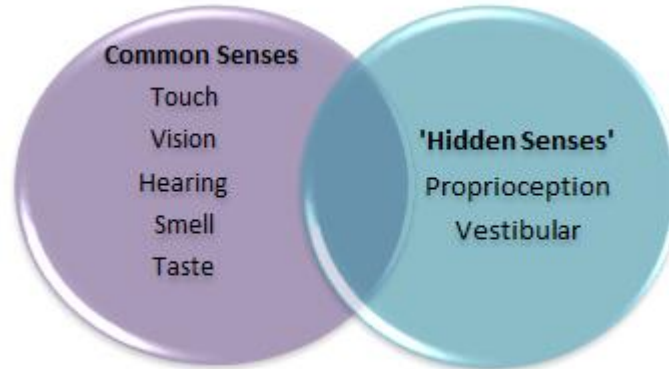


# Sensory Strategies for Toddlers and Pre-schoolers



## Our Senses

When we think of our senses, we tend to consider the five common ones:



But there are two other 'hidden' ones that we also use:

- ✓ The **Proprioceptive system** provides information from the muscles, joints and tendons telling the body where it is or where the particular body part is at any given moment.
- ✓ The **Vestibular system** (sense of balance) is located in the inner ear and provides the body with information about movement (up, down, left or right). The brain receives this input during movement activities.

## What is Sensory Processing?

**Sensory Processing is the ability of the brain to take in, sort out and process information from the world around us.**

We process the information straight away and our brain then responds through thoughts, feelings or behavioural responses.

We all interpret senses in different ways.

Please refer to the Sensory Information for Parents booklet developed by the Demonstration Project on In-school and Early Years Therapy Support for more information. <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Sensory-Processing-booklet-for-parents.pdf>

## Tips to manage common everyday problems at home

Children may find some daily activities difficult. Here are some tips on everyday activities you might find useful to help your child. If your child has an identified learning need or developmental disability, it is important to consult with an Occupational Therapist for support and guidance with sensory strategies.

- ❖ **My child has trouble sticking to one specific task or is 'on the go' more than other children his/her age.**



The vestibular system (see 'Our Senses') in the inner ear is responsible for processing balance and movement. Toddlers and Pre-schoolers typically tend to be 'busy bees' and are on the go a lot during the day. However, some children's brains may need more stimulation than the brain is getting from their everyday activities. These children tend to be always 'on the go' and never seem to have enough movement. They take risks running and climbing and find it difficult to sit for story time. When they do rest, it is only for short periods and they are ready to go again. These children can be described as 'sensory seeking' and may benefit from more movement opportunities during their day. Providing more movement in a safe, functional, playful way helps 'get the wiggles out' so that their brains can get what

they need. Movement and other sensory tools need to be provided regularly during the day to give them a sense of calm.

### **Some strategies to consider are:**

- Try 'wheelbarrow walking' or 'animal walks' to get from one place to another in the house or garden.
- Fill a beach ball with air and water to make a weighted ball for playing catch.
- Play a game where your child is carrying buckets with sand, rice, beans or water.
- Play 'tug-of-war' with a blanket or toy.
- Jump on a trampoline.
- Encourage cycling up inclines when on tricycles or riding toys.
- Swinging or climbing on monkey bars.
- Row the Boat - use a skipping rope, or hold hands. Sit facing your child with feet outstretched and touching. Do controlled push and pull movements like a rowing exercise.
- Roll a large playground ball or a yoga ball over your child when they are lying down on the floor. Apply maintained touch pressure up and down the length of your child's body. **Note:** Always respect your child's desire to continue or discontinue with the activity.

## ❖ My child doesn't like messy things, getting dirty or enjoy being touched, hugged or cuddled ...



All children need touch experiences. However, children that are over-responsive to touch often misinterpret many types of touch experiences as negative or even painful.

For some children who are 'Sensory Sensitive', touching objects that are wet, sticky or slimy is a sensation that feels painful and distressing to them.

If your child is 'sensory sensitive', it is important to take it slowly when introducing touch-based experiences whilst also providing lots of different opportunities during the day to help your child's brain learn that the input is not negative.

### **Some strategies to consider are:**

- Before engaging in 'messy' play, spend about 10 minutes doing some deep pressure activities. See some sample activities mentioned at the end of this booklet.
- Use slow, rhythmical swinging or rocking before a challenging tactile activity.
- When introducing new textures to your child, start with touch activities that your child prefers and then gradually introduce others. When introducing other textures, start with dry textures first before introducing wet and messy textures. For example, start with uncooked rice or dried lentils. Then move onto sand, flour, salt, play dough, cooked spaghetti, damp sand, shaving foam, soap and paint.
- If your child does not want to touch the texture, place a small amount on the table in front of him/her; demonstrate moving it about, picking up small pieces etc.

- Be guided by your child; **never** force your child to touch something they are reluctant to touch.
- Do not move onto a new texture until your child is willing to explore the current level of texture.
- Play with vibrating toys. If you do not have any vibrating toys, you could try using an old electric toothbrush (cover the head of the toothbrush in different fabrics and allow your child to feel the vibrations of the different fabrics on their arms and legs), or ask your child to hold the electric hand mixer when baking.
- When wiping off things that your child does not like, wipe gently but firmly.
- Allow your child to use a paintbrush, spoon, scoop to encourage play with sand, water, rice, beans, water, and play dough. Gradually introduce more items to the messy play that your child enjoys playing with for example, a toy car driving over the rice.
- You could also put paint, rice or sand into a zip lock bag to avoid touch.
- Hide items in a basin or large bowl of rice or dried beans and encourage your child to find them. Hide items that are interesting and motivating for your child to find. Partly cover the item initially so your child can get the toy without having to get his/her hands too dirty. Allow your child to use a spoon to assist in finding it, if they do not want to touch the rice or beans.
- Always praise your child for all attempts made to touch or go near the texture.

## ❖ My child responds negatively or emotionally to loud noises...



Just like us adults, children can find certain sounds uncomfortable. For example, loud, irregular sounds such as hand dryers, fire alarms, vacuum cleaners etc. can cause a child to feel distressed.

### Some strategies to consider are:

- When your child becomes upset by a noise, move him/her away from the sound slightly and comfort them.
- Try to explain what the sound is.
- Do not force your child to stay somewhere that upsets them. You can encourage him/her to get used to noises gradually, with time and care.
- Sometimes your child will be less scared if they can control the sound themselves. Let them switch the vacuum cleaner on and off, turn music on and off, and play with noisy toys.
- Record sounds that your child does not like, maybe on your phone. Play them back quietly at first and then gradually louder. Try letting your child control the loudness, while explaining what the sound is, maybe with pictures or videos. Try making it into a game.
- Talk to relatives and staff at nursery or school. It helps if everyone who sees your child understands how to help them.

## Common sensitivities with self-care activities

If your child has [sensory differences](#), such as a heightened sense of smell or touch, self-care tasks such as washing may be an uncomfortable experience.

Some children have very sensitive skin. The sensation of water spraying from the shower, the feel and noise of a nail clipper, the bristle of toothbrushes on sensitive teeth and gums can all feel uncomfortable.

As all of these self-care tasks are necessary so we have devised some strategies and tips to try to make them a little more tolerable.

To help your child understand the duration of the activity try one of the following:

- Sing a familiar short song throughout the process. When the song is over, the activity ends. There are lots of songs available on YouTube such as tooth brushing songs.
- Use a sand timer to indicate when the activity will end.
- Try a Timer App or visual timers on YouTube.
- Count to a specified number each time they complete the activity. Once that number is reached, the activity is over.





## **My child gets upset when having his/her nails clipped...**



This is another common area of difficulty for children with tactile sensitivity. The majority of children who have sensory issues find it difficult to cope with having their nails cut. Some children are resistant to the sound, sensation or feel of nail clipping or have a fear of the nail clipper itself.

### **Some strategies to consider are:**

- Do some deep pressure activities prior to cutting nails, to help decrease overall sensitivities. See some sample activities mentioned at the end of this booklet.
- Organise for your child to watch while an adult or a sibling trims their own nails.
- Use play to learn about nail trimming. Ask your child to pretend to trim their favourite doll or character's nails.
- Cut nails fresh out of the shower or bath, when they are softest. Or, soak hands first with some good calming aromatherapy oils and water.
- Use baby nail clippers. They are easier on the nails and are better at not cutting too far down. They are much more comfortable.
- Your child may only tolerate trimming one or two nails at a time so maybe start small and see if this helps.
- Allow them to watch their favourite TV show whilst trimming to aid distraction.
- Choosing the correct utensil. For example, there are many different types of nail clippers for children. Or, perhaps a nail file would be more tolerable for your child.

## ❖ My child refuses to brush his/her teeth...



Brushing teeth is a sensory experience. Some children are resistant to toothbrush bristles and / or certain textures / flavours of toothpaste.

### Some strategies to consider are:

- Prior to brushing, do some deep pressure or [heavy work activities](#) prior to brushing, to help decrease overall sensitivities.
- You may need to experiment with toothbrushes of different sizes, bristle firmness, handles, and colours before you find the one that suits your child.
- Your child may prefer a battery or electric toothbrush that has a slight vibration.
- Try a toothbrush that sings or lights up.
- Consider the taste of the toothpaste. Try altering the brand, use less, or start without using any toothpaste.
- Experiment with different water temperatures when brushing his/her teeth. Your child may tolerate warm, rather than cold water better.
- Allow your child to hold the toothbrush while you gently guide his/her hand as tolerated.
- Use a Mirror - He/she may allow you to help brush their teeth if you stand behind your child while he is looking into the mirror.
- Make tooth brushing a game - Attack of the cavities! Make brushing away the "germ bugs" a fun game.

- ❖ **My child screams and cries when he/she has to take a bath or have their hair washed, brushed or cut...**



There are many reasons why a child may find these activities challenging.

- Some children are sensitive to having their head tilted backwards or forward for rinsing when having their hair washed.
- Your child may be sensitive to the smell of the bath products you are using.
- Many children with sensory issues have very sensitive scalps or are sensitive to touch in general from hands, brushes or combs, and even water.
- Some children dislike the sound of the water in a shower.
- Water on the face, in the eyes, or shampoo in the eyes can be difficult for all children, not only children with heightened sensitivities.

If possible, determine the cause by talking to your child and also observing him/her to see if you can discover which of their senses is causing the distress.

### **Some strategies to consider are:**

Acknowledge that you understand that this is a difficulty for them.

- Give your child **more control** in the process. Allow them to **choose** their hair/shower products. Let them smell shampoos and soaps when shopping and decide what they like or buy unscented products. Let them comb and style their own hair.

- Do not expect your child to hold still while you comb or style their hair. Give them a fidget to play with. Let them play Lego or watch TV or both.
- Try a different comb such as a Tangle Teaser or Wet Brush.
- Try a bath rather than a shower or a shower rather than a bath.
- Wash their hair in the sink rather than in the bath.
- Try pouring water on their head using a Rinse Cup rather than having them tip their head back.
- Have your child use a bath visor to avoid getting a lot of water on their face. You can also use this during haircuts to avoid pieces of hair getting on their face.
- Allow your child to wear swim goggles or a snorkel mask in the bath or shower.

## List of Deep Pressure Activities

**Deep pressure can help calm the body and can help your child tolerate sensory experiences that they do not like.**

- ✓ Act out the actions in the 'Row your boat' song
- ✓ Play Tug-of-war
- ✓ Pile cushions, pillows & duvet covers on the floor and allow your child to jump into them
- ✓ Jump on a trampoline
- ✓ Do animal walks such as crab walks
- ✓ Play 'wheelbarrows' by supporting your child's legs & hips and letting them 'walk' on their hands
- ✓ Try deep pressure e.g. tight bear hugs
- ✓ Use weighted blankets

- ✓ Roll in a blanket, applying pressure to the shoulders

## Sensory Diet



A sensory diet is a group of activities that are specially scheduled into a child's day to assist with attention, arousal and adaptive responses. Its purpose is to help a child become better regulated and more focused, adaptable and skilful. A sensory diet includes a combination of alerting, organizing and calming activities.

Please find a link to an NHS document: "Basic Sensory Diet information and activity ideas for self-isolation and social distancing".

<https://www.hct.nhs.uk/media/3518/basic-sensory-diet-ideas-mar-2020.pdf>

Information is provided in the document on sensory diets and how to use sensory diets with your child.

## Disclaimer

*The information presented in this booklet was developed by Occupational Therapists from the Demonstration Project on In-school and Early Years Therapy Support and the School Inclusion Model (SIM) for general information only. Children with identified needs related to sensory processing should refer to an occupational therapist for personalised advice and guidance.*

*All activities will need close supervision by an adult.*

## References

- Henry, D., Wineland-Kane, M. and Swindeman, S. (2010). *Tools for Tots Sensory Strategies for Toddlers and Preschoolers*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Henry OT Services. Arizona, USA.
- Usher, W. (2013). *Creating Sensory Play at little or No Cost*. The Play Doctors. Bedfordshire, United Kingdom

## Websites

- <https://www.toolstogrowot.com/>
- <https://www.middletownautism.com/>
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