

Occupational Therapy Handout



SENSORY STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Reacting to different sensations and activities

Different children notice and respond to different things from the world around them. Your child may be more sensitive to certain sensations and activities than their friends. These differences are usually normal and part of what makes us individual.

What is sensory processing?

The term 'sensory processing' describes how we understand information from the world around us – through our senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. There are also two other senses, 'proprioception' (body awareness) and 'vestibular' (balance and movement).

Some children may show a heightened response to some sensations and this can very occasionally be a sign of a sensory processing difficulty. However, it is important to remember that having a sensitivity in one area, during certain times of the day, does not usually mean that your child has a sensory processing difficulty or needs to see an occupational therapist.

A great many children under the age of five, with no sensory processing issues, will find certain parts of their daily routine difficult. These often include bath time, hair brushing, visiting the supermarket and loud or unpredictable noises.

Daily routines

Many children resist parts of the daily routine as a way of trying to exert greater control over their environment – and their parents! Try to work out if your child really dislikes certain sensations or activities, or whether they are experimenting with control.

Sometimes you may avoid certain situations, places or activities to avoid the reaction they bring out in your child. However, bear in mind that this means your child will not have the opportunity to experience the things they find challenging and it will be harder for them to learn to become tolerant of them.

Your child may become anxious about certain situations or environments. If this happens, you need to prepare them for the activity to help them cope better with it. Reassurance is very important and needs to be given in a way that your child can understand. Looking at pictures or photo stories about the activity, holding a familiar comforting toy, or using a picture timetable for the event that is happening can all be helpful.

Tips to manage common problems

There are many common activities which children may find difficult. Here are some tips on things you could do to help your child manage them better.

If the problem persists and these tips do not seem to help, you may want to ask for additional support from an occupational therapist.

My child hates having their hair brushed...

- ☺ Use gentle yet firm brush strokes and try sitting your child in front of a mirror so they can see what is happening.
- ☺ Try using a song or rhyme as you brush. Finish brushing when the song ends so that your child knows how long the task will take.
- ☺ Try using a good detangling conditioner or detangling spray. Some hair brushes such as 'Tangle Teezer' seem to glide more easily through hair. And keep hair shorter if your child really dislikes hair brushing.
- ☺ Stickers or reward charts might be helpful.
- ☺ Keep it fun. Play 'hairdressers' with your child, where they brush and style your hair too, and encourage your child to brush their toys' hair.

My child won't sit still...

- ☺ Young children often find it harder to stick with more structured activities, so keep activities short at first and change activity frequently to help keep them engaged.
- ☺ It will help to let your child use some of their 'energy' during active games such as trampolining, a trip to the playground or using a scooter, before expecting them to sit and play in a more structured way.
- ☺ Link activities to your child's interests. For example, colour pictures of a favourite television character and have puzzles that link to their interests.
- ☺ Try sitting next to your child, playing with a similar toy or drawing alongside them.
- ☺ Reduce any distracting clutter on the table top or where they are playing.
- ☺ Make sure your child is not too tired or hungry to play.

My child hates loud noises...

- ☺ Try to warn your child about a noise before it happens. This can help them to anticipate and make sense of the sound.
- ☺ Tell your child stories, with words or pictures, about loud noises that they fear. This can help to reduce anxiety and help them understand what they are hearing.
- ☺ Try to arrive at noisy places early, before the noise peaks, so that your child can gradually become used to the environment around them. Find quieter parts of noisier places if possible. Wearing ear defenders, hats, ear muffs or even ear plugs may help.
- ☺ If necessary, try to avoid extremely noisy situations that cause your child great distress. This can help for a while and as your child becomes older they may be more able to cope with that particular environment.
- ☺ Sucking, drinking from a sports bottle, crunchy snacks or mouthing a safe object may help your child cope with noisy places and comforting toys may help to relieve their anxiety.
- ☺ If noisy electronic toys are a problem, turn down the volume or put tape over the speakers.

My child won't eat that...

- ☺ Bear in mind that many children go through phases where they will and won't eat certain types of foods.
- ☺ It will help if your child is sat properly at a table, where possible, with their feet supported. If your child is very 'wiggly' try having an active play session before mealtimes.
- ☺ Try to keep mealtimes calm and fun, even if your child is refusing the food that you have made. Do not force your child to eat something, but try encouraging gently with games, reward charts, etc.
- ☺ You could try involving your child in the cooking as they are more likely to try something they have helped to make.
- ☺ Allow your child to experiment with different finger foods and textures. If your child does not like to touch food, try using a dip with a finger of toast, bread stick or raw vegetable stick.
- ☺ Give your child a baby wipe or flannel to wipe their hands and face if they get upset about being messy.
- ☺ See [feeding and mealtimes](#) for more help and advice.

Bath time is a nightmare...

- ☺ Try to work out which part of the bath time routine is most stressful for your child, as this may help you to work out a way forward.
- ☺ A non-slip mat may help your child sit more securely and a step will help them get in and out of the bath more confidently.
- ☺ Stay calm and keep it fun. Try using play as a distraction. For example, hide toys in containers or under bubbles, use bath crayons, bath toys and squirry bottles. Singing songs about bath time may help.
- ☺ Read stories with your child about bath time so they understand what is going to happen.
- ☺ Try getting a sponge or flannel with a character that your child particularly likes, such as Thomas or Peppa Pig.
- ☺ Consider the temperature of the water, and use firm pressure when washing and drying your child as this can be more predictable and calming.
- ☺ Do not bath your child every night if they become very upset about it, and try keeping the time spent in the bath to a minimum.
- ☺ Try singing or playing a favourite song for the duration of the bath so that your child knows how long the task will take. A visual timer such as a stop clock or sand timer may be useful.
- ☺ You can buy shields that go around the head during hair washing to help reduce soap running over the face.

My child won't sleep...

- ☺ Make sure that you have a predictable bedtime routine. For example, calm time before bed, bath, tooth brushing and then a story.
- ☺ Avoid active and excitable play just before bedtime. Stories should be calming and read in a quieter voice.
- ☺ Try having plenty of outdoor time earlier in the day.

- ☺ Keep the bedroom a calm space without too much distracting clutter.
- ☺ Blackout blinds may help if your child's bedroom is too light.
- ☺ Your child may find firm cuddles or a massage calming before going to sleep.
- ☺ Make sure that your child is not too hot or cold at night as this can interfere with their sleep.
- ☺ See [sleeping](#) for more help and advice.

My child doesn't listen to me even though I know they can hear me...

- ☺ Make sure that you are talking to your child at their level, whilst they are looking at you. Use simple, age-appropriate language.
- ☺ Use play or songs to catch your child's attention, so they want to listen.
- ☺ Avoid calling to your child across a busy room if possible and approach them from the front, rather than behind.
- ☺ Having visual cue-cards of photos or pictures that are relevant to their daily routine may help.

My child dislikes tooth brushing...

- ☺ Reading your child stories or showing them books that feature tooth brushing or pictures of the sequence of brushing may be helpful.
- ☺ Ensure that your child is sat or standing securely while they are brushing their teeth.
- ☺ Different children prefer different flavours of toothpaste so try a different variety. You could also try different types of toothbrush. A rubber type of brush such as Nuk may be helpful initially and character toothbrushes may be more motivating for some children.
- ☺ Let your child brush their own teeth for part of the routine.
- ☺ Keep it fun and encourage your child to role-play 'brushing' a toy's teeth or your teeth.
- ☺ Reward charts may be helpful.
- ☺ Have a visual timer or sing a favourite song for the duration of the task, to let your child know how long brushing will take.

My child will only wear...

- ☺ Children often have preferences about the types of clothes that they like to wear and may have a favourite item, outfit, or colour.
- ☺ Try giving a choice of two outfits. This lets your child feel more in control but lets you keep clothing suitable for the weather and activities of the day.
- ☺ Consider the texture and feel of your child's clothes. Some children can be sensitive to certain types of material or labels. If your child does not like seams on clothes, underwear can be worn inside out. And use unscented detergent and conditioner if you feel your child might be sensitive to these.
- ☺ Encourage your child to sit while dressing.
- ☺ Stories about dressing, or using photos and pictures, can help your child learn about getting dressed.
- ☺ See [getting dressed](#) for more help and advice.

My child bites...

- ☺ Children often bite when they are upset or angry. It is important to try to work out why they have bitten because this is often the way to identify a solution.
- ☺ Children who bite might need to have crunchy snacks at certain times of day, or when teeth are coming through. These snacks should be appropriate to their age and dietary needs and could include toast, pretzels, apple, raw vegetable sticks or bread sticks.
- ☺ Having a piece of fabric to chew may also be helpful, but check they can't bite through it and that it doesn't fray.
- ☺ Some children use a 'chewy tube' which can be bought over the internet.
- ☺ Any child who bites persistently may need a check-up from their dentist to look at their teeth, or a doctor to check their ears are not causing discomfort.
- ☺ Behavioural strategies can be helpful when dealing with biting, once the reason for biting has been established.