

Sensory Processing Differences

What Are Sensory Processing Differences?

Sensory processing differences refer to how individuals experience and respond to sensory input. Neurodivergent learners may process sensory information in different ways.

There are **eight senses** to consider:

- **Sight**
- **Hearing**
- **Taste**
- **Smell**
- **Touch**
- **Balance (Vestibular)**
- **Body Awareness (Proprioception)**
- **Internal Sensations (Interoception)**



Learners may be **hypersensitive** (sensory avoiding) or **hyposensitive** (sensory seeking) in one or more of these senses at different times. These differences can affect the way someone behaves and interacts, their emotional regulation, and their engagement in learning.

Why Sensory Processing Differences Matter

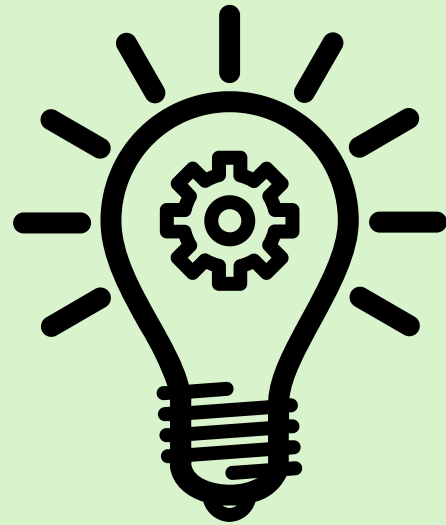
- Sensory overload can lead to **dysregulation, anxiety, or shutdown**.
- Learners may struggle to stay within their **window of tolerance**, the optimal state for learning and interaction.
- Unmet sensory needs can contribute to **emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA)**, distress behaviour, or even **school exclusion**.

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Practical Strategies for Teaching Staff

Understanding and Planning

- Use the **Assess–Plan–Do–Review** cycle to identify and respond to sensory needs.
- Complete **individual risk assessments** to understand triggers and plan regulation strategies.
- Develop **support plans** that include sensory preferences and calming tools.



Sensory Seeking

- Recognise that some learners actively seek sensory input to regulate emotions and maintain focus. This can include **movement** (e.g. pacing, rocking), **tactile experiences** (e.g., fidget tools, textured materials), or **auditory stimulation**.
- While these behaviours can look disruptive, they are often **essential self-regulation strategies** that help learners manage sensory input and remain engaged.
- Remember that sensory seeking **varies widely**. Observe and record what supports each learner best. Incorporate these preferences into support plans and risk assessments.

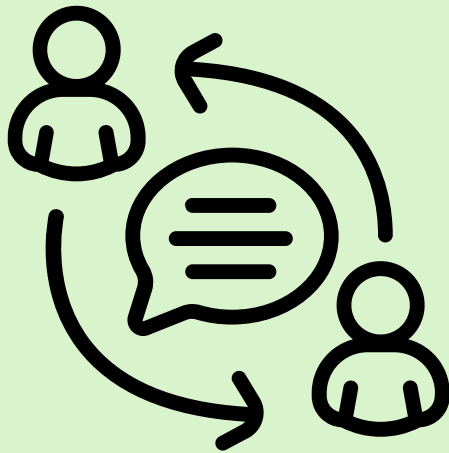
Environment and Equipment

- Create **low-stimulation spaces** such as calm corners or quiet zones.
- Offer **sensory supports** like ear defenders, fidget tools, weighted items, chewable jewelry, textured materials or access to movement breaks.
- Provide **flexible seating** options (e.g. wobble cushions, standing desks) to support movement and comfort.
- Remember that **predictable routines** combined with **novelty** (e.g. rotating sensory tools) can help meet sensory needs without overwhelming learners.

Communication and Instruction

- Allow **extra processing time**. Some learners may need additional time.
- Use **indirect language** to reduce anxiety.
- Use **visual supports** to help with understanding and task initiation.

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Teaching and Engagement

- Incorporate a learner's **existing interests** to motivate and engage them.
- Consider **varying your approach** to maintain novelty and interest.
- Adjust the **complexity** of information to avoid overload.

Relationships and Regulation

- Develop **trust** to build a sense of **belonging**.
- Use **movement breaks** and preferred activities to help learners regulate.
- Encourage **reflection** to support recovery and regulation.