

Sensory Processing and Home Recommendations

Sensory Processing:

Each of us is continually taking in and organizing sensory information from the environment and our bodies. Children actively use sensation to learn about objects, their bodies and movement through space. Difficulties with sensory processing can impact a child's ability to stay calm and organized, to focus on specific tasks, and to develop motor coordination. Sensory accommodations can assist in regulation and organization, as well as enhance body awareness and motor development.

ENVIRONMENTAL ACCOMMODATIONS:

Environmental accommodations refer to ways of altering the surroundings to help children with sensory processing difficulties maintain organization and focus during daily activities. The environment can also be designed to enhance motor skill development.

- ☐ Cut down on sensory inputs in the environment by using low lighting, soft rhythmical music or quiet spaces. If your child is overwhelmed, talking to her too much can be disorganizing. Regulate your speech into short, only necessary phrases.
- ☐ Keep visual and auditory distractions to a minimum. It may be helpful to have a quiet space in your home with a reduced number of toys. A small tent, table covered with a blanket, or a large empty box works well as a quiet "fort". A carpet can decrease noise and a beanbag chair or pillow can provide comforting deep pressure.
- ☐ Give your child the option of time-out or "quiet time" alone when he feels overstimulated.
- ☐ A quiet area with few visual distractions is also helpful during homework.
- ☐ Be aware that bright lights or the flicker and hum of fluorescent lighting may be disturbing. Use lamps and other lighting alternatives such as full spectrum light bulbs. Children who are highly sensitive to light may prefer to wear sunglasses.
- ☐ Prepare your child for sudden noises. Vacuum and use other noisy appliances while she is out.
- ☐ Unexpected touch can be difficult for children who are sensory defensive. Approach your child from the front and provide a warning before touching.
- ☐ If your child is over-sensitive to smells, use unscented detergent and shampoo. Do not wear perfume or use car or stick-up air fresheners. Use unscented markers.
- ☐ If your child is over-sensitive to movement or fearful of leaving the ground, provide alternative playground activities. *Ex. Your child may be able to walk along a line on the floor but not on a balance beam.* Limit the amount of rolling or twirling – let your child's response be your guide.

Strategies for Running Errands, Public Outings, Family Gatherings or Special Holidays:

- ☐ Be watchful during stimulating group activities such as birthday parties, family gatherings, recess or lunchtime at school, trips to malls or playgrounds. Your child may be bothered by large amounts of multiple sensory input inherent in these situations. Allow your child to sit or stand on the outskirts of the group and move in as he feels comfortable. It may be helpful to initially spend a short time in these settings, increasing the time as your child's comfort level increases.

- When you know the day will include activities that involve a great deal of sensory stimulation e.g. trip to the mall, meals with large groups, family events, structure the rest of the day with calm and organizing inputs.
- Shorten family gatherings or outings as needed. It may be necessary to avoid these all together and have a sitter come stay with your child while you go grocery shopping or to the mall. Sensitive children will generally accommodate better to shopping during less busy times.
- Before entering a potentially stimulating situation, help your child to engage in gross motor movement, such as **Sleep & Wake Routines:**
- A quiet tape of “easy listening” music, ocean sounds or white noise may be helpful. Some parents report that their children fall asleep more easily when a humidifier, fan or fish tank is turned on and making a soft background noise.
- If your child is having trouble falling asleep, try using soft flannel or cotton tee shirt sheets. A heavy comforter or sleeping bag can provide deep calming pressure, which some children like. Children may benefit from having stuffed animals to hug, or sleeping on lamb’s wool.
- Putting pillows or large stuffed animals on the edges of the bed can provide a smaller, more enclosed space for sleep.
- Provide window darkening shades or curtains.
- Respect the child’s choices in sleepwear. Children with tactile sensitivities often prefer soft cotton pyjamas without feet. Some children prefer tighter fitting pyjamas that provide touch pressure; others prefer lightweight, loose clothes.
- Create a consistent bedtime routine. It is important to get your child to bed before he becomes overtired and moves into overdrive. Activities that can help settle your child down for bed include reading a book or watching a calming video, cuddling in a rocking chair, taking a warm bath an hour before bedtime, having a massage or listening to quiet music or lullabies in bed.
- Do very active games one hour before bedtime for about 20 minutes *Ex. Dancing, jumping, swinging.*
- Comfort objects can ease the transition away from family activities and assist your child in settling himself for sleep. These might include a favourite stuffed animal, blanket, or piece of clothing that smells like mom or dad.
- Some children need to be awakened with calming stimuli such as back or foot rub, oral input, or gentle rocking. Limit the conversation for this child.
- Some children require intense input to wake up. Try jumping up and down on the bed with hands held, cold face wash, electric toothbrush, lively music and strong flavours at breakfast *Ex. Orange juice made with less water, lemonade, or tangy jelly/jam.* running or jumping in a safe place, or engage her in “heavy work” activities, such as pushing on the car and pretending to move it.
- If roughhousing gets out of control, direct children to more appropriate gross motor activities, such as jumping, marching, or dancing.
- At birthday parties, keep the number of children small and have the party in a familiar comfortable environment.
- Educate family and friends about the negative impact of unexpected touch and loud voices ahead of time. Advocate for your child if an adult is not respecting his space or discomfort with touch or movement.

- Pay attention to your child's positive behaviour and provide praise as appropriate – "Catch them being good".

Eating, Bathing, Self-care and Dressing:

- If your child is over-sensitive to food in her mouth, try giving ice pops or frozen juice ice cubes to desensitize the mouth. Carefully applying firm pressure around the mouth prior to eating may also be helpful.
- Your child may have strong preferences for foods of similar tastes, shapes or colours. Introducing new foods slowly may work. It may be helpful to use preferred foods to entice children to try novel foods. *Ex. Try hiding chicken in yellow cheese.*
- To improve self-feeding use a weighted fork or spoon. The weight gives your child clearer sensory feedback about the position of his arm in relation to his body. Placing a non-slip surface such as dycem mats under plates keeps them from moving.
- For children who have difficulty brushing their teeth, a Gerber Nuk brush or a toothbrush with natural bristles can be a more acceptable. Some children might prefer a vibrating toothbrush.
- If haircuts are a problem, give pressure to the head or shoulders; for nail cutting, give pressure to the hands or fingers. At times visually distracting your child with a book or video during these activities can be helpful. If your child is extremely sensitive you may find that performing these activities when she is asleep works best.
- For children who dislike baths make sure to warm the bathroom prior to undressing. Using a smaller tub can make your child feel more comfortable. Encourage water play to make the experience fun.
- To help with showers, try a handheld showerhead to control the spray and keep water out of the eyes. Pouring rinse water from a small pitcher or using a visor or dry wash cloth over the eyes may be helpful. Count to "10 while pouring water so he knows it will end. When washing hair allow your child to sit upright as tipping the head backwards may be frightening.
- If your child is overly sensitive to smells use unscented shampoo and soaps.
- When getting out of the bathtub, use a large towel to wrap the child tightly. Have your child reach out one arm or leg at a time and rub it firmly with another towel to decrease tactile sensitivity.
- Some children prefer either tight or loose fitting clothes. Be aware of your child's preferences in clothes and buy accordingly. All cotton clothes often work well. Wash clothes several times before your child wears them.
- Have fun with dress-up clothes. You can provide larger sizes in soft materials that can easily be pulled on and off.
- To decrease tactile distractions, turn socks inside-out and remove tags from shirts. Socks without a toe seam are best.
- Set clothing out on the bed in a row from left to right to help with dressing. Label drawers if needed and rearrange them top to bottom in order of first to last items needed.