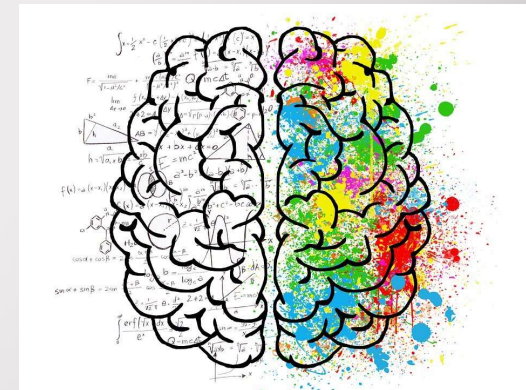


Sensory Strategies for the Older Child and Adolescents



Review of sensory processing

- Sensory processing is the ability of the brain to recognise and organise all the sensory information from inside the body (head and body movement, interoception) and outside the body (touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing).
- The brain then uses this information to decide what to pay attention to and what to ignore, (for example, the teacher talking or the ambulance siren outside).
- The brain usually filters out 95% of the sensory information and focuses on just 5%.
- Problems arise when it filters out too much (under responsive) or too little (over responsive).



Review of sensory processing continued

Children will use active and passive strategies to manage their sensory processing problems, or a mixture. **Active strategies may look like:**

- **Avoiding a sensation:** usually because they are over-responsive or over-sensitive to it. Children can become hypervigilant for unwanted sensations, they look out for it to avoid it – like a meerkat scanning for danger. They get easily anxious and may refuse activities.
- **Seeking a sensation they do like:** either to drown out other unwanted sensations (over-responsive); OR because sensations are not getting through to them (under-responsive), so they need more sensation to help them focus and organise. For example: making preferred noises to drown out surrounding noise, or fiddling with a paperclip whilst listening to the teacher.

Review of sensory processing continued

Passive strategies may look like:

- **The child may appear withdrawn or disinterested:** They may miss cues, fail to notice details and drift away during tasks. You may say 'they need a rocket to get going.' This is because they are under-responsive.
- **The child may notice sensations easily and get easily interrupted or distracted by sensations:** This is because they are over-responsive. They may find it hard to pay attention or seem to notice details most of their peers miss.

Remember the child may be over-sensitive to a particular sensation and under-sensitive to another, and have 'usual' responses to yet another. We are all unique.



Postural control and balance

In addition to being over or under responsive to sensations, some children may have postural control difficulties because the sensory components of movement are not processed correctly.

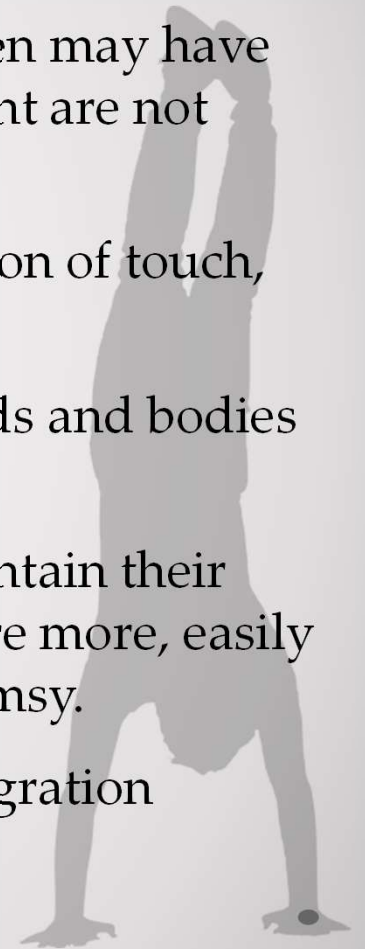
Postural control and balance mechanisms rely on the efficient organisation of touch, visual, proprioceptive and vestibular input.

Our brain constantly receives messages from these senses to get our heads and bodies in the right position and to maintain our balance so we don't fall over.

Children with sensory processing difficulties may find it effortful to maintain their posture, get easily tired, have poor stamina, slouch a lot, lean on furniture more, easily lose balance, have poor body awareness and confidence, and appear clumsy.

Posture and balance can be affected by problems other than sensory integration difficulties too.

-



Praxis difficulties for novel movement

In addition to being over or under responsive, some children may have praxis difficulties. Praxis is the ability:

- To have an idea of how to move the body in the situation
- Plan to move the body
- Sequence and execute the movement needed.

Children with praxis difficulties or dysfunction – like Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (which can also be called Dyspraxia) can have difficulties moving about in their everyday life.

Once they have learnt a motor pattern they usually become better at it, as the movement becomes habitual and automatic rather than novel.



Praxis difficulties for novel movement continued

Children with Praxis Difficulties might:

- Take longer than others to learn new skills
- Have poor fine motor coordination, for example struggling to learn how to use scissors or tie shoelaces
- Have low confidence in their ability to carry out tasks
- Avoid gross motor activities, such as riding a bike
- Appear clumsy (often falling or bumping into things)
- Be messy eaters and struggle with using cutlery
- Appear disorganised in managing belongings
- Dislike change – because it requires novel motor planning.



Remember they can't try harder, it is an underlying difficulty with the components needed to plan and execute the movement.

Sensory overwhelm or overload

Children with sensory processing problems can easily get overwhelmed and overloaded as a result of their sensory processing difficulties.

This may trigger a stress hormone response in the body, which can result in a fear, fight, flight or freeze response:

- **Fear:** They may become more anxious and worried about everyday tasks
- **Fight:** They may get angry and lash out more easily, either during or after a difficult sensory experience. This may involve trying to push off something that is touching them.
- **Flight:** They may try to run away or avoid situations that are uncomfortable for them.
- **Freeze:** They may shut down, making it hard for them to plan what to do or speak.

When we have these restrictions, it becomes harder for us to think clearly and process what we are being told.

Signs of sensory overload

Sometimes children can't recognise they are in sensory overload or heading that way. Learning to recognise their signs can be helpful. Signs of sensory overload:

- Getting pale in the face
- Increased sweating
- Breathing quicker and heavier
- Getting agitated
- Closing their eyes or blinking more
- Feeling sick or nauseous
- Yawning more
- Higher voice pitch and louder volume
- A sudden change in their energy levels – really high or really low
- More or less tension in their muscles – go floppy or tense.



Additional issues for older children

Puberty: hormones can change the way the brain processes sensations – this may be new for your child. They may become more or less sensitive to certain things.

Motivation: as children get older, they get more affected by what their peers are doing. This motivation may over-ride their sensory preferences. Suddenly they may tolerate things they refused before. This doesn't mean their sensory processing problems are solved, just that they are choosing to push themselves despite them. This can result in difficulties spilling out when they are safely home.

Exams and stress: Years 10-13 can be very stressful. Stress hormones increase sensitivity to sensations and can make the child more easily over-whelmed.



Additional issues for older children continued

Movement: As children get older some may move less and spend more time sitting or lying down. Being more sedentary can add to the child's sensory processing problems. Movement is calming and organising for the brain. Movement will get you going if you need a kick-start, or calm you down if you need to focus.

Screen time: This also reduces movement and can be a great way of avoiding sensations and focusing in on sensations that are fully controllable and predictable. However, spending a lot of time doing this can result in narrowed sensory experiences and the brain not developing strategies to manage the real world.



Coping strategies for adolescents

Older children need to develop self-reliance and independence. They will need to learn to use a toolkit with your help, including:

- Which sensations or activities organise them and which activities they find harder to cope with.
- Recognising when they are getting to their coping limits.
- Knowing how to get themselves focused if they become easily withdrawn or disengaged.
- Strategies they can use to organise and regulate themselves anywhere, anytime - that are not embarrassing or noticeable.
- How to communicate their difficulties to teachers, responsible adults, or employers.



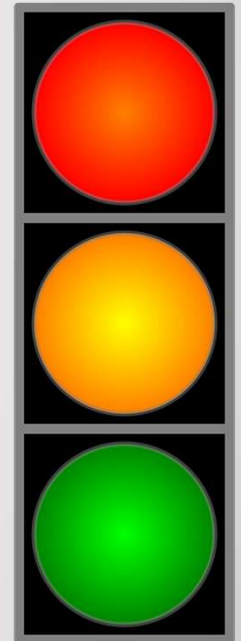
Coping strategies for adolescents continued

Recognising their sensory difficulties and tools to help:

- Start to make a note of which activities are difficult for your child and which activities help them.

You can think about it as zones or traffic lights:

- **Blue Zone:** Low in energy, hard to engage, tired, ill.
- **Green zone:** The just right state, where they are calm and can engage in activities and learning.
- **Yellow Zone:** They are starting to get a little agitated, excited, stressed or upset. They can still think clearly and access coping strategies.
- **Red Zone:** They are very agitated, excited, distressed and can't access coping strategies easily. **Overload!**



Coping strategies for adolescents continued

With your child, you can start making a plan of which strategies help them to tolerate the zone they are in or help them get back to the green zone if possible. None of us in the green zone all the time, so sometimes our strategies or toolkit help us cope in the zone we're in.

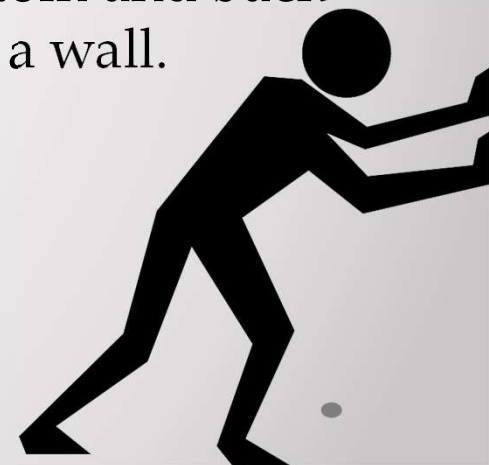
Zone	What your child looks like / does	Triggers – activities or situations or sensations	What helps -coping strategies or toolkit

Easy to use coping Strategy 1

The following strategies will help organise the brain for both over-responsive and under-responsive children. They can be used anywhere and you don't need any equipment.

Wall or chair press:

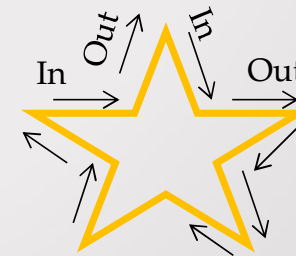
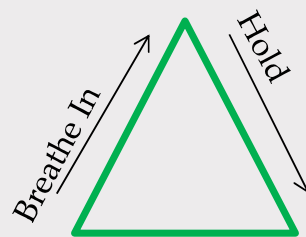
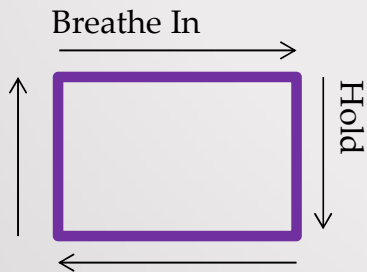
- Push yourself up in the chair using your arms, or press your bottom and back really hard into the chair or push your hands or body hard into a wall.



Easy to use coping Strategy 2

Breathing exercises:

- Hold the hands on the tummy. Breathe in for a count of four to the chest and tummy causing the hands to rise
- Breathe out for a count of four, the hands will come back down
- You can adjust the timings
- You can hold the breath between breathing in and out for a count of two if you prefer. This is called square breathing
- There is also triangle and star breathing. Chose the one which you like best. See the diagrams below
- Breathing in for longer than you breathe out is generally more alerting
- Breathing out for longer than you breathe in is generally more calming.



More coping strategies for the sensory toolkit

Please look at the strategies suggested in Modules 3 and 4 as well. This section will not cover them all.

We will cover a few additional ideas or thoughts using:

- **Head and Movement:** Vestibular and proprioception
- **Touch:** Light pressure and deep pressure
- **Mouth:** Taste, touch and jaw movement
- **Visual**
- **Noise**
- **Smell**

Remember, we can always cope better with sensations if we are in control of them.

Body movement

Movement of the body will calm or alert, whatever is needed. It is a great way to regulate our system and stay in the green zone.

The same movement strategies may be used for being in a low energy blue state or a high energy yellow or red state.

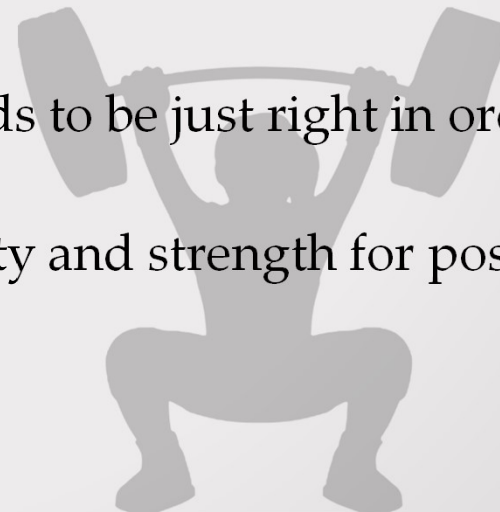
Encourage your older child to incorporate movement activities they enjoy into their routine.

Be guided by their interests.

Make sure the movement is not challenging, it needs to be just right in order for it to organise our brain.

Movement also helps us build stamina, core stability and strength for postural control.

It helps us sleep well at night.



Body movement

Ways to move

- Regular exercise classes or clubs
- Run, cycle or walk to and from friends houses, school, shops
- Help with the gardening or DIY projects
- Carry heavy bags
- Help with the housework: Hoover, mop, sweep
- Skate boarding or scooting
- Yoga / aerial yoga if they like upside down
- Swimming
- Trampolining
- Online movement activities – YouTube
- Wii Fit or similar
- Use a fitness watch to monitor movement and set goals
- Dancing.



Touch

Deep Pressure Touch: This is generally more calming and organising. Your teenager can use it as a calming strategy by:

- Try a weighted blanket, lap pad, vest, or a compression vest or sleeping under a compression sheet (a giant Lycra tube inserted over the mattress).
- Have a warm bath
- Squeeze themselves into a small space
- Ask for a firm hug or give themselves one
- Using a vibrating cushion.

Light Pressure Touch: This is generally more alerting and will wake you up:

- Have a shower and rub themselves down with the towel vigorously
- Ask for someone to stroke / tickle their skin, or play with their hair
- Wear more scratchy tickly textures: sequins, glittery fabrics
- Have some messy play or do the washing up
- Use temperature extremes, hot and cold.

Reducing unpredictable touch

Some children can find unpredictable touch very difficult to cope with, particularly if they are already stressed, these ideas can help:

- Always warn them or ask them if you need to touch them
- Sitting in a corner or by a wall reduces unexpected touch from behind or accidental touch when others pass by
- Think about what textures they wear, sit on, or sleep under – it is easier to cope with soft cotton or bamboo textures than wool or man-made fabrics which can be sweaty or scratchy. Compression garments might help.

Oral motor - mouth

The mouth is a great organiser and we tend to use it without even knowing, chewing or sucking our fingers or pens, fiddling with it, poking our tongues out when we concentrate or biting our lips.

Some useful strategies can be:

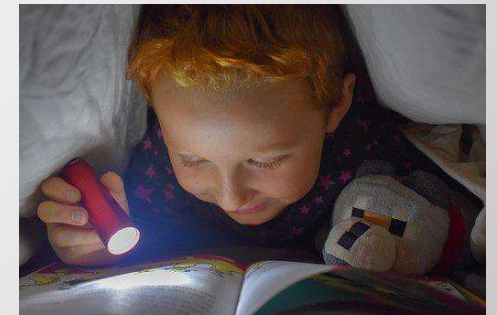
- Get chewy pen tops or chewy jewellery: www.tinknstink.com is a good website for this
- Use straws and thicker drinks for organising and calming: milkshakes, yoghurts
- Crunchy and chewy foods can be organising, make sure these are available in lunch / snack boxes. They use lots of muscles in the jaw
- Use a drinks bottle with a straw – these can help give us bursts of calming input from sucking. Camelbak do a bite and suck type tip for cyclists which can be great for calming oral input
- Sweet or salty foods are more calming.

Managing the environment

Noise, light and smells can also add to sensory discomfort. Some children will need more noise, light and smells, others will need less.

Think about the following:

- Is their bedroom a place that they can relax in and sleep – if not think about using fairy lights or lamps to reduce brightness, making it less cluttered, and making it smell nice
- Flowery and sweet smells are more calming, citrus and woody smells are more alerting
- The more sound and light there is in an environment the more alerting it will be. Let the child control the noise and light in their own room.



Managing the environment continued

- Think about how much noise there is in your home / school from appliances and other people. Can this be reduced in any way if they find noise tricky?
- They might prefer to reduce light themselves by wearing a hoody, cap or sunglasses, or painting their room dark colours – this is ok?
- A pop up tent or den can reduce visual sensations and increase the feeling of safety
- Wearing ear defenders can help in a really noisy place, but try not wear them all the time as it can result in them getting more sensitive to noise.

Managing multi-sensory environments

Older children have to cope with busier and more chaotic places, like college and sixth form, without adult help.

These ideas can help them to cope if they find it too much:

- **Plan:** Plan what to do and how to cope before hand. When we feel in control we become less easily stressed.
- **Exit cards:** These can be useful to have in place so the child knows they can leave the room if they need to.
- **Reassurance:** Can help to calm them and think of coping strategies.

Managing multi-sensory environments continued

- **Escape places:** If it all gets too much, encourage the child to use quiet spaces like small rooms, SEN hubs, toilets.
- **Sleep:** We all cope better when we have good sleep. Movement, a consistent bedtime routine, and calming activities or sensations before bed can help us sleep better.
- **Timings:** avoid busy places when tired, emotional or stressed. Go in early or late to avoid the rush, with permission.
- **Think about before and after:** What movement/sensory activities can the child do before and after a busy place to help regulate their system.
- **Think about where to sit:** They may prefer to sit near the exit, near the front, or near a wall.

Communicating their sensory processing problems

It is helpful to communicate with educators and employers about the difficulties your child has.

1. **Meet with the tutor / manager:** Encourage your child to explain their own sensory difficulties and what they find hard. Agree exactly what they can and can't do. Discuss how the team can support your child. Some ideas are: shorter but more frequent breaks, providing a quiet space, allowing them to exit without needing to ask for 5 minutes, allowing the use of headphones or chewing gum.

Communicating their sensory processing problems continued

2. **My plan:** Write a short one page plan with your child which they can show to employers and educators. It should:

- Highlight their problems and strengths (About Me)
- List the activities or sensations they find difficult
- Outline how they can help themselves
- Outline how others can support them.

MY PLAN		
NAME:	D.O.B.:	DATE OF PLAN: 2021
About me: I have This means I This plan has been developed to outline how best to support me so I can achieve to the best of my ability. I am a hard worker and am eager to learn. I enjoy helping and supporting others.		
Things I find difficult:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Coping in noisy rooms> Carrying lots of items> Sitting still for longer than 5 minutes> Sitting by windows> Keeping focussed> Being touched.		
Ways to help myself:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Cycle into college.❖ Sit where there are fewest distractions.❖ Take my breaks in a quiet place.❖ Use my headphones when it's too noisy for me.		
How to support me:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow me to access a quiet room at break times.• Allow me to leave the room if it gets too much without asking, for 5 minutes.• Allow me to use headphones when I do not listen to the teacher.• Let me stand up and move around if I need to.• Try and give me one piece of information at <u>at</u> time.• Warn me if you are going to touch me.		

Resources

There is a lot on the internet that can help you. Below are just a few suggestions. A lot of these sites also recommend and review books on sensory processing problems. For your teen, there are bloggers with sensory processing difficulties out there too.

- [Sensory Integration Education Home](#) UK resources and more detailed courses available at a reasonable cost.
- [SPD Education Toolkits | The Spiral Foundation](#) Free downloadable toolkits for parents and adolescents.
- [GriffinOT - Sensory and Motor Skill Resources for Parents and Teachers](#) Resources and training for parents and educators on sensory and motor difficulties, some free and some you need to pay for.
- [THE ZONES OF REGULATION: A SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING PATHWAY TO REGULATION – Welcome](#) More detail on using the 4 zones of regulation (blue, green, yellow and red)
- **Weighted blanket guide.** Gives safety tips for weighted items.
- [Pediatric Occupational Therapy Free Resources - The OT Toolbox](#) Free tips and activities for sensory processing issues.