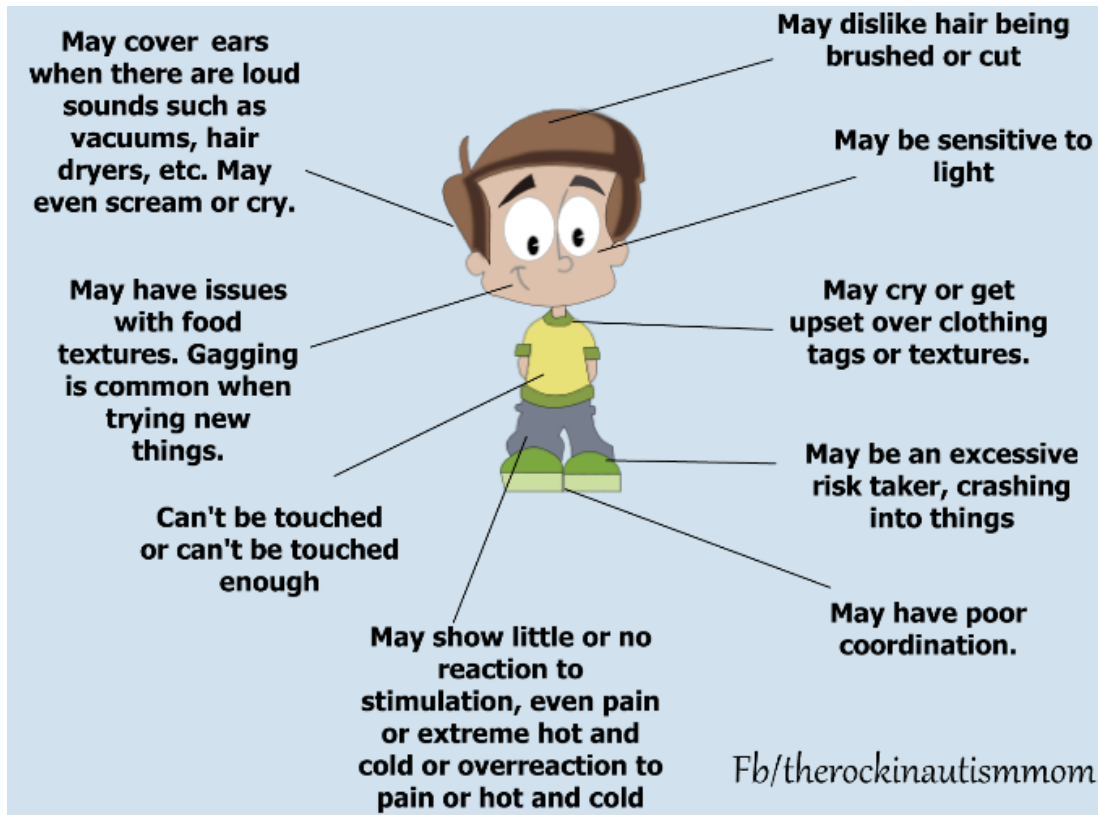


Becoming a Sensory Detective and Reframing Your Child's Behavior

"A child's behavior is a form of communication"



Find the positive in your child unique sensory differences!

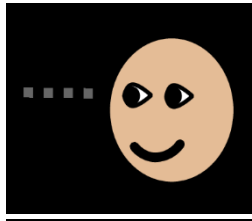
- Needs to touch everything —————> Likes to explore with his hands
- Climbs on whatever they can —————> Great explorer
- Always covers her ears —————> Attentive to detail
- Always talking —————> Story teller
- Plays too rough —————> Strong muscles, loves to engage
- Takes excessive risks —————> Great partner for different activities
- Oblivious to messy hands —————> Can have fun in the dirt and sand
- Seems lazy —————> Super chill, reads/plays a game for forever!

Sensory processing differences are not "good/bad, right/wrong they just are" (Henry & Wheeler, 2001) When caregivers and teachers can understand a child's brain based differences they can start to identify triggers and subsequently prevent some fight, flight and freeze responses.

**When you are identifying triggers
consider the following and document**

- (1) What was happening right before the behavior (who was there, what were the expectations, what was going on in the environment in terms of their senses - seeing, hearing, smelling, touch etc.)
- (2) What was the specific behavior observed from the child
- (3) How did you or others respond to the behavior and what was the response from your child
- (4) It is very important to realize that sensory differences can have a different impact on behavior due to a variety of things such as: the time of day, are they hungry, anxious about something else etc.

Becoming a "Sensory Detective" and Tools to Try



Visual Sense (Eyes)

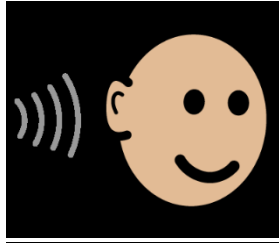
- Prefers to play or work in low lighting
- Bothered by bright lights, clutter/messiness
- Enjoys looking at visual details in objects or books
- Needs help finding things in busy/messy spaces
- Craves or loves flashing bright lights or frequent changes (iPads, watching sports, video games)
- Prefers OR dislikes colors and patterns of clothing
- Watches people as they move around the room
- May miss written information
- Difficulty reading



Visual Tools

- Limit distractions: table divider, study carrel, curtains, hat, sun glasses, hoodie
- Turn off the T.V., music during periods of concentration
- Use natural light
- Be creative with spaces to work in (calming space, under a table, in a tent, in the library, outside)
- Keep spaces organized and free of clutter
- Use calming colors (e.g., blues, greens, pastel yellow, neutral tones)
- Slow moving objects are calming like lava lamps, bubble lamps, sand timers
- Use visual schedules and timers for better transitions
- Puzzles, Looking at photo books, looking at pictures in a book (e.g. Guinness World Record), pendulum toy
- Where's Waldo, Dot-to-Dots, Color by Numbers, Ball Mazes
- Glow in the dark sticks/bracelets, these can be lots of fun in the bath too
- Try not to shop during peak hours (less people = less visual stimuli)

Becoming a "Sensory Detective" and Tools to Try



Auditory Sense (Ears)

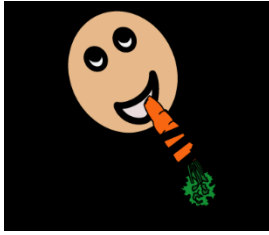
- Gets upset with loud or sudden noises
- Covers their ears a lot
- Tells others to be quiet, turn the T.V. off or down
- Notices sounds others can ignore; easily distractible (e.g., clock ticking, hum of florescent light) making it really hard to be productive in a meaningful task
- Shuts down or gets upset in loud or busy places, assemblies, large gatherings
- Oblivious to some sounds
- Has a difficult time working in groups when there is lots of talking



Ear Tools

- Minimize extra noise when possible,
- Be proactive: prepare for (or avoid) fire drills, gym assemblies, shopping trips, family gatherings – have an escape plan
- Shop during less peak hours and/or do smaller shops to decrease the time spent in the store. Consider "click and collect" for groceries and online shopping when possible.
- Ear protectors or ear plugs for really loud environments or when they need to concentrate
- Soft rhythmical music with consistent beat
- Some children benefit from a constant white noise to drown out all the other unpredictable noises for e.g. a fan, air cleaner, humidifier/dehumidifier, white noise Apps
- Find natural sounds
- Offer calming spaces for "sensory breaks" (give the auditory sense a break!)

Becoming a "Sensory Detective and Tools to Try



Oral Sense (Mouth)

- Often chews / licks non-food items (e.g., pencils, sleeves, hair)
- Strong opinions re: taste, texture, temperature of food (e.g., sour, lumpy). Perceived as a picky eater.
- Drools more than you might expect for chronological age
- Chews, licks, smacks lips; chews on tongue
- Hates brushing teeth
- Gags easily
- Seeks out water breaks when restless
- Swallows food without chewing or overstuffs

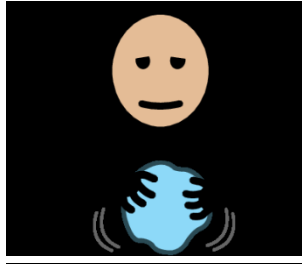


Mouth Tools

Integrating mouth tools throughout the day can be calming and organizing! There are many ways to do this and some may be too intense for you but perfect for your child!

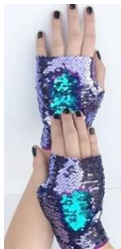
- Things to suck on: sugarless candies, frozen starbursts, smoothies, regular access to a water bottle with a straw, orange/lemon/grapefruit wedges, popsicles, frozen fruit bars, warheads, large sour soothers, suckers, fruit leather bars (skinny and/or thick), candy canes, lemon water, mentos
- Things that are chewy: gum (explore the different kinds and flavors of gum AND they may need more than one piece), granola, bagels, fruit leather, craisins/raisins, jerky, skittles, licorice/nibs
- Things that are crunchy: Crispers, Pretzels, carrots, celery, frozen grapes/strawberries dry cereal, nuts, popcorn, pickles, apples (alone, with cheese, with wow or peanut butter), toast
- Non-food items: chewlery, chew-safe tubing, coffee stir sticks, pencil toppers,
- Oral Activities: blowing bubbles, blowing cotton balls through a straw, harmonica, wazoo, playing "pass" with a marble by blowing it across the table or blowing the marble into a target, slide whistle, bendy/thin/thick/twisty straws, blowing a pinwheel, vibrating toothbrush

Becoming a "Sensory Detective" and Tools to Try



Tactile Sense (Touch)

- Always needs to touch objects and others
- Craves/needs OR pulls away from hugs
- Sensitive to their personal space, has a hard time understanding others personal space
- Very high /low tolerance for pain (e.g. falls down hard but doesn't seem hurt vs. gently bumps something and cries hard)
- Unaware of pain, temperature, messy on hands/face
- Gets too close to others when talking
- Becomes anxious when standing too close others
- Can have an emotional response to being touched

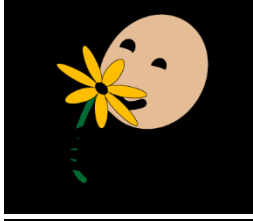


Hand/Touch Tools

These should be emphasized as a hand tool or a listening helper. Your child will need you to coach them on how to use it as a tool and provide them with feedback. Hand tools can promote self-regulation during transitions, waiting in line, when the teacher is giving a lesson, class discussions, waiting at doctor's office, car rides etc.

- Firm, expected, predictable touch (e.g., massaging, rubbing back)
- Exploring different textures, temperatures through sensory play (kinetic sand, play-doh, shaving cream, bins of uncooked rice/beans, beads, sequence, fleece, Velcro)
- Objects to touch, manipulate, fidget with (i.e., listening helpers). Sometimes our hands need to be busy so our brains can listen and focus. Items to pull, twist, squeeze etc: elastics, squishy, tangle fidget, putty, rubix cube, key chain, lego guy, twisting pipe cleaners, paper clips, smooth rocks, rubber bands, tape
- Games that involve our hands: simon says, playing catch, water balloons, zoom ball, Velcro and ball catching set, beading, finger painting

Becoming a "Sensory Detective" and Tools to Try



Olfactory Sense (Smell)

- Smells are very intense, they notice smells that others do not notice
- Constantly smelling items, always smells their food before eating
- Gags easily
- They choose not participate in an activity because of the smell
- They frequently get upset in the store (by the laundry detergent, perfumes, fish etc.) or refuse to go



Nose Tools

Our sense of smell is incredibly powerful and is directly linked with our nervous system. Smells can have a strong link to memory and emotion. It is important to know they can be a big trigger for vivid emotional memories, especially from early life. However tools for the nose can have a positive impact on one's occupational performance across environments!

- Calming scents are lavender, vanilla, coconut etc. Alerting scents are peppermint, citrus, fresh air, spearmint etc.
- Use scented laundry detergent, dryer sheets and/or washing beads. You can put a dryer sheet in your child drawers or in their pillow.
- Scented soaps, shampoo, and conditioner. Not everyone loves strong smells so you may need to have options in the bathroom to meet everyone's needs in the home.
- Hand and body lotion. Your child could put a scented hand cream in their school bag.
- Baking and cooking can create wonderful smells!
- Fresh herbs can also be a great tool either from the store or from your garden. If you are interested in growing your own herbs you may have a pot that your child can smell as the walk by!
- Essential oils can be really helpful. They can be used in a diffuser for different scents; there are rollers and "inhalers" as well as pendants and bracelets. These are small and can be easily kept in an individual's pocket or desk which can be really beneficial at school, in the community, car rides etc.
- Having fresh flowers

Becoming a "Sensory Detective" and Tools to Try



Vestibular Sense (Movement)

- Is either really driven or avoids extreme movements (spinning, hanging upside down, swinging)
- Loves or avoids carnival rides
- Gets dizzy easily after getting up
- Takes movement and climbing risks
- Enjoys falling, looks for opportunities to fall
- Bumps into things easily, doesn't notice objects or people in their way



Vestibular (Movement) Tools

Your child's brain may need regular vestibular input throughout the day to help them achieve a "just right state." Important to remember that vestibular input is alerting and organizing so you want to avoid this kind of stimulus before bed!

- Help your child hang upside down (use a pillow for their head and hold their feet against the wall)
- Show your child how they can look at pictures, read, watch T.V. etc. upside down (sitting with their feet up on the couch and head down)
- Swinging, bouncing, cartwheels, rough housing (not tickling), sitting in a rocking chair, yoga, tobogganing, rolling down a hill, somersaults
- If available, find play structures near you with a variety of equipment
- Pow Wow's – may need some ear tools to support them!
- Your child may enjoy playing with toys such as fidget spinners, table top spinners
- Mark areas in your home where your child frequently bumps or falls colored tape, available at the dollar store (e.g. threshold in a doorway, step to a sunken living room, corner)
- Keep the child's environments clean and free of clutter to decrease fall risk

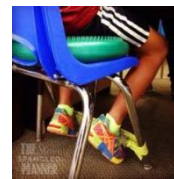
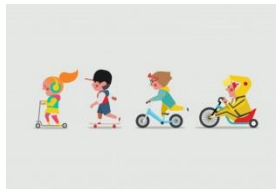
NOTE: A movement tool alone may not be enough to meet your child's neurological threshold. They may also need heavy work to reach their "just right state." See the next page on Muscle Tools.

Becoming a "Sensory Detective" and Tools to Try



Proprioceptive Sense (Muscles)

- Appears uncoordinated
- Seems to have "weak" muscles
- Clumsy, very accident prone
- Loves crashing and banging
- Doesn't seem to understand their own strength
- Play is often rough
- Falls out of their seat a lot, moves around/"wiggly"
- Becomes tired easily, supports or props self
- Drapes themselves over furniture and people



Proprioceptive (Muscle) Tools

Some children need more muscles tools during the day to help them succeed, but muscle tools can help everyone. They are good for transitions (before to prepare for activity; during to facilitate/sustain participation and after to calm).

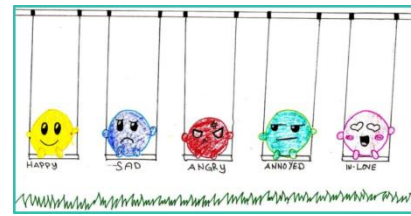
- Rough housing play (a child's tolerance for this varies and it is important to read their cues to prevent overstimulation as well)
- Weight/resistance (Theraband, body sock, weight in backpack, bean bag)
- Whole body pressure (e.g., squished between pillows, roll over body with ball), firm massage and hugs
- May enjoy sitting in a snuggly chair, large bean bag chair, or on the floor with lots of pillows and blankets
- Heavy work helper activities: shoveling snow, raking, cutting the grass, pushing the cart at the grocery store, carrying the groceries, vacuuming, moving furniture, changing laundry, carrying wood for a fire etc.
- Heavy work leisure activities: monkey bars, "hanging" from a bar (see how long your child can hold it), tug-of-war, wheelbarrow walking with a partner, weight lifting, Pilates/yoga, swimming, hiking, rock climbing, exercises with a medicine ball, push-ups, tuck jumps, burpees, hunting, fishing, etc.

NOTE: Some children need A LOT of input before they reach their "just right state." You may be surprised how much they need. Sometimes an organized – adult led muscle tool may be required to transition back with the group successfully!

Becoming a "Sensory Detective" and Tools to Try

Interoception

- Doesn't notice if they are cold/hot
- Unaware of thirst, hunger, if they are full or fatigued
- Can get upset or angry suddenly for minor reasons
- Difficulty with potty training / continues to have bathroom accidents past expected age
- Seems to have many mood swings throughout the day, has trouble explaining feelings



Interoception Tools

- Yoga, Mindfulness Activities, Meditation (there are books available with scripts you can read to your child or free online videos). Try your best to do one of these each day!
- Breathing Exercises
- Prioritize sleep hygiene
- Social stories for concepts like toilet training, temperature regulation etc.
- Emotional games/conversations: matching facial expressions to names of emotions, emotional flash cards, make a face and have your child identify what you may be feeling and talk about what happens in your body, flip flop faces emotions in motion by Discovery Toys
- Have a regular daily routine that includes activity and calming time, it is important not to be go, go, go all day!
- Include regular water breaks and snacks rather than waiting for your child to say they are hungry. Some kids like having a water chart or putting check marks on the calendar to track how much water they are drinking
- Talk to your child about portions and that maybe their tummy doesn't always tell them when they are full but they can learn what would be an okay amount to eat
- If constipation is a concern speak with your child's family doctor. Some children need small amounts of stool softener/laxative in their regime in conjunction with regular exercise, eating fibre and drinking water.
- Make it a routine to go to the bathroom before leaving the house and when you come back. If they don't "feel" like they have to often they are successful if they try.



Specialized Services
for Children & Youth
Together Is Better

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References & Acknowledgments

- (1) Sensory Profile 2, Winnie Dunn (2014)
- (2) Tools for Parents, Henry OT, Diana A Henry & Tammy Wheeler (2005)
- (3) Oh Behave! Sensory Processing and Behavioral Strategies, Colby Trott (2002)
- (4) I would like to acknowledge Laura Bennett's excellent presentations she has prepared for the Building Circles of Support series to help families, caregivers and staff and her contribution to this resource.
- (5) I would also like to thank my OT colleagues who took the time to review and edit this resource.