

Understanding Your Child's Sensory Preferences

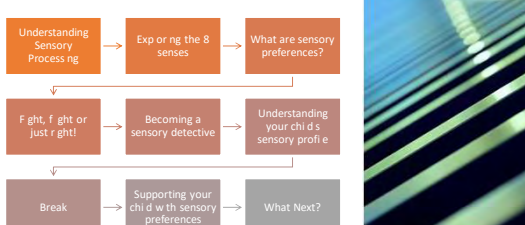
Children's Occupational Therapy
Argyll & Bute

Handouts

- Parent/Carer handout
- Adult sensory strategy checklist
- Sensory behaviour tracking sheet
- Child Sensory Questionnaire

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Overview



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What are children's occupations?



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Suggested Group Agreements

- Confidentiality
- Kindness and Respect.
- Everyone's Voice Matters
- Share from Your Own Experience
- One Voice at a Time
- Take Care of Yourself
- *Get the most from the session*
- Keep It a Safe Space
- There are no silly questions



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Understanding Sensory Processing



Sensory processing

- Sensory Processing Disorder not a recognised diagnosis in UK
- Sensory processing challenges can be on their own or part of a diagnosis

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Helping us join in and take part in everyday life

Exploring the Eight senses

What is sensory Processing?

Information comes in through our senses.

Our brain processes that information and tells our body how to respond.

That response might be something we do (motor output) or something our body does automatically (autonomic response).

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The Eight Senses

Auditory	➔	Hearing Sense
Vision	➔	Seeing Sense
Olfactory	➔	Smelling sense
Gustatory	➔	Tasting sense
Tactile	➔	Touch sense
Vestibular	➔	Movement sense
Proprioceptive	➔	Body Awareness sense
Interception	➔	Internal Awareness

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Some Brains work differently

- Notice **too much** all at once
- Not notice **enough**
- Have a **harder time tuning things out**
- Need **more time** to get used to things
- Because of **brain plasticity**, our brains can keep learning and changing — even as we grow older!
- Core function of brain is to initially keep us safe- primal instinct
- Then comes ability to learn
- Remember age and stage

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What are Sensory Preferences?

Sensory Hotspots

Child 1 (Girl):

- I find it difficult to focus on a task or concentrate
- I chew on everything
- I have the tags cut out of my clothing
- When I touch things I am often too hard or too soft
- I have poor gross motor skills and have co-ordination difficulties
- I like to smell things
- Some fabrics make me upset and uncomfortable
- I don't like being tickled
- I prefer to walk on tiptoes

Child 2 (Boy):

- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I close my eyes in bright light
- I don't like loud or unexpected noises
- I am a fussy eater and like to eat the same things daily
- I don't always feel pain like others might
- I don't like being cuddled
- I sit awkwardly and fidget on the carpet
- I hate being bare-foot

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Questions

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What we see

- Crying
- Aggression
- Yelling
- Avoidance

What we don't see...

- Sensory Overload
- Changes in routine
- Difficulty communicating needs
- Difficulty expressing emotions
- Experiencing physical pain/sickness
- Functional Difficulties
- Difficulty processing instructions / task too challenging
- Moody due to lack of sleep or hunger

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Every Child is Different

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Exploring your own Sensory Preferences

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Take 5 minutes to fill out a **sensory preferences checklist for adults**.

This can help you understand how you regulate your own energy, comfort, and focus — and how this might differ from your child.

5 min

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How Children Respond When Their Sensory Cup Isn't Just Right

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How Children Respond When Their Sensory Cup Isn't Just Right


Passive Response

- Don't try to change what's happening around them.
- Seem to 'tune out', not notice things, or quietly endure uncomfortable sensations.
- May not act to get more of what they need, or to protect themselves from too much.
- This isn't laziness or ignoring — it's simply how their brain responds in the moment.

Active Response

- Other children take action to feel 'just right'.
- Seek more input — like moving, chewing, lurching, or making noise.
- Might try to escape or avoid things that feel too much — like covering ears or leaving the room.
- These are smart, instinctive ways to help their body feel safe and regulated

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When Sensory Input Feels Like Too Much or Too Little

Too Much Input = Over-stimulated
Your child may feel overwhelmed, like their brain is getting too many messages at once.
They might:

- Cry, cover ears or eyes
- Seem scared, angry or shut down
- Want to escape or be alone

This often happens with **Sensitivity** or **Avoiding** patterns.

Too Little Input = Under-stimulated
Your child may not notice what's going on, or seem "out of it."
They might:

- Seek movement, touch, or noise
- Be constantly on the go or distracted
- Seem "tuned out" or slow to react

This links to **Registration** or **Seeking** patterns.

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Pauline Dale O Therapist Occupational Therapy



Becoming a Sensory Detective

Fight, Flight, Freeze (or Calm): A Survival Response


How the Body Reacts When Overwhelmed
When a child feels too much (or too little) sensory input, or feels unsafe or confused, their brain may go into **survival mode**. This is automatic — not chosen.

Fight
Shouting, hitting, throwing, pushing
"I'm scared — I need to get control!"

Flight
Running away, hiding, avoiding
"I need to escape now!"

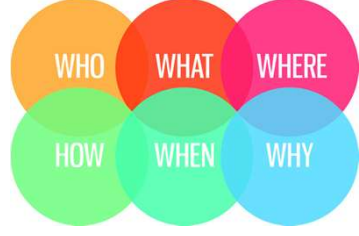
Freeze
Going quiet, still, zoned out
"I can't move — it's too much."

Calm
With the right support, children can feel safe again. This might look like: deep breathing, snuggling, fidgeting, retreating to a quiet space.



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Observe and Learn from Daily Life




- Track patterns using the behaviour tracker
- Look at:
 - When?
 - Where?
 - What senses?
 - How did they react?

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Sensory or Behaviour?

- Need to be a detective- watch and observe your child, what is happening immediately before and after?
- Behaviour approaches won't impact a sensory need and sensory approaches won't impact a behaviour.
- Do they respond to motivators?
- May begin as a sensory sensitivity but turn into a behaviour as the child may enjoy the adult response
- Tantrum = in control, testing boundaries
- Meltdown = overwhelmed, needs support





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Date	Time of Day	Activity	Behaviour	Senses	Type (tick)	Notes
02/06	Morning	Getting Dressed	Refused clothes Jumper – scratchy wool	touch	<input type="checkbox"/> Balanced <input type="checkbox"/> Registering <input type="checkbox"/> Seeking <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding	Cried, ran away, pulled PJ's back on.
04/06	Evening	Garden play	Jumped on trampoline Very excited, fight with brother, didn't settle at bedtime.	Movement	<input type="checkbox"/> Balanced <input type="checkbox"/> Registering <input type="checkbox"/> Seeking <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding	Needed extra time, away from brother to settle.
09/06	Evening	Meal time	Got upset when pasta sauce poured over pasta- refused to eat	Taste Touch Vision	<input type="checkbox"/> Balanced <input type="checkbox"/> Registering <input type="checkbox"/> Seeking <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding	Had to remake pasta and serve sauce on the side for dipping. Upset, took a long time to settle.

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Tracking

- Look for Patterns – transitions, change, time of day, situations.
- What are your child's first signs of upset/overwhelm/dysregulation?
- Thresholds – experience goes on too long, find it hard to stop and move on, playing with one child is ok but two children = overwhelmed.

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Page 10 of your hand out

Your Child's Sensory Profile

Circle the relevant statements for your child as we go through the senses

You can use different colours for multiple children or your own profile


More than one answer or category may be true, make note of when you or your child fall within one category or another i.e. the time of day, time of year who is in control

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End of Day Explosions

- Why it happens
- Common
- Masking



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Profile Overview Example

Balanced	Low Registration	Seeking	Sensing/Avoiding
Hearing	Hearing	Hearing	Hearing
Seeing	Seeing	Seeing	Seeing
Smell	Smell	Smell	Smell
Taste	Taste	Taste	Taste
Touch	Touch	Touch	Touch
Movement	Movement	Movement	Movement
Body	Body	Body	Body
Awareness	Awareness	Awareness	Awareness
Internal	Internal	Internal	Internal

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Understanding your child's Sensory Profile



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	Balanced	Low Registration	Seeking	Sensitive/Avoiding
Hearing Sense	Notices important sounds and responds	Might not notice or respond to sounds or voices	Likes loud noises	Notices every sound & comments on them (e.g. dripping tap).
	Enjoys music and stories	Often needs instructions repeated	Makes noise, often for fun	Is upset by unexpected noise; covers ears, runs away
	Responds to their name and familiar voices	Seems to be 'not listening' sometimes.	Talks sings and hums often	Prefers quiet spaces; may move away from noise.
	Can focus with background noise	Can have difficulty noticing new noises or verbal instructions	Can cope with multiple noises on at once e.g. t.v. and video game	Is distracted by background noise – interrupts focus

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Take 5 minutes to complete the profile for your child



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What Does This Mean for Everyday Life?



- Which senses seem most tricky for your child?
- Are there certain **activities** (like dressing, eating, or schoolwork) that are harder because of their sensory needs?
- Are there times or places where they feel **calmer or more confident**? These clues help you figure out what support might help most.

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Break 10 minutes



Supporting your child with sensory preferences.



Guiding Principles for Supporting Your Child's Sensory Needs – Low Registration



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Guiding Principles:

- Make input **MORE** noticeable – brighter, repeat, or exaggerate.
- **ADD** movement, visuals, or sound to help them tune in.
- Use upbeat, **CLEAR** instructions and consistent routines.
- Give **EXTRA** time for them to notice and respond.

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Low Registration Examples

Current Concern	Guiding Principal	Strategy
Does not hear instructions	Make it feel MORE	Gain eye contact Use gesture+ verbal instructions. Use object e.g. Bath toy
Complains food taste bland	Make it more noticeable	Provide extra spices to add to foods to give more flavour.
Does not notice when s/he needs to go to the toilet – can have accidents	Make it feel more and build predictable routines	Set an alarm or reminder to go for a regular toilet break at regular times in the day

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Guiding Principles for Supporting Your Child's Sensory Needs – Sensitive/ Avoiding

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Guiding Principles: Sensitive

- **REDUCE** background input – aim for calmer, quieter spaces.
- **PREPARE** them for sensory events(e.g. loud noises/busy places)
- Offer **CHOICES** and control (e.g. "Do you want the soft hoodie or the t-shirt?").
- Use gentle pacing and **BREAKS** to help them feel safe.

Guiding Principles: Avoiding

- Create predictable **ROUTINES** they can rely on.
- **LIMIT** intense input – choose soft fabrics, gentle lights, and calm voices.
- Let them say "no" when possible – offer **ALTERNATIVES** to join in.
- Take **ONE STEP** at a time and celebrate every success.




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Guiding Principles for Supporting Your Child's Sensory Needs – Seeking

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Guiding Principles:

- Offer safe, **REGULAR** sensory input throughout the day (e.g. movement, touch, chewing).
- Build sensory activities into everyday **ROUTINES**.
- **TEACH** when and where it's okay to seek (e.g. Jump on the trampoline, not the couch!).
- Keep them **ACTIVE** and engaged to support focus and comfort.



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Sensitive/Avoiding Examples

Current Concern	Guiding Principal	Strategy
Strongly dislikes/wont wear school uniform	Limit intense input – choose soft fabrics	Find clothing that feels comfy and explain to school this is a reasonable adjustment.
Wants to avoid busy and loud places e.g. Supermarket	Reduce background input – aim for calmer, quieter spaces	Build up slowly – go at quieter times and only for a small shop. Offer headphones to reduce noise and sunglasses/tinted glasses for light.
Get upset when washing body and hair	Create predictable routines they can rely on. Limit intense input –	Agree on days of the week washing happens. Consider fragrances, temperature, lighting. Consider washing body one day and hair another.

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Seeking Examples


Current Concern	Guiding Principal	Strategy
Has difficulty sitting still, being described as fidgety in class	Offer safe, regular sensory input within routine	Scoot to school with heavy back pack or arrive early to allow him/her to run around playground.
Will chew on clothes and ruin coats and jumpers	Offer safe, regular sensory input within routine	Provide crunchy foods, drinks with ice-cubes and chew toys every day
Will not sit at home to eat a meal or complete homework	Keep them active and engaged to support focus and comfort.	Offer movement prior to sitting task e.g. Trampoline or allow task to be completed in a lying, half-kneeling or standing position

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Questions




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Dressing

- Dressing is something children do every day
- Involves a lot of sensory information
 - Can you identify what senses we use for dressing?
 - **Touch (Tactile):** Clothes can feel scratchy, tight, loose, cold, or irritating (especially labels or seams).
 - **Body Awareness (Proprioception):** Children need to know where their body is to move into clothes and fasten buttons or zips.
 - **Movement (Vestibular):** Balancing to pull up trousers or stand on one leg.
 - **Interoception:** Noticing if they're hot, cold, itchy, or uncomfortable in clothing.



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Washing and Grooming



How this might Feel Sensitive/Avoider

- Overwhelmed by texture, smell, water
- Resist/become upset

How this might Feel Low Reg/ Seeking

- Not notice own dirt/smells
- Need prompts to wash/groom

Environment Sensitive/Avoider

- Calm soothing space
- Fragrance free
- 'Dry run' during play

Environment Low Reg/Seeking

- Bright colours, visuals/songs
- Mirrors to notice dirt
- Short consistent routines

Caregiver Adjustments Sensitive/Avoider

- Prep for each step in advance
- Countdown/timer/small steps
- Offer choice of tools

Caregiver Adjustments Low Reg/Seeking

- Prompts to check in mirror
- Make it a game/race
- Visual timers, checklists

Adjustments for Child Sensitive/Avoider

- Do through play first
- Heavy towel/firm pressure
- Use song/video for tasks

Adjustments for Child Low Reg/Avoider

- Messy play, vibrating toothbrush, textured brush
- Movement before, give choice



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Dressing



How this might Feel Sensitive/Avoider

- Notice every sensation
- Overwhelmed by textures

How this might Feel Low Reg/ Seeking

- Does not notice sensations quickly
- Distracted/slow to start

Environment Sensitive/Avoider

- Quiet, calm, soft lights
- Organised, clutter free

Environment Low Reg/Seeking

- Bright, natural light, clear
- Music/dressing song
- Remove distractions

Caregiver Adjustments Sensitive/Avoider

- Predictable routine
- Offer simple choices
- Explain what's next

Caregiver Adjustments Low Reg/Seeking

- Clear routine, make it fun
- Visual Schedule
- Short, clear, instructions

Adjustments for Child Sensitive/Avoider

- Soft, seamless, tagless clothes
- Allow familiar favourites
- Deep pressure/visual aids


Adjustments for Child Low Reg/Avoider

- Movement before/during
- Strong textures, bright
- Be active, use mirror



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Sleep



- Sleep is a vital occupation for all children, helping them grow, learn, and regulate
- Children with sensory differences may find bedtime routines and the transition to sleep particularly challenging


What Sensory Demands Are Involved?

- **Tactile:** Pyjamas, bedding textures, temperature of the room.
- **Auditory:** Bedroom sounds (household noise, creaky floorboards, outside traffic).
- **Visual:** Light levels, visual clutter, shadows.
- **Proprioception & Vestibular:** Staying still in bed, body awareness when lying down.
- **Smell:** Familiar or unfamiliar scents from bedding or products.




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Washing and Grooming




- Hair washing, brushing teeth, nail cutting, and bathing
- Can you identify what senses we use for washing and grooming?
 - **Tactile:** Feeling water, soap, towels, brushes, nail clippers, and more.
 - **Smell:** Shampoos, lotions, and soaps can be overpowering.
 - **Auditory:** Running water, echoes in bathrooms, hair dryers.
 - **Proprioception:** Coordinating movements like brushing or scrubbing.
 - **Temperature regulation:** Sensing hot or cold water or air.



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Sleep



How this might Feel Sensitive/Avoider

- Pyjama, bedding, light, noise sensitive
- Long time to settle

How this might Feel Low Reg/ Seeking

- Difficulty winding down
- Moves/wriggles
- Unaware of tiredness

Environment Sensitive/Avoider

- Quiet, dark, cool room
- Low Clutter, calming visuals
- Unscented familiar bedding

Environment Low Reg/Seeking

- Consistent visual routine
- Dim but colourful lights
- Limit distracting noise

Caregiver Adjustments Sensitive/Avoider

- Calming activities before bed
- Keep routine predictable
- Offer choice, prep for transition

Caregiver Adjustments Low Reg/Seeking


- Deep pressure input
- Movement based routine
- Clear prompts, consistent timing

Adjustments for Child Sensitive/Avoider

- Allow choice of bedding/clothing
- Soothing tools, weighted blankets
- Extra time to wind down

Adjustments for Child Low Reg/Avoider

- Involve them in room set up
- Sensory rich stories
- Body awareness tools



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Toileting




- Toileting is a complex daily task that can feel overwhelming or unnoticed depending on your child's sensory preferences

What Sensory Demands Are Involved in Toileting?

- Interception:** Noticing when the bladder or bowel is full or when it's time to go.
- Tactile:** Managing clothing, wiping, sitting on different surfaces.
- Auditory:** Sounds of flushing, fans, or other people nearby.
- Smell:** Toilets and cleaning products may have strong or unpleasant smells.
- Proprioception & Vestibular:** Balancing on the toilet, using step stools, pulling up clothes.

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Eating and Drinking




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How this might Feel Sensitive/Avoider

- Very aware of smells/textures
- Only eat certain foods
- Upset by mess/mixed textures

Caregiver Adjustments Sensitive/Avoider

- Predictable mealtime routine
- Keep new foods separate
- Respect their boundaries

How this might Feel Low Reg/ Seeking

- Not notice hunger/flavours
- Disinterested in food
- Eat slowly/reminders to eat

Caregiver Adjustments Low Reg/Seeking

- Consistent routine, visual cues
- Sit close by and encourage
- Talk about food together

Environment Sensitive/Avoider

- Calm, quiet, low lighting/clutter
- Avoid strong cooking smells
- Sit them in non crowded place

Adjustments for Child Sensitive/Avoider

- Cutlery with easy grip/divider plate
- Let them wipe hands/face often
- Deep pressure/comfort toy/object

Environment Low Reg/Seeking

- Bright,well-lit room/tableware
- Reduce visual Clutter
- Use fun visuals, songs, timers

Adjustments for Child Low Reg/Seeking

- Strong flavours, bright colours
- Let them use fingers
- Movement before meals

Toileting




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How this might Feel Sensitive/Avoider

- Scared/uncomfortable
- Avoid going/wiping
- Become distressed in toilet

Caregiver Adjustments Sensitive/Avoider

- Break down each step
- Offer choices, schedule, Stories
- Wet Wipes/type of paper

How this might Feel Low Reg/ Seeking

- Not notice when to go
- Unaware of accidents
- Enjoys flushing, water play

Caregiver Adjustments Low Reg/Seeking

- Schedule regular toilet breaks
- Prompts to check body/clothes
- Upbeat reminders

Environment Sensitive/Avoider

- Calm Predictable space, cosy, quiet, warm
- Dim lighting, neutral smells

Adjustments for Child Sensitive/Avoider

- Padded seat, footstool
- Headphones/music,easy clothing
- Firm/deep pressure

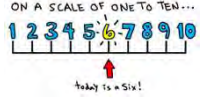

Environment Low Reg/Seeking

- Bright visuals, labels.
- Timers, Visual schedules
- Sticker charts

Adjustments for Child Low Reg/Avoider

- Bright Clothing to notice wet
- Fun songs/routines
- Movement before/during

Pick one area to focus on

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- Use the trigger tracking form
- Use your knowledge of your child and their profile
- Notice what feels challenging
- What change would make the biggest difference ?
- Experiment with one change

Eating and Drinking




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- For many children, mealtimes can be about much more than just hunger. Eating and drinking involve a range of sensory experiences—taste, texture, smell, temperature, sight, and even the sounds of food.

What Sensory Demands Are Involved in eating and drinking?

- Touch(Tactile):** Feeling food on lips, in hands, or in the mouth.
- Smell and Taste:** Strong flavours or smells can be unpleasant or unnoticed.
- Hearing:** Background noise or clashing cutlery may be distracting or upsetting.
- Posture and Movement:** Sitting still, coordinating hand-to-mouth movement.
- Interception:** Noticing hunger, fullness, or when the body is uncomfortable.

No matter your child's sensory type, remember:

Connection comes before correction. You can adjust their environment, not the child. You are the expert in your child

Use the ideas and tips from each sense section to guide your support.

Try small changes in routines or environments (e.g. dimming lights, offering fidget toys, building in movement breaks).


Watch your child's responses and adjust as needed.

Celebrate the little wins they all matter!


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Points to remember




Time of year/end of term




Change in routine/environment



Might be something going on you are not aware of



Pain



Constipation/bowel movements

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Feedback Form



[Sensory Processing Workshop – Fill in form](#)

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Future Support?



Advice Sheets
nhsh.argyllandbutepaedot@nhs.scot

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- Dressing Strategies for Sensory Comfort
- Supporting your child with Washing and Grooming
- Understanding Eating and drinking challenges
- Understanding the sensory side to eating and drinking
- Supporting my child when they place too much food in their mouth
- Supporting your child with hair brushing and hair cutting
- Supporting your child with nail cutting
- Understanding sleep challenges
- Understanding the sensory side of sleep and bedtime routines
- Understanding toileting through a sensory lens
 - Only poo in a nappy
 - Smearing
 - Toilet readiness
- Using social cues to support my child's ALD's
- Supporting my child with community outings
- Help my child attend health appointments
- Social Story Template- going to appointments
- Understanding attention and concentration

- Understanding flow and hyper focus
- Attention and concentration activity ideas
- Always on the go proprioceptive and calming strategies
- How to help my child regulate their emotions
- Why does my child become deregulated after school
- My afterschool plan
- Understanding self-soothing behaviours
- Meltdown or tantrum
- My child shuts down
- How to reduce demands for my child
- Stimming
- Masking
- Understanding my child's pain responses
- Helping my child broaden their special interests
- Supporting my child's friendships and social play
- Helping my child understand social cues
- Supporting my child's social skills and relationships
- Developing your child's independence skills
- Safety Awareness and Executive Function
- Why cleaning your room feels so big
- PICA

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Future Support and next steps

- Track your child using the tracker and identify triggers
- AHP Advice Line Tuesdays Term Time 9:30-11:30am
01546 703333
- Exchange Counselling services
- Specific Strategies and advice sheets

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Questions



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- STAR Institute for Sensory Processing: www.spdstar.org
- Sensory Integration Education (UK-based training and resources): www.sensoryintegration.org.uk