



The Sensory System and Play

Many people with autism process sensory information differently. Sensory information gives us feedback about the environment and ourselves enabling us to make sense of what is happening and respond accordingly. People with autism frequently experience differences processing sensory information. This can be seen when people are hypersensitive (over sensitive when too much stimulation occurs possibly resulting in sensory avoidance) or hyposensitive (under sensitive when too little stimulation occurs possibly resulting in sensory seeking). Hyper or hyposensitive responses can be affected by factors such as anxiety, health, tiredness, hunger and changes in the environment or routine. This means that sensory avoidance and seeking behaviours can fluctuate on different days and times.

Providing opportunities for someone to be able to access or escape sensory information can assist them to regulate their senses. Before addressing any sensory issues always eliminate any physical causes for the sensory seeking or avoiding behaviour such as the person being unwell or in pain. Specially trained occupational therapists can undertake a sensory integration assessment, please talk to your GP or support worker to investigate further.

Regular opportunities for young people to access or escape can be provided by having items permanently available, when safe to do so. This can help them to independently regulate themselves. However, encouraging siblings and other members of the family to join in sensory play can also provide great times of engagement.

Sensory play can get messy, to contain it visually define the area by using a mat, tuff spot tray, container, empty paddling pool or even the bath. Here are some suggestions for sensory play, keep in mind that some young people will seek, and some will avoid, and this can be different on different days!

Sensory play suggestions

Create your own mini mud kitchen and offer different textures, rough, smooth, hard, rough, prickly, soft, cold, dough, slime, flour wet, warm, cold. Add equipment such as pots, pans, funnels and cutlery and try mixing them together and add water or paint. Some young people will like to use their hands and feet, or you can paint it on them using your hands or a brush. Some smells can be off putting and others relaxing, try adding a safe to use essential oil or cooking essence. Other activities such as baking, vacuuming, sweeping, washing the car or windows and gardening may appeal to some. Encourage the young person to help prepare and tidy away the activity as this can promote daily living and organisational skills. Play England has an extensive list of resources

<http://www.playengland.org.uk/resource/nature-play-activity-recipes/>

Make a sensory room, safe space or den. Use a tent, put a blanket over a table or use a corner of the room. Add lights, torches, lava lamps or projectors, music, instruments,

nature sounds or headphones to escape noise. Add cushions and blankets, things to squeeze and touch, books and catalogues.

Some young people enjoy designing, building, drawing, mazes, 'Where's Wally' and optical illusions. These can be satisfying and calming. Provide opportunities to swing and jump, roll up in a rug or cocoon in a blanket or climb into a big box. For further ideas please see Occupational Therapy in the Home Sensory Activities

https://www.supportincornwall.org.uk/kb5/cornwall/directory/advice.page?id=7w5Rr6wm_sM

Further reading

Cornwall Council, Support in Cornwall, Autism and Sensory Processing

<https://www.supportincornwall.org.uk/kb5/cornwall/directory/advice.page?id=cRd3GfZ1suc>

The National Autistic Society, Sensory Differences

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx>

The Autism Education Trust, Tools for Teachers

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/t4t/>

Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Processing Issues, Revised and Updated Edition. Biel and Peske. 2009. ISBN: 9780143115342