

Understanding your child's sensory needs

Sensory challenges

Autistic individuals can experience their environment differently and have challenges processing the sensory input around them. They may be over/hyper-sensitive or under/hypo-sensitive to certain things in their environment. Difficulties with sensory processing can result in behaviours you wouldn't typically expect.

Hyper-sensitive means that a little feels like a lot, a smell that may not be noticed by people without an autism diagnosis might feel overwhelming to an autistic person. **Hypo**-sensitive means that a lot feels like a little. The volume of a speaker may appear too loud to a person without an autism diagnosis, but an

autistic person may listen with the speaker close to their ear. People can fluctuate between hyper and hypo sensitivities, and it can vary across the different senses. It is not the case that all autistic people will find loud noises overwhelming.

This can apply to any of the senses that humans have, which includes the five main senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch) or other senses such as vestibular (balance and spatial orientation), proprioception (body awareness) and interoception (internal signals from vital organs such as, a feeling of hunger). These are the main senses that we are looking at.

What might this look like?

Sense	Over/hyper-sensitive	Under/hypo-sensitive
Sight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmented images Distorted vision Covering eyes frequently throughout the day, particularly from bright lights Appears avoidant with eye contact and focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May have difficulty focusing on written work May squint eyes or look at objects out of the side of their eye Can be seen to flick objects close to eyes or watch screens closely (a sight test should always be completed to rule out any visual impairment)
Smell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoiding people that wear strong perfume May not tolerate strong smelling spaces, e.g., lunch hall or kitchen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't appear reactive to strong/uncomfortable smells Seeks out strong and/or preferred smells Smelling people or objects
Sound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty concentrating in noisy environments May avoid loud spaces or people Can be seen to put fingers into ears Sounds become distorted and difficult to discriminate the different noises in the environment (e.g., listen to name being called over sound of people talking outside) Difficulty concentrating in noisy environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks out noises e.g. listening to a speaker close to the ear May take a while to react to name being called Can be seen to listen to the same sound over and over again, e.g., rewinding a video

Sense	Over/hyper-sensitive	Under/hypo-sensitive
Taste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very selective diet • Will only eat certain textures • More likely to be comfortable with beige, bland foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likes very spicy food • May seek more intense flavours
Touch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May dislike wearing some clothing (e.g., socks/labels in clothes/loose fitting clothing) • Dislikes light touch • Very cautious of people near them that may touch them even if they don't mean to. i.e., with lanyards, long hair etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constantly touching whatever is around • Holding an item in hands • May not discriminate between items well
Balance (vestibular)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverse to climbing play equipment • Cautious of deep steps and being off balance • May dislike heights and unpredictable movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks out rocking/swinging • May climb at any opportunity • Can be seen to jump and bounce rather than walking in a straight line
Body awareness (proprioception)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes inaccurate movements • May like 'rough play' or use too much force when not meaning to • Seeks out deep pressure • Stands too close to others • Bumps into people 	
Interoception	<p>Interpreting internal feelings differently. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hunger • Pain • Toileting • Heart rate • Breathing • Tiredness 	

Examples of situations that autistic individuals may find particularly difficult due to their sensory needs:

- Cutting hair
- Brushing teeth
- Wearing a cycle helmet
- Washing hands
- Eating new foods
- Visiting the doctors
- Having a routine medical procedure (e.g. checking in the throat/ears)



To help support your child in managing sensory experiences, see the factsheet titled, **Supporting your child's sensory needs.**