/or physical needs encompass a wide range of needs, including difficulties with hearing, vision, physical disabilities and sensory processing differences. Children with these needs require specialised educational support and provisions to support their access to learning.

In this guide, you'll find clear, supportive insight into how sensory and/or physical needs can impact your child and how you can support them.

You'll also find clear signposts to further sources of advice and support for your family.



What are sensory processing differences?

Sensory processing differences refer to variations in how individuals perceive and respond to sensory information from their environment and their own body. They might be more or less sensitive to things like sounds, lights, smells, tastes and touch. These differences can also affect how they move and interact with their surroundings.

Sensory processing differences are not 'curable' or 'fixable'. They make up a part of an individual. Sensory sensitivities can be part of other neurodevelopmental conditions, such as Autism or ADHD. They can also exist independently.

Supportive Strategies

There are many different ways to support your child's sensory and/or physical needs. Not all these strategies will work for your child the first time or at all; it takes time to figure out what works best for your child. You might find their needs will change over time, so some strategies will need to change as your child grows and develops.

Environmental Strategies

These strategies or changes can be applied to the environment around your child to make it more accessible and comfortable for them.

Reducing sensory inputs:



- Minimise distractions by clearing away visual, physical and audible distractions or playing relaxing background sounds to help your child focus.
- Provide a safe space by creating a quiet, calm area where your child can regulate when they feel overwhelmed.
- Create clear movement paths with visual aids like ramps or steps to make it easier for your child to move around and judge distances.

Sensory Support

Supporting a child with sensory needs involves a range of strategies designed to help them regulate their sensory experiences and reduce feelings of overwhelm or anxiety. These strategies often focus on providing specific types of sensory input to either calm or stimulate, depending on the child's individual needs.

Weighted items - These can include weighted blankets, vests or lap pads. The deep pressure provided by these items can have a calming effect on the nervous system, helping to alleviate stress, anxiety and overstimulation. It's crucial to **always consult an occupational therapist** before introducing weighted items to ensure they are used safely and effectively, and that the appropriate weight is selected for the child.

Deep pressure therapy - This involves applying firm, sustained pressure to various parts of the body. Similar to weighted items, deep pressure can help to down-regulate the nervous system, providing a sense of security and promoting relaxation. This can be achieved through techniques like firm hugs, squeezes or even massage. An occupational therapist can demonstrate appropriate techniques and help tailor them to a child's specific needs and preferences.

Tactile tools - Offering opportunities for tactile stimulation can be incredibly beneficial for children with sensory needs. Sensory bins filled with materials like rice, water beads, sand or pasta provide a rich and engaging tactile experience. Fidget toys, such as stress balls, textured rings or pop-its, can also offer a discreet and accessible way for children to self-regulate through touch, helping to improve focus and reduce restlessness.

Oral sensory tools - Some children have a strong need for oral input, which can manifest as chewing on clothing, pencils or other inappropriate items. Providing designated oral sensory tools, such as chewable necklaces, bracelets or pencil toppers, can redirect this need in a safe and appropriate manner. Additionally, offering crunchy or chewy snacks can satisfy oral sensory cravings and provide proprioceptive input to the jaw and mouth.

Reduce auditory overwhelm - Loud or chaotic auditory environments can be incredibly distressing for children with auditory sensitivities. Using headphones or ear defenders can significantly reduce the impact of these sounds, helping to minimise auditory overwhelm and create a more manageable sensory environment. This can be particularly useful in busy classrooms, public places or during noisy activities. Creating quiet spaces where a child can retreat from auditory stimulation can also be highly beneficial.

Movement Breaks: Regular physical activity and movement breaks are crucial for children's regulation and focus. These breaks help to release pent-up energy, improve circulation and re-engage their attention. They can be integrated throughout the day in various ways:

Structured breaks

Plan short, scheduled breaks every 30-60 minutes where children can engage in activities like stretching, dancing or a quick walk.

Active transitions

Instead of moving directly from one activity to another, incorporate a brief physical activity, such as a 'crab walk' to the next room or a 'bear crawl' to gather materials.

Outdoor play

Encourage outdoor play whenever possible, providing opportunities for running, jumping, climbing and exploring.

Brain gym exercises

Try some easy exercises that involve crossing the middle of the body. These can help connect both sides of the brain and improve focus.

Sensory paths

Create a designated sensory path with different textures, obstacles and activities that children can navigate when they need a quick sensory input break.



Proprioceptive Activities: Proprioception refers to our sense of body position and movement. Activities that provide deep pressure and heavy work input can be incredibly calming and organising for children, helping them to feel more grounded and aware of their bodies. These activities can include:

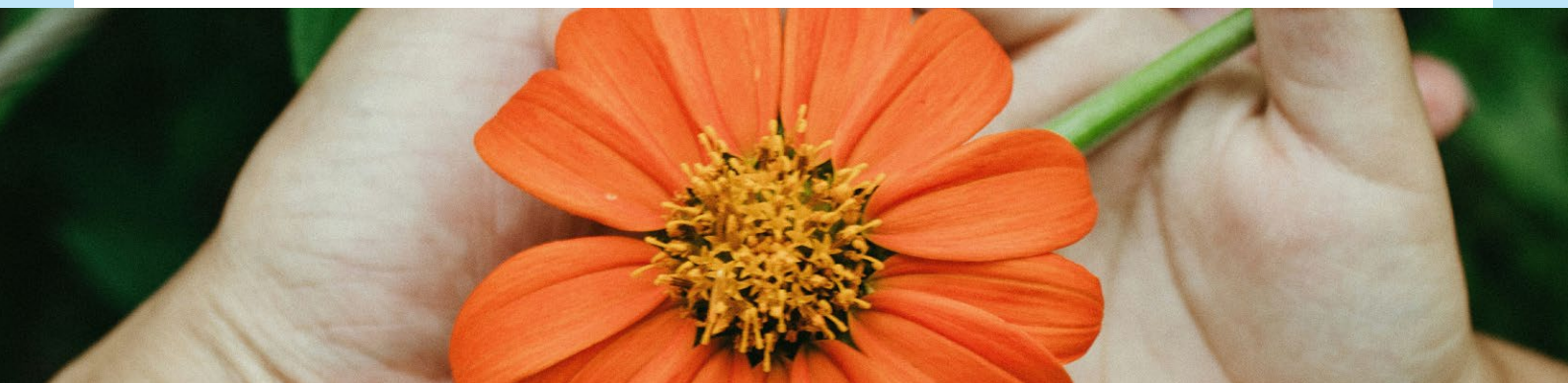
Gross Motor Activities:

- **Jumping** - Trampolines, jumping jacks or simply jumping on the spot.
- **Swinging** - Traditional swings, platform swings or even just gentle swaying in a chair.
- **Crawling** - Through tunnels, under furniture or on all fours across a room.
- **Pushing/pulling** - Moving heavy objects (like a laundry basket filled with blankets), pushing a wall or pulling a wagon.
- **Climbing** - On play structures, stairs or even just crawling over pillows.

Gross Motor Activities:

- **Playdough or clay** - Kneading, rolling and squeezing these materials provide excellent proprioceptive input.
- **Heavy work chores** - Helping with chores like carrying groceries, stacking chairs or raking leaves.
- **Deep pressure massage** - Gentle, firm pressure applied to the arms, legs or back.
- **Wearing a weighted vest or lap pad (with professional guidance)** - These can provide a calming and organising effect for some children.
- **Chewing gum or crunchy snacks** - The act of chewing provides proprioceptive input to the jaw.

By incorporating both movement breaks and proprioceptive activities into a child's day, you can significantly support their physical development, self-regulation, attention and overall wellbeing. It's important to observe individual responses and adjust activities as needed to best meet their unique sensory and physical needs.



Working Together



Working together with everyone involved in your child's life is the best way to support their development. Parents, schools, local authorities and other professionals all have different insights and skills. By teaming up, you can create a strong and steady support system for your child.

Sharing observations, concerns and successes helps everyone understand your child's needs and work together. This creates a smooth support system between home, school and the wider community.

- **Talk openly:** Regularly share successes and concerns with your child's teachers, support staff and other professionals.
- **Build good relationships:** Develop and maintain strong connections within your support network, focusing on shared goals and solutions.
- **Don't be afraid to ask questions:** If you're unsure about strategies, resources or words used, always ask for clarification.
- **Keep a record of progress:** Write down what works well and any changes you see.
- **Be consistent:** Use the same strategies at home that are being used elsewhere so your child benefits from consistent support.

Further Support

Local and national charities offer a rich source of support and information. They provide invaluable guidance and strategies, from parent helplines to specialist services, catering to both you and your child.

Remember, you're not alone on this journey; many resources are available to support your child's development.

If your child's difficulties are ongoing, worsening or impacting their learning, relationships or family life, it's important to seek help. Consider contacting their teacher, SENDCo or GP for support.

At Twinkl, we're dedicated to supporting your family every step of the way. Scan the QR code below to discover our growing collection of helpful guidance.



These resources are those which we have generally found to be of benefit to learners with SEND. However, every learner's needs are different and so these resources may not be suitable for your learner. It is for you to consider whether it is appropriate to use these resources with your learner.

This resource is provided for informational and educational purposes only. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of professional research as of July 2025. This resource is not intended to be used in an emergency and should not replace professional training. If you require mental health advice, you should contact a suitably qualified mental health professional.

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