

Understanding Sensory Processing

What is Sensory Processing

Sensory processing is how our body understands the information it is receiving and uses that information to respond to the world. Everyone takes in and responds to sensory information differently. Some of us love big tight hugs and others don't. Some of us are sensitive to smells and others aren't. Sometimes sensory information can be overwhelming, or we need more inputs to feel comfortable in our bodies.

The Eight Senses

1. Visual – what we see.
2. Tactile – what we feel.
3. Taste – what we taste.
4. Auditory – what we hear.
5. Smell – what we smell.
6. Vestibular – balance, speed and direction of movement
7. Proprioception – where my body is and what is it doing (joints and muscles)
8. Interoception – how my inner body feels - hunger, thirst, hot, cold

Sensory challenges look different for everyone

Some might avoid whatever feels too much:

- pulling away from touch,
- removing clothing that scratches or itches (think about that tag at the back of your neck),
- leaving or refusing to be in noisy spaces like gyms or crowded halls,
- refusing specific foods.

Some might seek more input:

- put things in their mouth,
- want to jump, climb, spin or swing,
- moving or wiggling at the desk

Some challenges are less obvious:

- poor coordination, clumsy, difficulty learning new skills in gym, loves to jump/climb/spin, wants to be squeezed or hugged tightly, putting things in their mouth, yelling or making loud noises.

How to help:

- Ask or learn what is uncomfortable for the student.
- Ask or learn what the student needs more of.
- Create a plan for breaks to decrease or increase the sensory input prior to behaviours becoming a challenge. Pre-book the sensory time.
- Modify the environment to allow for sensory support.
- Talk to the Occupational Therapist for more strategies.

| System | Additional Input | Decreasing Input |
|----------------|--|--|
| Vestibular | Swing, exercise balls, wobble cushion, obstacle courses, yoga, dancing/action songs | Stable supportive seating, some find a swing or hammock calming |
| Proprioception | Heavy work – carrying heavy books, resistance activities, yoga, chewing, blowing/sucking, resistance bands | Time and space to move, Modify arrival/leaving times so not in crowded spaces or stairs, break down new tasks into smaller skills |
| Touch | Fidget toys, multi-sensory play/activities, sand, water, playdoh, pop-its | Warnings, massage, gloves, brushes rather than finger painting |
| Oral | Chewlery, spouted bottles, gum, hard/crunchy/chewy snacks, blowing | Bland food, warm liquids, single textures |
| Auditory | Voice scale so can learn to regulate, time in more stimulating environments, use of music | White noise, calming music/sounds, noise reducing/cancelling headphones or ear plug, access to quiet spaces, warnings before bell/fire alarm, cover over sensor of autoflush toilets |
| Visual | Increase contrast | Limit contrast, light covers, dimmer lighting |
| Interoception | Regular check-ins to ask how their body is feeling | |