

Waltham Forest Early Years Guidance

Sensory Processing

The purpose of this guidance is to support schools and early years settings, including childminders, in developing their understanding of children's sensory processing difficulties and strategies to support children.

What is sensory processing?

Sensory processing is how people experience, interpret and use their senses to guide their day-to-day behaviour. Sensory information is received from many different sources, including vision, hearing, touch, tastes and smells. As well as movement and body awareness.



- Children who experience **hyperactivity** might try to avoid certain sensory inputs to try to stop the overwhelming experience of sensory information.
- A **hyperreactive** child may seek out sensory stimulation to 'drown out' another input that is overwhelming for them, they may do this by rocking when there is too much noise.
- Children may also be **sensory seeking** as they enjoy certain sensations or because it can make them feel calm in stressful situations.

What are sensory processing difficulties?

Sensory processing issues are difficulties with responding to information that comes in through the senses. Children may be oversensitive to sensory input, undersensitive, or both.

- Common types of sensory processing difficulties include:
 - Experiencing too much stimulation from incoming sensory information (**hyperreactivity**)
 - Experiencing too little stimulation from incoming sensory information (**hyporeactivity**)
 - Needing to seek out sensory experiences (**sensory seeking**).
 - Having difficulty combining sensory inputs from different senses (**multi-sensory integration**).

It's important to remember that difficulties interpreting sensory information can have an **impact** on how children and adults **feel, think, behave or respond!**



Common behaviours

Hyperreactivity	Hyporeactivity	Sensory Seeking
<p>Distressed by bright lights or loud noises, including hand driers.</p> <p>Cannot tolerate the feeling of certain types of clothing or labels.</p> <p>Often distracted by background noises that most people ignore.</p>	<p>May not respond to certain sensations most people normally would (e.g. another person touching their hand or calling their name).</p> <p>May have a high tolerance for pain.</p>	<p>Often touching items with interesting textures.</p> <p>Have difficulty understanding personal space and be overly physically affectionate.</p> <p>May seek out extreme sensory experiences (e.g. climbing high trees).</p>

Strategies to support

Some children may be able to learn self-regulation strategies to help manage the environment around them by themselves, others may need more support.

When a child is over-stimulated and feeling anxious these activities/strategies may help them feel calmer:

- Sitting under a big, heavy blanket.
- Tucking legs up and squeezing.
- Slow rocking e.g. rocking chair.
- Giving themselves a hug.
- Lavender scents – this could include putting lavender in playdough.
- Squeezing and relaxing a small fidget toy.
- Squeezing and relaxing face and/or hands.
- Snuggling into a small space.



When a child is not alert enough to pay attention to an activity, these activities/strategies may help:

- Up/down movements, jogging/running, fast movement (for short periods only).
- Jumping, jumping jacks.
- Clapping activities.
- Making faces e.g. open mouth wide.
- Stamping on the spot.
- Gain the child's attention before speaking to them.
- Removing other distracting background noises.
- Breaking down instructions into several smaller steps.

General calming strategies

- Having a routine helps children to feel calmer.
- Visual Supports - when a child cannot hear what others are saying or cannot focus, a visual timetable may help.
- Consider the child's environment - what could be done to reduce possible trigger stressors? Be a detective - look at the environment in the light of sensitivities and preferences of the child.
 - Children who are sensory seekers often benefit from more opportunities to interact with their surroundings. For these children have lots of toys that provide sensory input.
 - Provide a place where the child can take themselves for a bit of time out, for example, a small tent.
 - Avoid unexpected touch.
 - Creating sensory areas - small, safe, hidden areas with suitable toys resources can create a calming experience.

Remember all children are unique and what works one day may not work the next – being **calm** and **consistent** will work wonders!