

Supporting your child's sensory needs

Autistic individuals can have a number of different sensory needs. For more detail on this, see our factsheet titled 'Understanding your child's sensory needs'. This factsheet will focus on how to support those needs, once they have been identified, to reduce stress for the individual and help improve their quality of life.

Sensory strategies

- **Using visual timers:** Having a visual of how long they need to be somewhere or when an activity is finishing makes their schedule more predictable. This can have a calming effect and give a sense of more control of their day.
- **Visual timetables or now/next boards:** These can be used in conjunction with the visual timer to empower the person further. Activities that a child does not like can be followed up with activities that they do like, showing that they will get to what they want to do.
- **Ear defenders:** Ensure to use them at times of difficulty and encourage removing them at times of low-level noise to ensure the person doesn't become too used to the reduced noise at all times and then cannot cope in situation where the ear defenders are not available.
- **Fidget toys:** Toys can provide sensory feedback and can support the child to focus, while also getting their sensory needs met.
- **Deep pressure:** Carrying a heavy backpack or using a compression vest can help reduce anxiety (ensure to read safety instructions).
- **Breathing and counting techniques:** Trace up your fingers taking a deep breath in and breathe out on the way down your finger.
- **Movement breaks and opportunities to access outdoor spaces.**
- **Sensory breaks:** Access to low stimulus environments.

In the **Understanding your child's sensory needs** factsheet, we mentioned some scenarios in which autistic people may experience difficulties with due to their sensory needs. Some examples of these scenarios included:

- Cutting hair
- Brushing teeth
- Wearing a cycle helmet
- Washing hands
- Eating new foods
- Visiting the doctors

Below are some ways in which you can support your child in these scenarios, and can be used in combination with the sensory strategies listed above.

Shaping

Shaping is a method of teaching a new behaviour.

Shaping involves breaking down an activity that an individual finds difficult into very small approximations of that activity and rewarding the individual for taking part. Over time, these approximations are increased and added to, so they become more like the final activity, the one that was originally too difficult for them to do.

By utilising this teaching method, we can gradually expose someone to a situation that they previously found too overwhelming. The key is to go at the individual's pace, only increasing the expectation when they are ready.



Take the example of shaping up an individual's acceptance to having their hair cut with clippers. This shows how the child can be progressively supported to access the activity.

- To start with they are reinforced (or rewarded) for accepting the clippers being plugged in
- Then they are reinforced/rewarded for the clippers being turned on
- Next for allowing the clippers to be brought near to their head
- Then for the clippers touching their head
- Slowly this builds up, with the length of time tolerating each step being increased steadily
- Finally, the individual is comfortable with their head being shaved

The key is to go at the individual's pace, only increasing the expectation when they are ready.

This process could take many steps and will go back and forth dependent on the individual's success with each step. For example, step 3 above could have many sub steps within where the clippers are left on for 15 seconds, then 30 seconds, then 45 seconds etc.

If one step is causing distress, the procedure is taken back to a level that was successful and the shaping process starts again. By doing a small amount each day, for example, the procedure is gradually de-sensitised, and what was once an infrequent but traumatic procedure, is now a quick and easy process.

When considering something like a haircut, it is important to consider the child's own wishes to have longer hair or have it in a style they desire. Unless there is a health, wellbeing or safety reason, then consideration should be given to the actual need for them having their hair cut.

By doing a small amount each day, for example, the procedure is gradually de-sensitised



Another example could be brushing teeth:

- To start with they are reinforced (or rewarded) for being in the bathroom
- Then they are reinforced/rewarded for letting you look in their mouth with a mirror
- Next for the toothpaste being put on the brush
- Then for tolerating brushing teeth for a few seconds
- Slowly this builds up, with the length of time at each step being increased steadily
- Finally, the individual is comfortable with their teeth being brushed for 2 minutes

With both of these examples, there are different sensory factors that may be making the task more difficult. Is it the sound of the clippers or an electric toothbrush? Is it the taste of the toothpaste? Making adjustments to these factors can be done in parallel to the slow step approach to getting used to the activity as a whole.