

**Autism
seminars**
for families



Sensory needs

Seminar booklet





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Sensory needs

Seminar booklet

This seminar booklet is designed to accompany the **Sensory needs** seminar.

A range of people deliver this seminar, including National Autistic Society employees and professionals who have bought our facilitator pack. The materials in the pack, including the presentation and seminar booklets, have all been written and developed by The National Autistic Society.

The seminars and booklets are based on the highly successful *help!* programme The National Autistic Society developed in 2002.

This seminar you are attending today is being delivered by:

Language used to describe autism

Our most recent research into the language we use to describe autism showed there is no single term that everyone prefers. Although it does suggest a shift towards more positive and assertive language, particularly among autistic communities, we recognise that many parents prefer 'person-first' language such as 'child with autism' and 'child on the autism spectrum'. Therefore we have used these terms throughout this booklet.

For more information on the research, visit www.autism.org.uk/describingautism.

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Sensory processing

The seven sensory systems

Touch (tactile)

The tactile system provides information about the environment, objects and textures around us. This includes information such as whether things are hard, soft, sharp, dull, hot, cold or painful to the touch. The sensory receptor for this system is the skin. Some areas of skin are more sensitive than others.

Sight (visual)

The visual system provides information about objects and people around us. It helps us to define boundaries as we move through time and space. The sensory receptor for this system is the retina in the eye.

Hearing (auditory)

The auditory system provides information about whether sounds in the environment are loud, soft, high, low, near or far. The sensory receptor for this system is the inner ear.

Smell (olfactory)

The olfactory system provides information about different types of smell, such as musty, acrid, putrid, flowery and pungent. The receptors for this system are the chemical receptors in the nose.

Taste (gustatory)

The gustatory system provides information about different types of taste, such as sweet, sour, bitter, salty and spicy. The sensory receptors are the chemical receptors on the tongue and throat.

Balance (vestibular)

The vestibular system provides information about movement, gravity and changing head positions. It helps us know where our body is in space and whether or not we or our surroundings are moving. Even without vision we are able to tell without looking if we are horizontal or vertical (however visual information is very important for this system). The receptor for this system is the inner ear.

Body spatial awareness (proprioception)

The proprioceptive system provides information about which parts of our body are moving and how. It allows us to control movements without looking. It is also involved in the amount of pressure needed to manipulate objects. The sensory receptors are in the muscles, joints and tendons.

Sensory processing

- Our bodies and the environment send our brains information through the senses.
- We process and organise this information so that we feel comfortable and secure.
- This helps us to understand the world and respond appropriately.

To enable us to make sense of the world around us, our brain processes all the sensory information we receive through all the different systems. It helps us to organise, prioritise and understand the information. By doing this we do not become overloaded and can respond appropriately.

We then respond to this sensory information through thoughts, feelings, behaviour or a combination of these.

Most of the time, we process sensory information automatically without needing to think about it much.

You may hear different terms to explain this. Often the terms 'sensory processing' and 'sensory integration' are used interchangeably. Throughout this booklet we will use the term 'sensory processing'.

To understand sensory processing, it is important to look at the different stages that happen from receiving sensory information to acting on it.

Receive

This is the stage where we become aware of some sensory input (registration), and then we pay attention to it (orientation).

eg "I feel something on my hand" or "I can hear something".

The level at which we register and pay attention to sensory information may vary throughout the day, depending on our previous sensory experiences or how alert or stressed we are. For example, in the middle of the day our brain may not register the noise of the stairs creaking, but it may do in the middle of the night.

If a child is over-sensitive, their brain may be telling them to pay more attention to a particular sensory input and they may be processing this input as being very intense.

eg They may hear sounds from very far away, a light may seem overly bright to them or they can feel a tiny seam in their clothing.

As a result of being over-sensitive they may try to avoid certain sensations.

If a child is under-sensitive, their brain may not be registering or paying attention to certain sensory input, so they may not show typical reactions that other people would expect.

eg They may not notice their clothes are twisted on their body, may not show much awareness of pain or may not get dizzy when spinning around.

As a result of being under-sensitive, they may try to seek certain sensations.

Some children who appear to be under-sensitive may actually be experiencing 'shutdown'. This is where they are feeling so overwhelmed by incoming sensory information that they shut down completely to protect themselves.

Filtering sensory information

Children may have difficulties with knowing which information to pay attention to and which to ignore. There is sensory input around us all the time and part of the role of sensory processing is to determine which input we need to pay active attention to and which to ignore. If someone has difficulties with filtering the vast amount of sensory input coming in, this can lead to them not paying attention to the right things and experiencing 'sensory overload'.

eg All the sounds around a child may seem to be at the same level, making it difficult for them to pick out the teacher's voice and pay attention to him or her. Or a child may be getting sensory input about how their clothes feel on their body as well as trying to watch the TV (typical processing would filter out this information as you don't need to attend to it to watch TV).

Level of arousal or alertness

The brain tries to make sure we are at the right level of arousal or alertness for what we are trying to do. This process is called sensory modulation and our level of arousal varies throughout the day.

eg We might drink coffee in the morning to wake us up and make us feel more alert. A child might fiddle with a pen to help them concentrate. We might turn the light down low to help us relax in the evening.

Many children with autism have difficulty being at the right level of arousal for the situation they are in. This can lead to them having difficulties with paying attention, controlling their impulses and coping with frustration, and they may show extreme emotional reactions.

eg It takes a child with autism a lot longer to calm down after playtime than another child without autism, or it is very difficult to get the child motivated in the morning.

Sensory defensiveness

This term refers to some children's tendency to react negatively or with fear to sensory input that is generally considered inoffensive to the majority of others.

eg Covering their ears when they hear a certain noise, gagging if they look at a particular food, or feeling extreme fear of falling if they have to close their eyes when in the shower or if their feet can't touch the floor when on the toilet.

Children may be defensive in just one sense or in a variety of senses, and their level of defensiveness can vary greatly.

One sensory input at a time

Children with autism may find it difficult to pay attention to input from more than one sensory channel at a time.

eg If they are listening to you they may not be able to look at you.

Attaching a meaning to a sensation

Many children with autism find it difficult to link back to past experiences, and this makes it very difficult when they are trying to make sense of sensory input.

eg "The cooker was hot last time I touched it, better not touch it again!"

A child who cannot tell whether water is hot or cold, or doesn't recognise the feeling when they need to go to the toilet.

Common differences in individual senses

There are some difficulties which might be specific to processing differences in the individual senses. The following pages show examples of some of these, and have space where you can write down any other examples you can think of for your child.

Touch



Might only be able to tolerate certain clothing



Dislikes or seeks touch from people or objects



Gags at different food textures, has a very restricted diet

These are examples of different behaviours you may see



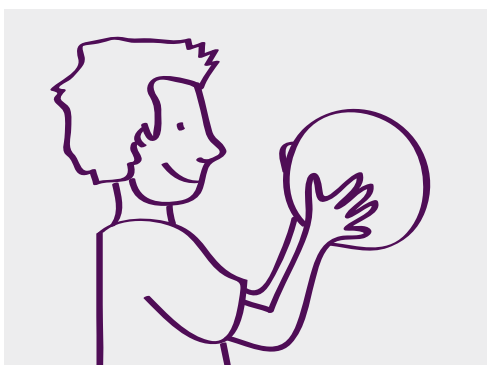
Avoids personal hygiene activities



Different or delayed reaction to pain or temperature



Bangs head or bites hand (self-injurious behaviour)



Is constantly touching things, always needs to be holding something

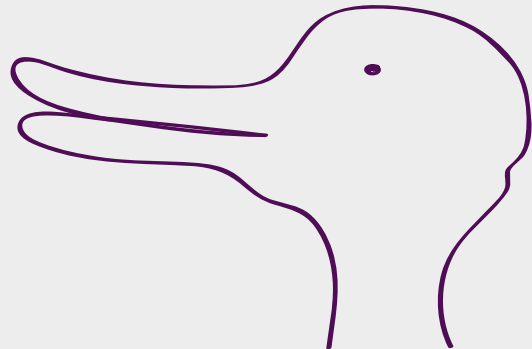


May prefer deep pressure to light touch

Sight

What can you see?

This picture (right) is an ambiguous figure in which the brain switches between seeing a rabbit and a duck. The duck-rabbit was originally noted by American psychologist Joseph Jastrow. The eye and brain make an unconscious inference about the meaning of the picture. As the picture is ambiguous, the brain switches between the two pictures.



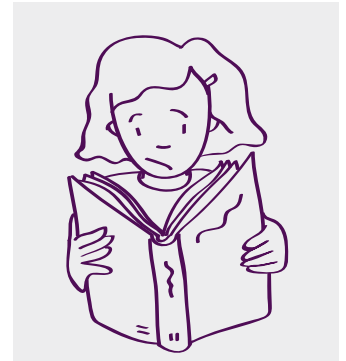
These are examples of different behaviours you may see



Difficulty in tracking movement



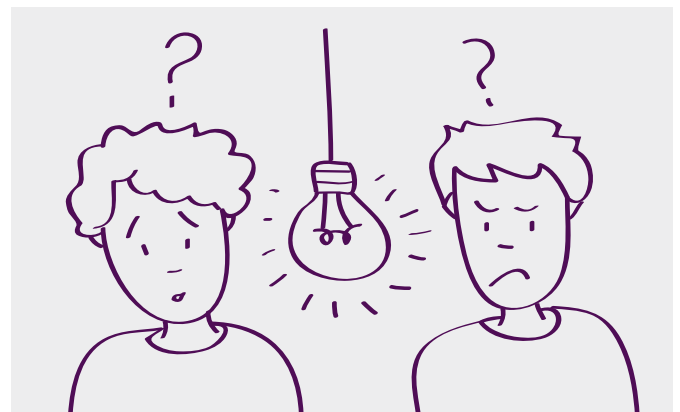
Uses peripheral rather than central vision



Problems with reading and writing

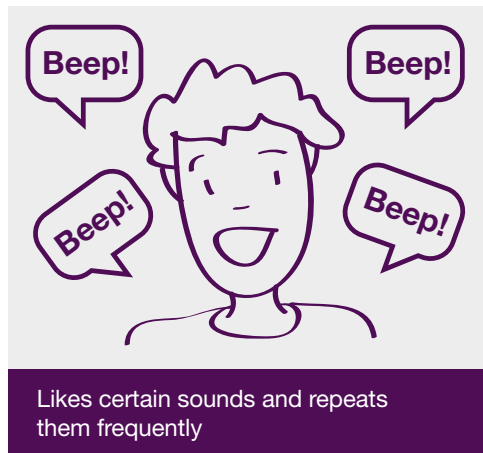
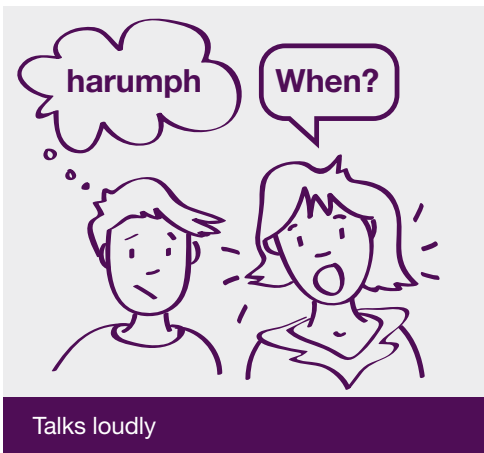


Distorted vision

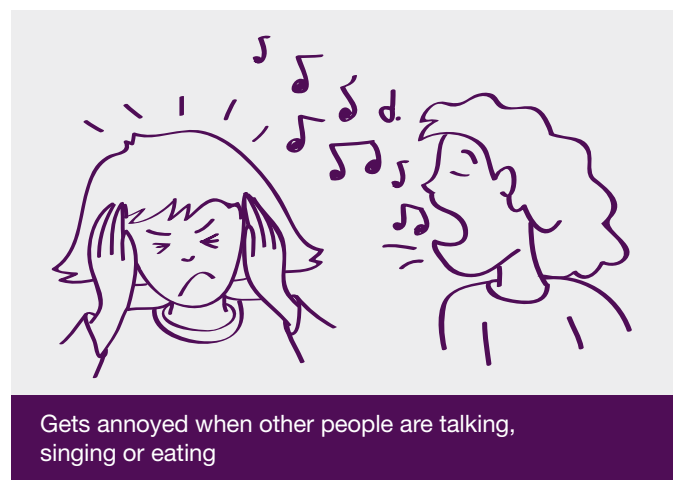
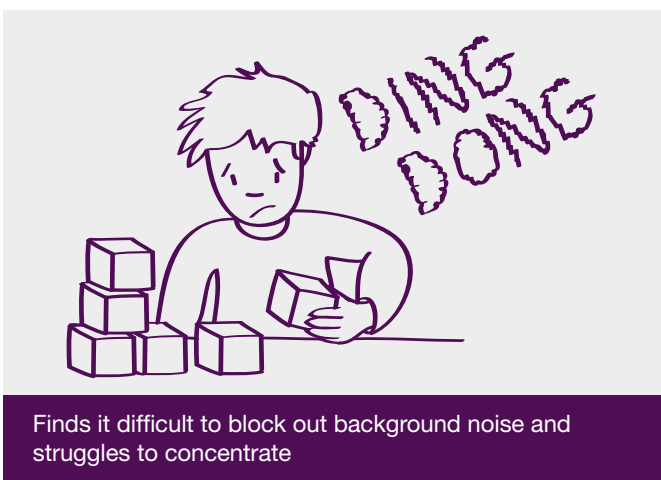


Sensitivity or distraction caused by lights, colours or patterns

Hearing



These are examples of different behaviours you may see



Smell and taste

The smell and taste senses are very closely linked which is why we look at them together.



May have difficulties with using the toilet or bathroom



Eats non-edible items (pica)



Prefers or avoids certain foods or smells

These are examples of different behaviours you may see



Licks people or objects



Refuses to use toothpaste



May use smell to recognise certain people



Not able to tolerate certain food tastes, smells or textures

Balance

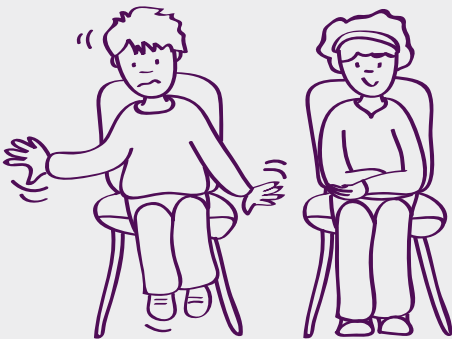
What can you see?

Fairground ride – Many of us may have enjoyed going on fairground rides as children, but as adults find we are unable to do so anymore. Our need for movement may change as we get older, hence we may react differently to fairground rides.



Treadmill – Many adults who go on a treadmill find that unless they slow it down very gradually, it feels like they are still moving when it comes to a stop. This could be because their vestibular system is still predicting the movement.

These are examples of different behaviours you may see



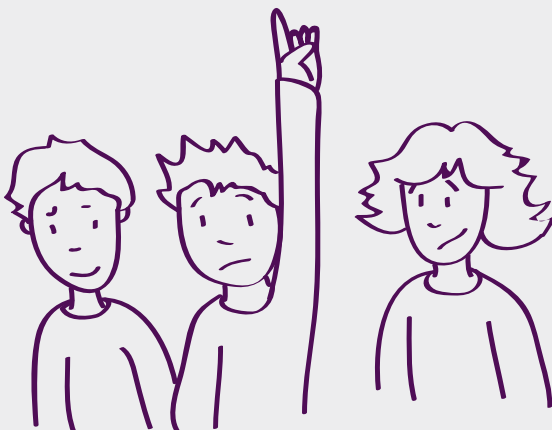
Difficulties with activities where the head is not upright or feet are off the ground



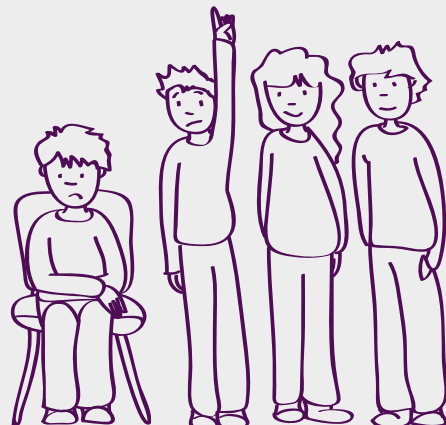
May avoid or actively seek out movement



Needs frequent movement breaks



Difficulty staying in the same position

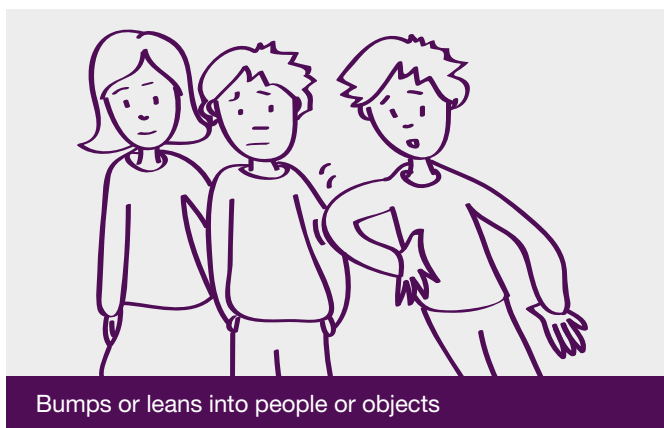


Gets tired easily

Body spatial awareness



These are examples of different behaviours you may see



Sensory worksheet

Is there an activity or situation your child finds difficult?

	Possible sensory reasons Why?	Potential strategies How?
Touch		
Sight		
Hearing		
Smell		
Taste		
Balance		
Body spatial awareness		

General strategies

Be the detective

It can be useful to try to understand why a behaviour might be happening, as this might give you some clues as to what might help reduce or eliminate it. It is important to try to think from the child's perspective why they might be behaving in a particular way, along with considering if the behaviour is actually a problem, or is it something they can continue if they need to.

Avoid the situation

There may be some sensory experiences that are uncomfortable, distressing or painful for your child. Supporting or teaching them to avoid that sensory input may be useful. This may be for a short period of time while you try to teach them to cope with it, or it might be a long-term strategy. This will depend on the type of sensory input it is.

eg We can avoid eating bananas, but a child can't avoid going in all shops for the rest of their life.

Desensitise

Desensitisation refers to a process of gradually getting someone used to a sensation or experience that they previously had a fearful or extreme reaction to.

We might first try helping them to avoid the parts of a situation that they find difficult and just experience a short amount of it.

eg Only going to the shop when it will be quiet; just going into the last five minutes of a long school assembly; or wearing headphones to reduce noise.

eg Initially only flushing the toilet when the child is out of the bathroom, then gradually flushing it when they are a bit closer.

eg Visiting small shops for very small amounts of time before gradually building up to visiting bigger shops for longer periods.

Many children with autism are extremely sensitive to certain sensory input. This may be because they have not been able to receive, or allowed themselves exposure to, a particular input, so their sensory receptors are still very sensitive.

eg When babies are born, their mouths are highly sensitive. It is only through the process of drinking and eating that they gradually become desensitised. For some children with autism who have a restricted diet, the inside of their mouth may still feel very sensitive.

With any form of desensitisation, it is very important to take it slowly, and you may need to combine it with visual supports to show the child how long they have to cope with the sensory input.

eg If you're trying to get a child to wear new shoes, try using a timer that shows how long they have to keep them on for.

Some children may have highly sensitive reactions when we try to begin an activity with them, so allowing them time to get used to the sensation may be helpful.

eg Touching their fingers firmly to reduce their sensitivity to touch before beginning to trim their nails, or firmly touching their head before brushing their hair.

Communication strategies

With some children, it is helpful to try to give them a means to communicate when they are looking for or trying to avoid a particular sensory input. Because of their difficulties with understanding other people's perspectives, many children with autism may not realise that their experiences are different from other people's. Using visual supports can often help with this.

eg A symbol that your child can use to tell you they've had enough and need to leave, or a phrase that they can use to explain that they can't cope with something.

Empower the child

Some sensory input is easier to cope with if it is under our own control. By allowing or encouraging your child to control how much sensory input they receive, it may increase their ability to cope.

eg Letting your child brush their hair or clean their teeth, or letting them use headphones to block out sound when they need to.

Provide structure

Children with autism often cope better when they know what is happening, in what order and for how long. If we can give them structure so things become more predictable, it may help with sensory processing differences.

eg Teeth cleaning always happens at a certain time for a certain length of time, or going on the trampoline always happens when they come home from school.

Mixture of sensory input

A mixture of sensory input can help a child's nervous system to feel better organised and support the child's attention and performance. This is paramount for the child to be a successful learner. Although this is important for everyone, it is even more important for people with sensory processing differences, because they are sometimes unable to modulate or self-regulate their sensory input.

Calming activities

Providing a variety of calming activities or items can help with relaxing the nervous system, with the aim of helping to reduce anxiety, sensory defensiveness and 'fright, flight or fight' reactions.

Create a calm, 'low arousal' environment, especially in your child's bedroom. Low arousal means approaching children and their environment in a calm and ordered way to reduce anxiety and help concentration.

There should be as few distractions as possible. Remove clutter as it often causes anxiety. Some children benefit from having plain, pale curtains, carpets and walls. By starting with a calm, uncluttered environment, you can then introduce other things that help your child.

Below are some suggestions for calming activities - but remember that what might be calming for one child might be alerting for another:

- soft lighting
- deep pressure massage
- sleeping bags
- blankets, cushions, body pillows
- bean bags
- rocking chair
- weighted lap pads
- Lycra clothing
- quiet corner with sensory items
- low level lighting
- pop up tent or quiet corner
- sensory toys or fidget toys
- quiet music or white noise
- lavender or soothing smells.

Alerting activities

Activities that help with alerting are useful for children who have difficulties with being at the right level of arousal and who are hypo (under) sensitive. If your child is not responding to sensory input because they are experiencing sensory overload, these activities will not help.

Try introducing alerting activities for short spaces of time to start with. Some children can easily become over-stimulated if they do them for too long.

Below are some suggestions for alerting activities:

- running or games with running
- brisk walk
- trampoline
- swinging
- messy play
- catch or bouncing games
- bright lighting
- loud, fast music
- sensory toys or fidget toys
- strong smells
- tickling.

Organising activities

Some children seem to go very quickly between being over- and under-sensitive. Using the activities suggested below may help them to feel at the right level and to become more focused and attentive:

- sitting on a physio ball
- wheelbarrow walks
- pulling or pushing heavy objects
- heavy exercise
- pushing (against wall or hands together)
- sucking through straws
- chewing or blowing
- swimming
- vibrating pillows or massagers
- sensory toys or fidget toys
- strong smells
- tickling
- massage or joint compressions
- rhythmic activities.

Daily events	Activities
Morning	<p>Alarm clock with light that gradually gets brighter.</p> <p>Shower with strong-smelling shower gel and rub dry with towel.</p>
Arrival at school	<p>Encourage to look at visual planner to know what is happening.</p> <p>Fiddle toy or blu-tack to help concentration.</p>
Mid-morning	<p>Run-around activity at break time, including putting-away task at end to help with winding down. Lap pad as reminder that it is work time again.</p>
Lunch	<p>Free-play choice from assortment of tactile activities, eg sensory play materials.</p>
Mid-afternoon	<p>Deep pressure input from sitting on beanbag.</p> <p>Working on floor to give change in sensory input.</p>
Arrival home	<p>Trampoline</p>
Dinner	<p>Either with lap pad or sitting on a physio ball.</p>
Evening	<p>Listening to chill-out music with low lighting.</p> <p>Soothing bubble bath and pat dry with soft towel, get into warm soft pyjamas.</p> <p>Sleeping bag for sleeping.</p>

Adapted, with thanks, from *Building bridges through sensory integration* by Ellen Yack, Paula Aquilla and Shirley Sutton (see Useful reading for details).

Practical strategies

There are lots of different ideas, activities and resources you might be able to use to help with your child's sensory differences. We have divided them into top tips for different activities or environments, although many of them can be used to help with all difficulties.

Professionals who can help

Occupational therapists design programmes and often make changes to the environment so that people with sensory difficulties can live as independently as possible.

Speech and language therapists often use sensory stimuli to encourage and support the development of language and interaction.

Music therapists use instruments and sounds to develop people's sensory systems, usually their auditory (hearing) systems.

In the classroom

Writing

- visual cues on the page for where to start and finish – green margin to start, red margin to finish
- pen or pencil grips
- angled desk or writing surface
- workstation or screen to block out visual stimulation
- tape words to desk instead of child needing to look at the board.

Seating

- child's seat should be at the front or back of classroom, not where people will be walking past, may need to be where it is easy to get out of the classroom, not directly under fluorescent lighting
- cushion to sit on – one that is familiar or one that allows for movement (eg Mov'N'Sit cushion)
- alternative seating for certain activities or times – rocking chair, physio ball
- floor activities may be good for some, best avoided for others.

Movement breaks

Build in opportunities to move throughout the day.

- taking a note to the office
- pushing a trolley of books somewhere
- helping with putting things away
- marching from one activity to the next
- items to fiddle with.

Movement exercises

- pushing arms against the wall
- cross ankles and hands (cross legs at the ankles, cross one wrist over the other then link fingers together)
- stretchy material or Theraband attached to chair legs to kick against
- any physical activity that will get them moving
- big ball exercises using physio or therapy balls.

More sensory input

- weighted items (lap pads, jackets)
- deep pressure
- fiddle toys (including blu-tack)
- access to water or chewy snacks
- hold something related to the lesson or activity to give tactile stimulation.

Less sensory input

- avoid touch
- sunglasses
- headphones, ear defenders or active noise reduction headphones
- gloves for messy play or art activities
- opportunity to use a keyboard instead of writing (ensuring non-glare screen)
- laptop may be preferable to PC for non-glare screen.

Make a note

Environment

- low arousal
- workstation
- any visual information on walls or ceiling should be minimal and ordered
- organisation of classroom – use containers and clear labelling
- structured areas for different activities
- quiet corner or pop-up tent
- warning of loud noises (eg fire alarm)
- use rugs or carpeted surfaces to reduce noise.

Self-care activities

Washing

- try to use unscented or scented products
- install a seat in the shower
- grab rails for the shower or bath
- encourage sitting down to do things
- try to have an organised bathroom and bedroom, with specific places for things to go, using baskets to organise toiletries and making use of visual supports
- some children may show a preference for shower or bath – may be useful to stick with their choice.

Dressing

- put clothes out in the order that they need to be put on
- encourage child to sit down to get dressed
- use a mirror for some children, or take mirrors away for others
- think about clothing material and textures
- seamless socks
- remove the labels from clothes
- may need alternative fastenings
- tumble dry clothes before wearing so they feel softer and warmer
- washing powder – non-bio, not strong smelling, try to use the same one
- some children may prefer long or short sleeves, trousers or shorts
- some children may need only loose clothing, others may need only tight clothing
- they may need to remove shoes when in house or classroom
- may need reasonable adjustments to school uniform – tie, collars, jumper, labels or logo.

Using the toilet

- feet need to be able to touch the floor – use a foot stool, may need marks for where feet go
- use wet wipes
- mark on wall for how much toilet roll to use or rule about ‘how many sheets’
- padded toilet seat with a smaller hole
- tissue or liner in nappy to increase awareness of wees and poos
- have a Radar Key to use Accessible Toilets – www.radar.org.uk
- get *One Step at a Time* for toilet training (a free downloadable guide to toilet training children with autism) at: www.continencevictoria.org.au/one-step-at-a-time.

Cleaning teeth

- try alternative toothbrushes – electric, flashing, timed, musical, two-headed, small, additional one to hold
- use a face cloth to wipe teeth
- try alternative toothpaste – mild, alternative flavour, dip toothbrush into it for very small amount
- encourage child to sit down to clean teeth
- adult to stand behind while child is cleaning teeth
- desensitise mouth – may require input from an occupational therapist.

Nail care

- apply deep pressure by massaging before cutting or encouraging child to firmly place fingers on a table with the nails over the edge
- use lotion to relax the child, give more deep pressure and get used to touch
- make it part of their routine – try only trimming two nails at a time
- avoid using the word ‘cut’ as it may be taken literally and sound scary, maybe talk about making nails ‘healthy’
- try alternatives – emery board, small nail clippers, cuticle scissors
- give some sensory input elsewhere to help with distracting – weighted lap pad or massage.

Hair brushing and cutting

- try alternative brush – large headed, Tangle Teezer
- massage scalp beforehand
- increase body awareness – use a neck cushion, make sure the body is supported and their feet can touch the floor
- fiddle toy or vibrating input somewhere else on their body

Sleep

Routine

- try to have the same routine each night
- incorporate time to relax or wind down
- try using massage and/or joint compression before bed
- rub gently with a towel
- some children may need a set time for talking about worries within their early evening or bedtime routine – maybe using worry book or dolls.

Environment

- have a neutral colour on the wall
- use bedding that is not overly visually alerting
- try to have an organised room that is not too distracting
- avoid having too many distractions in room or on walls
- some children need blackout blinds or curtains
- alternative lighting – night-lights, dimmer switches, lamps
- think about room temperature – ideally the temperature in the bedroom should be between 16- 20°C. Some children may need it to be cooler than this.

Bed

- put the mattress on floor
- use a different mattress, airbed or water bed
- use a sleeping bag
- body pillows
- alternative sheets – good quality cotton or flannelette
- use temperature regulating bedding – Dermatherapy, Climarelle, Alpaca
- alternative pillows – memory foam, chillow to help regulate temperature

- have a small space for child to crawl into
- some children may need to have things in bed with them for body reference.

General tips

- try using natural remedies to aid relaxation
- use visual supports which explain what to do if they wake up
- avoid stimulants – caffeine and sugary foods
- medications – see doctor about the possibility of using Melatonin (helpful for some sleep problems but not all)
- see National Autistic Society information sheet on sleep difficulties – www.autism.org.uk/sleep – this talks through graded withdrawal, scheduled awakening and restricting sleep
- contact Cerebra Sleep Service – www.cerebra.org.uk
- contact the Children's Sleep Charity – www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk
- see the Family Fund's Tired Out website – www.tiredout.org.uk
- try to access support from Social Services.

Ideas for activities

Tactile activities

- encourage tolerance of touch through gradual exposure to different textures and materials through play
- look at using the Wilbarger Protocol for Sensory Defensiveness – need input from an occupational therapist to use this
- allow your child to use fiddle toys or to carry items that give them tactile input
- give 'high-fives' for praise – also gives tactile stimulation.

Make a note

Useful reading

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One step at a time

<http://continencevictoria.org.au/one-step-at-a-time>
(Free downloadable resource for toilet training children with autism)

National Autistic Society information sheets

The sensory world of autism

Toilet training

www.autism.org.uk/toilet-training

Environment and surroundings

www.autism.org.uk/environment

Make a note 

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Autism seminars for families

The National Autistic Society

We are the UK's leading autism charity. Since we began over 50 years ago, we have been pioneering new ways to support people and understand autism. We continue to learn every day from the children and adults we support in our schools and care services.

Based on our experience, and with support from our members, donors and volunteers, we provide life-changing information and advice to millions of autistic people, their families and friends. And we support professionals, politicians and the public to understand autism better so that more autistic people of all ages can be understood, supported and appreciated for who they are.

Until everyone understands.

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