

A Graduated Approach to Supporting Sensory Processing Needs

in Derby City Schools and Early Years Settings

Introduction and Terminology

Sensory processing is a term to describe the fact that our senses take in information, decide whether to acknowledge it and take the information to the brain. The brain then decides whether a response is needed. It is happening all of the time in all of us. For some people, sensory information goes into the brain but can be processed in an unexpected or different way to most people.

Taken from a holistic perspective, sensory processing is only one manifestation of a child's general well-being. Psychological well-being, anxiety, and sensory processing operate together and are all context-dependent.

A child may be over or under- sensitive in one or more of these **sensory systems**. There are 8 sensory systems. They are hearing, vision, touch, taste, smell, vestibular (movement), proprioceptive (body awareness) and interoceptive (internal state).

A child might be more- sensitive in one sensory area and less-sensitive in another. more-sensitive children are often referred to as **hyper-sensitive** and may avoid some sensory input, for example, if it's too loud or noisy they might cover their ears. less sensitive-reactive children are often referred to as **hypo-sensitive** to sensory input and may seek out sensory input, for example, bang toys together to achieve the desired noise. These are the child's **sensory differences or sensitivities**.

Sensory differences can change over time, and individuals may have varying thresholds of sensitivity to different senses. A child's **sensory preferences** are based on an ongoing pattern of behaviour and responses to specific sensory input. Each child's sensory profile is unique. Some children have many sensory sensitivities, other children have few or none. Children's sensory responses may vary and fluctuate depending on their environment, emotional state and that of

others. Everyone has a sensory profile of preferences and dislikes and it is only a matter to be addressed if the sensitivities are impacting on the child's access to play, socialising and learning.

Providing appropriate opportunities for the sensory input the child is seeking, while offering accommodations and adaptations for the sensory input the child is avoiding, is sometimes described as a **sensory diet**.

Dr Jean Ayres published a book in 1972 in which she described sensory issues in children. She used the term **Sensory integration** to describe these issues and specifically the poor integration of the senses. Dr Ayres went on to create sensory integration therapy – a treatment approach used by some therapists today. Ayres Sensory Integration is trademarked and it is only possible to practice Ayres Sensory Integration Therapy if you have met certain standards which include the completion of certain trademarked courses.

The council for disabled children have produced an information sheet explaining sensory differences and approaches to intervention which the reader may find helpful. See [here](#) .

Other Sensory Processing theories, such as Winnie's Dunn's suggests that our individual sensory systems may be sensitive and therefore our responses may not be well matched to the nature and intensity of the sensory input / environment. Carrying out initial assessments which identify possible sensitivities / differences and lead to adaptations that are monitored and reviewed can be helpful.

The Specialist Teaching and Psychology Service (STePS) supports schools and early years settings to deliver a graduated approach through training, consultation and casework. A key element of this work is encouraging and supporting settings to monitor and review the impact of any implemented adaptations made at the targeted level. For example, if a child is subsequently more regulated and better able to access and engage in learning, playing and socialising, it seems evident that the interventions are having a positive effect and should continue to be put in place.

Phase 1 – Universal

Children and young people with sensory processing differences will initially be supported by front line staff/ practitioners who will have awareness of sensory processing differences. All front line staff and early years practitioners should have a basic awareness of sensory processing differences and needs, how to make the learning environment the best it can be for all children and how to differentiate and make reasonable adjustments to learning activities for children who may present with different sensory processing profiles to others. It is the SENCOs responsibility to provide or secure this training for setting/ school staff.

If a child is accessing play, learning and socialising well, then it is likely that the sensory processing differences are not interfering with their day-to-day functioning. In these instances, there is no need to make any changes.

All school staff and early years practitioners should have had some input/ training in understanding sensory processing differences and have access to support from the SENCO.

The SENCO will:

- be able to identify the key strengths and challenges faced by pupils with sensory processing differences and know how these can affect pupil's actions and learning
- be able to carry out an environmental audit and know how to enable modifications that are conducive to the well-being and learning of pupils with sensory processing needs
- know that pupils on the autism spectrum may have sensory processing difficulties and take these issues into account when considering a suitable learning environment and when interpreting a pupil's actions
- understand that enabling environments through making reasonable adjustments is a statutory obligation.

Key actions at Phase 1:

1. Sensory environmental audit e.g. NAS Environmental audit
2. Action taken to address issues identified through the audit
3. Autism awareness raising input/ training for all staff

Resources and Useful information

- Examples of Sensory Environmental Audits for SENCOs: [South West Yorkshire Autism Friendly Environments](#) or the [Sensory Audit for Schools and Classrooms](#)
- Guidance for SENCOs when planning classroom environment for pupils with autism <https://livingautism.com/create-autism-friendly-environment/>
- Online training courses in Sensory Processing: [National Autistic Society Training Courses](#)
- Derby City Specialist Teaching and Psychology Service (STePs) – information about upcoming training can be found [here](#)

Phase 2 – Targeted SEND Support

Children and young people who continue to experience sensory processing differences that impact on their inclusion in school will be supported by school staff/ early years practitioners identified within the setting with a specialist interest in sensory processing and with additional knowledge and skills in this area. This will be the SENCO or Autism Champion.

The SENCO or Autism Champion will:

- Plan setting based interventions and programmes for the child / young person

Key actions at Phase 2:

1. Identify the child's sensory strengths and difficulties (sensory profile)
e.g. GriffinOT sensory responses, IDP sensory checklist
2. Review the environmental audit (done during Phase 1)
3. Carry out observations of the child using a sensory observation tool e.g. tool 40 – AET Teacher toolkit
4. Identify strategies to help the child manage their own sensory needs e.g. tool 41 – AET Teacher toolkit, Leicestershire Council Strategies Resource
5. Implement specific programmes/ interventions e.g. sensory circuits, dough disco, squiggle whilst you wiggle, Write dance
6. Monitor and record the child's responses, progress and impact of strategies, programmes and interventions (assess-plan-do-review)
7. Ensure all staff working with the child have had sensory differences input/ training

Resources and Useful Information

- Autism Education Trust (AET) progression framework (Sensory processing) <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/pf-shop/> - free
- Sensory Processing Resource - <https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/> - free
- The AET Tools for Teachers includes a Sensory profile (tool 42), Sensory observation (tool 40) and Sensory strategies (tool 41)
- Sensory checklist e.g. [Tayside NHS Sensory Checklist](#) - free
- Leicestershire sensory processing guide for schools [Leicestershire Sensory Processing Pack for Schools Key Stage 1-4](#) - free
- Behaviour support plans e.g. [Kent PBSP](#)- free
- Sensory circuits. How-to video for beginners [How to Sensory Circuits for Beginners You Tube](#) booklet for teachers - [Cambridgeshire Health Services OT Sensory Circuits for Teachers](#) in class [Cambridgeshire Health Services OT Sensory Circuits In class](#) and/ or you can purchase the

sensory motor skills programme for children by Jane Horwood (currently £7.77 from Amazon)

- Dough disco - Shonette Bason-Wood [Dough Disco YouTube](#) and [Spread the happiness TV YouTube](#) Spread the happiness channel
- Squiggle whilst you wiggle – Shonette Bason-Wood [Motor Skills - Squiggle whilst you wiggle Part 1 YouTube](#) also see <https://www.schoolofspreadthehappiness.co.uk/product/squiggle-whilst-wiggle/> (currently £36)
- Write dance by Ragnhild A. Oussoren and <http://writedancetraining.com/> (currently £31.74). Also see [Write Dance - Henry You Tube](#)
- Emotions toolbox e.g. [Milton Keynes Emotional Toolbox](#) - free
- How does your engine run? [How does your engine run Alert Programme](#) - free
- Training for key staff e.g. [Levels 1-3 online sensory training course](#) <https://griffinot.teachable.com-> (currently £40)
- The Derbyshire NHS OT service offers training primarily for parents and carers in Understanding Sensory Skills in order to support their child but setting/ school staff can also attend (two places are allocated per family). Families can self-refer by contacting the administrative team on 0300 123 4586 (option 2 and then option 5) Mon-Fri 09.00-16.00 - free

Phase 3 – Specialist SEND Support

Children/ young people with significant sensory needs whose outcomes have not been adequately improved through the support of Phase 1 and Phase 2 can be supported by specialist practitioners (e.g. Specialist Teachers/ Education Practitioners, Educational Psychologists, SENCOs with experience and CPD commensurate to a specialist teacher). Specialist practitioners can be employed or commissioned by the school or provided by the Local Authority.

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Key actions at this phase:

1. Individual observation, assessment by a specialist practitioner
2. A review of the actions and impact at phase 1 and phase 2 by a specialist practitioner
3. Advice and recommendations by a specialist practitioner
4. Monitoring/ recording to evidence progress and impact by the school/ setting

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