



Black Country Healthcare

NHS Foundation Trust

Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
Children's Occupational Therapy
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SENSORY STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Sensory Processing

All day every day we are receiving information from the world around us via our sensory systems - sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. There are also two other senses, 'proprioception' (body awareness) and 'vestibular' (balance and movement). The way we understand and respond to this information is called 'sensory processing'.

Your child may be more sensitive to certain sensations and activities than their friends. These differences are usually normal and part of what makes us individual. The way we respond to sensation can change from day to day, hour to hour and can be affected by our environment, health, mood, behaviour or amount of sleep. Having a sensitivity in one area does not usually mean that your child has a sensory processing difficulty or needs to see an occupational therapist.

Many children, particularly under the age of 5, with no sensory processing issues will find certain aspects of their daily routine difficult. These often include bath time, hair brushing, visiting the supermarket and loud or unpredictable noises e.g. hand dryers. The development of our sensory needs change over time and mature as we get older.

Daily routines

It is not uncommon for children to resist parts of their daily routine as a way of trying to exert greater control over their environment – and their parents!

Sometimes you may try to avoid certain activities and situations that your child finds difficult. However this means that they will not have the opportunity to experience these activities and it will be harder for them to learn to cope with them. If your child becomes anxious in certain situations or environments, prepare them prior to the activity and give reassurance in a way that your child can understand. Looking at books, pictures, photo stories or watching a children's TV programme or appropriate YouTube video related to the event/activity can be helpful so they know what to expect. Holding a comforting toy or using a picture timetable for the event can also be helpful. Stickers and reward charts might be useful.

Tips to help manage common difficulties

There are many common activities that children find difficult. Here are some ideas that may help them to cope better. You will need to try a variety of activities consistently over a prolonged period of time.

My child hates having their hair brushed...

- Apply deep/firm pressure to the child's head before you begin brushing. This can be done using the finger tips or a towel. The child can do this themselves!
- Use gentle but firm brush strokes and sit the child in front of a mirror so they can see what is happening
- Use a weighted vest or lap blanket.
- Brush hair in a chair with surrounding support to calm. Your child may also be calmed by background noise.
- Provide your child with a "distracter" for use during the hair brushing such as a hand held electronic game or headphones (for listening to music), fidget toy to focus the child's attention on something of interest.
- Using a timer may help the child feel confident that the hair brushing will end shortly.
- Use detangling/spray conditioner and try different brushes such as a tangle teezer or a wet brush which glide through the hair more easily
- If your child has long hair divide it in to sections to brush a small amount at a time
- Keep it fun! Play 'hairdressers' where they brush and style your hair and encourage them to brush their toys' hair

My child hates going to the hairdressers...

- Use the word trim, instead of cut
- Prepare in advance e.g. visit the hairdressers beforehand to familiarise with the environment and the staff, "rehearse" a haircut through play, let the child touch safe tools under supervision e.g. combs, brushes, clips; use pictures, books, videos to familiarise with the process
- Help your child get used to the sound of the razor. Hold a battery operated toothbrush or other vibrating device near your child's ears when at home
- Organise appointments with your hairdresser for when there are no chemicals being used for hair colouring, etc. Your child may have difficulty with the smells
- Wash your child's hair at home before you go, to reduce the time spent in the hairdresser
- Apply deep pressure to desensitise the child's head before beginning the hair cut. This can be done using the finger tips or a towel. The child can do this themselves!
- Use a weighted vest or lap blanket
- Use distraction e.g. fidget toy, video games, listening to music, watch TV whilst the hair is being cut
- Ensure your child is not irritated by the cape around their neck. They may prefer a soft towel
- Bring fresh clothing for the child to change into immediately after the hair cut

Bath time is difficult...

- Allow your child to wash their own hair and body. Giving them control often relieves a lot of the stress!
- Consider water temperature. Use firm pressure when rubbing in shampoo, soap or towel drying as this can be more predictable and calming
- If they don't like "slimy" soap or shampoo, try foamy soap (also good for tactile play—unlike shaving cream, it doesn't have a strong smell)
- Use goggles, a foam visor or flannel held over the face when rinsing. This is good for a child who hates water on his face or who dislikes tilting his head back for rinsing. He might also like to dry his face immediately after washing it even if he's still in the shower or bath
- Try using a mirror, allowing them to see what is happening

- Some children prefer a large amount of water (such as a jug full) rather than a shower spray, to rinse their hair
- Stay calm, keep it fun. Use play as distraction e.g. bath toys, bath crayons, squirty bottles
- If hair is short, a cloth with a little diluted shampoo rubbed onto the head may be tolerated; your child can then wash off the shampoo with a wet flannel.
- Consider using a visual timer or sing a song that lasts the duration of the task so the child knows when it will end
- Preparation - Younger children can practice washing their dolls hair to understand the process and become familiar with the task, pre-warn before washing their body or hair, read stories, watch TV programmes or YouTube videos about bath time
- Give plenty of opportunity for your child to see other people having their hair washed and their observing the person's reactions.
- Use a sponge, flannel or shower gel/shampoo with their favourite character
- Don't bath your child every night and keep the time in there to a minimum. Bath at a time when your child is more calm e.g. mornings rather than evenings when they may be more tired
- Use a bath mat to help them sit more securely and get in and out more confidently

My child dislikes tooth brushing...

- Prepare their mouth for brushing by asking them to rub their gums using their finger or a Nuk brush. This prepares their mouth for the toothbrush and makes it less tickly!
- Select toothpaste that tastes good to them e.g. some types of children's toothpaste do not foam and come either flavour free or in flavours such as strawberry or mandarin
- Monitor the amount of toothpaste on the brush
- Consider dipping the toothbrush into the toothpaste rather than squeezing a 'blob' on it, this can feel less unpleasant in the mouth
- Develop a predictable routine for when and how to brush. Help your child choose the brushing pattern which will always be used. For example, they could decide to always start with the top teeth and to brush from left to right, front to back. A consistent brushing pattern will help your child motor plan this complex activity, learn to predict when and where they will feel various sensations
- Try using an electric tooth brush or a soft smaller tooth brush, but use firm pressure for brushing which will tickle less
- Use a visual timer, sing a favourite song for the duration of the task or use a tooth brushing app for older children
- For older children try using disclosing tablets so the child can physically see where their teeth are dirty and they need to brush
- Provide plenty of praise and a reward system if appropriate
- If possible let the child control his own tooth brush!

Nail cutting is difficult...

- Rub the child's hands with moisturiser using deep pressure beforehand. Press each child's individual nail bed firmly between your thumb and finger before cutting it to de-sensitise
- Use an emery board in between cutting and cuticle scissors instead of nail clippers. Try using a glass nail file as this can be smoother and less 'scratchy'
- Cut nails after they have been in the bath as the nail is softer after being soaked in water. Use distraction e.g. TV or sing.

My child is fussy about what they will wear...

- Children often have preferences about the types of clothes they like to wear and may have a favourite outfit or colour. Give a choice of two outfits letting your child feel more in control but allowing you to keep clothing suitable for the weather or occasion
- Allow extra time for dressing so that they have time to correct any clothing that is irritating
- Consider texture/feel of materials. Allow them to wear preferred textures where possible, avoid scratchy nylon threads and items made of polyester blends which can pill and cause discomfort, remove labels or tags, seamless socks or turn socks/tights inside out, try elasticated waist bands if the child doesn't like buttons or zips or tight clothes. Young children often do not like the feel of denim against their skin, however as they get older and are more aware of other children wearing jeans they may learn to tolerate this
- Stories about dressing, or using photos and pictures, can help your child learn about getting dressed.

My child is a fussy eater...

- Keep in mind that children go through phases where they will and won't eat certain types of food
- It will help if your child sits at the table with feet supported. If your child is very fidgety try having an active play session beforehand
- Keep it calm and fun! Do not force them to eat something but encourage gently with games, reward charts
- Involve your child in meal preparation. They are more likely to try something they have helped to make e.g. decorate biscuits, make own pizza
- Incorporate food into play so they can get used to being around it and touching it without the pressure to eat e.g. messy play in jelly, pasta (dried or cooked), custard, cereal; pretend to feed doll or teddy; search for toys hidden in food e.g. rice; potato printing
- Give your child a flannel or baby wipe to clean their hands or face if they get upset about being messy.

My child struggles to get to sleep...

- Make sure you have a predictable routine e.g. bath, brush teeth, story time
- Avoid screen time, active and excitable play too close to bedtime. Stories should be calming and read in a quieter voice
- Try having plenty of physical and outdoor play during the day
- Keep the bedroom a calm space without too much distracting clutter
- Make sure the room is light/dark enough. Some children prefer blackout blinds while others like to sleep with a night light on
- Your child might find firm cuddles or a massage to calm before going to sleep
- Make sure your child is not too hot or cold as this can interfere with sleep. Consider clothing – some may prefer heavy tight fitting pyjamas while others are more comfortable in a light weight T shirt
- Try white noise, fan or radio set to static to block out sleep disturbing sounds. Some may fall asleep more easily listening to gentle music
- Some children prefer to sleep in a sleeping bag or be tucked in tightly. Some benefit from enclosing their bed in a tent like manner to filter out noise and light.

My child doesn't like loud noises...

- Try warning your child about a noise before it happens so they can anticipate and make sense of the sound
- Tell stories with words or pictures about loud noises they fear to help reduce anxiety and help them understand what they are hearing
- Try to arrive at noisy places early, before the noise peaks so your child can get used to the environment. Lots of supermarkets and entertainment venues offer 'quiet' times
- If necessary, avoid extremely noisy situations that cause great distress. As your child gets older they may be more able to cope with that particular environment
- Try ear defenders, hats, ear muffs or ear plugs. However if worn for long periods of time it can make them more sensitive as they are not being exposed to noise. Therefore they should only be used briefly at the start of an activity
- Sucking, drinking from a sports bottle, crunchy snacks or mouthing a safe object may help your child to cope with noisy places and comfort toys may help reduce anxiety.

My child can't sit still...

- Young children often find it difficult to sit still and focus on more structured activities. Keep activities short and change them frequently to keep their focus
- Encourage energetic activities e.g. trampoline, scooter, bike, running, trip to the park before expecting them to sit and play in more structured way
- Reduce distracting clutter on the table top or where they are playing
- Sit alongside your child and play with a similar toy or activity
- Link activities to their interest e.g. puzzles or colouring pictures that link to their favourite characters
- For table top activities, ideally the chair table should be of an appropriate size for your child. Make sure feet are fully supported if possible
- You could try use of 'wobble' cushion or weighted lap tray/blanket to help them focus and sit for longer.

We hope this information will help you be more sensory-aware in a way that helps you, your family life and supporting your child's sensory needs.

Further information in the form of video's and leaflets can be found:

- Dudley Children's Occupational Therapy Facebook page
- Our webpage: <https://www.blackcountryhealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/dudley-childrens-occupational-therapy> (under the extra resources tab)
- Glasgow NHS Children's Occupational Therapy website on the following link www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/life-skills/joining-in-with-sensory-differences/
- Birmingham Community NHS webpage: <https://www.bhamcommunity.nhs.uk/patients-public/children-and-young-people/services-parent-portal/paediatric-occupational-therapy-service/advice-videos/>

If the problems persist despite trying these tips over a prolonged period of time and significantly interferes with your child's ability to participate in day to day activities, you may want to ask for support from an occupational therapist.