

# Sensory Supports

Sensory processing is complex and individuals with sensory processing needs can present in a wide variety of ways. These, and many other, supports can be used to help address an individual's sensory needs, but their use and impact should be closely monitored. Consultation with an occupational therapist can help better determine which strategies and supports may be more appropriate and provide additional instructions for implementing them safely and effectively. The goal of these supports is not to "fix" someone's sensory system, it is to provide individuals with greater access to the opportunities for learning, leisure, and growth within their environment. **Remember, never force sensory strategies on an individual. Take their lead.**

## General Supports

Provide opportunities for deep pressure/heavy work

Explicitly teach how to use sensory supports

Explicitly teach how to ask for a break

Explicitly teach how to ask for sensory supports

Provide choice (e.g., do you want to sit here or there; do you want to work alone or with a partner)

Provide access to known and preferred sensory stimuli (e.g., fidgets)

## Visual

### Over Responsive

Use light covers on overhead lights or remove some bulbs to dim light output

Use lamps in some areas

Remove extraneous visual stimuli from the environment and instructional materials

Seat away from windows, doors, or busy areas of the environment

Provide sunglasses or a visor

Provide a cubicle style visual barrier on desk or table (e.g., trifold foamboard)

Position them in such a way that they have an unimpeded view of the instructional area

Provide a second piece of paper during reading, classwork, or homework to cover up the information that comes next

Print on natural white instead of bright white paper

Do not force eye contact

## Under Responsive

Pair visual input with another sense

- provide a book and an audio version of the book to be used together
- provide a verbal description of an image
- put glue on the lines of a coloring page so, once dried, the crayon will bump into them when coloring

Use high contrast materials/add contrast

- add bright colored piece of construction paper under a task
- highlight the lines and margins on lined paper
- provide writing tools that produce dark/colored marks
- Use a highlighter to mark key points/content in printed materials

Place material on a slanted or vertical surface (e.g., a large ring binder turned horizontally; tape paper to an easel)

Provide additional time to process visual information

Provide a page guide to slide down the page when reading (e.g., a bookmark to hold under the line they are reading)

Color code materials

## Seeking

Provide instructional content on technology/screens

Add colors and patterns to materials

Provide toys and objects that incorporate moving parts and/lights during sensory breaks

Allow for visual self-stimulatory behaviors (e.g., flicking fingers in front of eyes) as long as they are not endangering the individual; may redirect back to task or other source of input if they occur for prolonged periods

## Auditory

### Over Responsive

Provide noise cancelling headphones, ear buds, or ear plugs

Speak in a soft voice

Provide advanced warning of loud sounds

Provide a quiet space to work

Add carpet or an area rug to non-carpeted rooms/areas

Put a sticky note over the sensor of automatically flushing toilets

Provide paper towels to use instead of hand dryers

Use a digital clock instead of a standard clock that ticks

Add tennis balls or sliding pads to chair and desk legs

## Under Responsive

Pair auditory input with another sense (e.g., provide a visual cue along with verbal cues)

Enunciate words clearly and monitor the rate of your speech

Provide additional time to process auditory information

Move closer when talking to them

Place close to where instruction will be occurring

Break verbal directions down into short and simple chunks

## Seeking

Allow for the use of headphones with music or white noise when working independently

Use audio books for content when available

Allow for humming or self-talk at levels that are not disruptive to others

## Tactile (Touch)

### Over Responsive

Avoid extraneous physical contact

Do not touch them if they cannot see you approaching

Use deep touch before light touch (e.g., massage head before brushing hair)

Provide gloves or tools for textured tasks (e.g., provide tweezers to pick up glued pieces of paper)

Provide alternate ways to engage in activities (e.g., allow for partner work rather than small group  
limit proximity to others; allow them to draw the task rather than using modeling clay)

Seat away from fans and air vents

Seat away from high traffic areas

Provide opportunities for deep pressure/heavy work prior to tasks with increased tactile input

Position them at the start or end of the line/

Allow students to leave class before bell to avoid crowded hallways

Remove tags from clothing

## Under Responsive

Use descriptive words about items that are being touched

Modify materials to add additional tactile input

- add textures under paper when drawing or coloring
- provide a textured pencil gripper
- use utensils with textured ends for meals and snacks

Provide opportunities for deep pressure/heavy work prior to tasks that include tactile input

Provide handheld fidgets

## Seeking

Provide fidgets

Explicitly teach appropriate vs inappropriate touch (e.g., provide a social narrative)

Provide alternate ways to engage in activities that add additional tactile input

- place task materials in a rice bin, textured bag, or other textured medium
- let them fingerpaint instead of using a paintbrush
- provide a chalkboard to write on
- provide 3 dimensional items related to the content when possible

Add texture to everyday items when possible

- add textured material to seat cushions
- place self-adhesive Velcro strips under desk, table, chair, etc.

## Olfactory (Smell)

### Over Responsive

Avoid wearing perfumes or scented lotions

Avoid using diffusers or seek input from individual on non-noxious scents

Provide low odor markers

Allow for the use of pens or pencils instead of crayons and markers

Use fragrance free cleaning products

Position seat away from trash

Keep rooms/areas well-ventilated and provide access to fresh air when possible

### Under Responsive

Explicitly point out and label threatening smells (e.g., smoke, bad food, chemicals)

Use scented materials (e.g., scented markers, scented playdoh)

### Seeking

Provide scented materials

Provide a smell jar (e.g., small container with scented cotton balls)

## Gustatory (Taste)

### Over Responsive

Allow the individual to control what goes in their mouth

Continue to offer a variety of foods, but never force them to eat it

Involve them in food preparation

Use a mint free toothpaste

### Under Responsive

Provide a variety of flavors and label what they may be tasting

Provide chewies or chewable jewelry

Provide crunchy foods

### Seeking

Provide spicy and sour food options

Explicitly teach safe and unsafe things to put in mouth

## Vestibular (Movement)

### Over Responsive

Ensure their feet can touch the ground while in a chair or provide a footrest

Provide a chair with arms

Place materials on a slanted or vertical surface (e.g., large binder turned horizontally; tape paper to an easel)

Provide the opportunity for more stationary options for recess or the playground (e.g., sidewalk chalk)

Provide advanced notice of when movement might occur or when approaching uneven surfaces

## Under Responsive

Provide additional cues or prompts when approaching uneven surfaces or engaging in movement activities

Explicitly teach safety rules for playground use, sports, etc.

Encourage the use of rails when on stairs

Provide a chair with arms

## Seeking

Alternate between sedentary and active tasks

Provide movement breaks (e.g., send them on an errand, allow them to jump during a sensory break)

Provide a variety of flexible seating options

- wiggle cushion in chair or on floor (e.g., a purchased cushion made for this purpose; a thick foam cushion; partially deflated beach ball)
- rocking chair
- therapy/exercise ball
- standing desk
- chair with tennis balls on only two or three legs to allow for rocking motion

Allow them to stand while completing tasks

Allow them to change positions frequently

Add movement into tasks (e.g., hop to the dinner table; jump the number of times that shows the math answer)

## Proprioception (Muscles and Joints)

### Over Responsive, Under Responsive, and Seeking

Allow extra time for learning new movements

Provide frequent stretch or movement breaks

Include crunchy or chewy foods in meals and snacks

Have them use a water bottle or cup that has a straw

Provide a beanbag for alternative seating

Incorporate heavy work/deep pressure throughout the day

## Interoception

Model talking about how your body parts feel (e.g., “My heart feels like it is beating out of my chest when something unexpected happens!”)

Encourage the individual to notice how their body parts feel (e.g., “Put your hand on your chest, is your heart beating fast or slow?”)

Guide individuals through body checks (e.g., How do your eyes feel right now? What about your mouth? How do your hands feel?)