

Understanding sensory needs

When the world feels too loud, too much, or not enough

Sensory processing differences · for parents and carers of primary aged children

We all take in information through our senses and our brains decide what to notice and what to ignore. Some children's brains **turn the volume up too high, or too low**, on some senses. This is called **sensory processing difference**. It is very common in autistic children and in children with ADHD or dyspraxia, but can occur on its own. It is not a separate diagnosis in the main diagnostic manuals, but an occupational therapist can assess it, and the effects on learning are very real.

More than five senses

As well as sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell, three hidden senses matter just as much:

Balance and movement

The vestibular sense, from the inner ear: where the body is in space and how it is moving.

Body awareness

Proprioception, from muscles and joints: where the body parts are and how much force to use.

Inside the body

Interoception: hunger, thirst, needing the toilet, being hot, and noticing feelings such as anxiety.

How it can show at school

- Exhausted or upset after assembly, the hall or the playground.
- Unable to sit still on the carpet, or leaning and slumping.
- Chewing sleeves, pencils or hair.
- Pressing too hard or too lightly when writing.
- Distracted by sounds others do not notice, such as a ticking clock.
- Toilet accidents from not noticing the signals in time.

Behaviour is information

A child who runs out of the classroom or lashes out may be overloaded, not naughty. Finding the sensory trigger often solves the problem.

Avoiders and seekers

A child who is **over sensitive** may cover their ears, hate labels and crowds, or eat a narrow range of foods. A child who is **under sensitive** may crash, spin, chew, touch everything or not notice pain or a full bladder. Many children are both, depending on the sense and the day.

Sensory overload

Input builds up across the day like water filling a bucket. When it overflows a child may melt down, shut down or run. A child who copes at school may let it all out at home.

A sensory diet

An occupational therapist may suggest a planned set of activities through the day that help a child stay calm and alert, such as jumping, carrying or a quiet break.

Often found alongside

Autism, ADHD, dyspraxia and anxiety (see our other sheets).

Strengths worth noticing

Many sensory sensitive children notice details others miss, have a keen ear for music or a strong eye for colour.

“Every child learns, some just need a different path.”

Nicola, Moss Grove Tutoring

Why one to one makes a difference

A classroom cannot be adjusted for one child's senses. At home, Nicola can set up the space to suit your child, so their energy goes into learning rather than coping with noise, light and movement.

What sessions look like

- **The right setting:** lighting, background noise and seating chosen with your child.
- **Movement built in:** short breaks, standing work or a wobble cushion.
- **Heavy work:** pushing, carrying or stretching before tasks that need focus.
- **Fidget tools** that help concentration without becoming a distraction.
- **Handwriting support:** grips, sloped boards and the right pencil.
- **Overload spotted early**, with a calm break before things boil over.

Learning your child's profile

In the first sessions Nicola will ask what your child seeks and avoids, watch how they respond, and plan around it. What works is shared with you and, with your permission, with school.

A typical session

Arrive and settle: a calm, familiar start.

Get ready: a short movement or heavy work activity.

Focused learning, in short chunks with breaks.

Finish calmly: something enjoyable and a clear end.

Working together

You know your child best. Before starting, Nicola will ask what has happened so far, what helps and what makes things worse. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child's teacher or SENCo so that everyone is working to the same plan.

Being realistic

Tutoring is not occupational therapy. Nicola can use sensory strategies to help your child learn, and share what she notices, but a full sensory assessment needs an occupational therapist.

Small things that help at home

- Keep a simple diary: what happened just before a meltdown or a great day?
- Build in active play before homework and bedtime: climbing, carrying, swinging.
- Create a quiet, low light space your child can retreat to.
- Prepare for noisy events, and plan an escape route.
- Cut out labels, choose soft clothes and allow ear defenders if they help.
- Never force a sensation your child finds painful; build tolerance gently.

Getting more help

Ask your GP or the school SENCo about a referral to occupational therapy. NHS criteria vary, so you may be offered advice and workshops before an individual assessment.

Where to find out more

National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk, search "sensory"

Sensory Integration Education:
sensoryintegration.org.uk

SENDIASS: free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search "SENDIASS" with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups.