



What are sensory issues?

Sensory symptoms can be seen often in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders to a greater or lesser degree.

Individuals with sensory issues can:

- ◆ use avoiding behaviour
- ◆ be over, or under active
- ◆ react emotionally to different situations
- ◆ sensory seeking - likes lots of spinning.

Each individual has their own response style

When sensory issues dominate an individual's behaviour, other social/emotional symptoms may appear. These secondary effects become another problem that is separate but related. Habits and learned fears can persist if not addressed.

Related Social and Emotional Behaviours

The child may misperceive the world as dangerous alarming or at the very least irritating. Learned patterns and habits are often developed around avoiding disrupting sensory events or seeking out sensation that might restore comfort. Innocent memories can be stored as traumatic experiences. Relationships can be exaggerated. Behaviour with known and trusted people can be quite different than with others. These behaviours make sense if viewed as the child doing the best he/she can to 'survive'.

Levels of severity

1. **Mild** - While appearing quite 'normal', individuals with mild symptoms might be described as 'picky', 'over-sensitive', 'slightly overactive', 'resistive to change', or slightly 'controlling'. They can act mildly irritated by some sensations, but not by others. They may be picky about clothes or food. While these children can achieve at age level in school or have good social relations, they may have to use enormous control and effort to succeed in these areas. When they can no longer maintain the level of effort required to do so, they may 'fall apart' emotionally under apparently little or no stress.



2. **Moderate** - Moderate sensory symptoms usually impacts on two or more aspects of an individual's life. At this level, individuals often have difficulty with social relations, either being overly aggressive or isolating themselves from peers. Many self-care skills are disrupted, such as dressing, bathing and eating. They may have difficulty with attention or behaviour in school. Exploration and play may be limited due to fearfulness of new situations and resistance to change.
3. **Severe** - Severe sensory symptoms may disrupt every aspect of an individual's life. Strong avoidance of some kinds of sensations or the reverse, intense sensory seeking are common.

Types of Sensory symptoms

Each individual with sensory symptoms will have their own set of behaviours. These are usually combinations of sensory avoidance and sensory seeking behaviours.

Although it is not possible to list all the symptoms, the following are a list of common symptoms. Each individual may have just a few of these symptoms or similar patterns of behaviour. It is important that the diagnosis be made by a knowledgeable therapist through a careful *sensory history interview*.

Tactile symptoms

Those with tactile defensiveness avoid letting others touch them and would rather touch others. They frequently fuss or resist hair washing or cutting. They may act like their life is being threatened when being bathed or having clothes changed. They are often irritated by certain types of clothes, clothing labels or new clothes. They may dislike being close to others and avoid crowds. They can be agitated by people accidentally bumping into them. They often do not like to get their hands or feet dirty. They may seem unnecessarily rough. Some may bump or crash into things on purpose as a way of seeking sensation or seem under-responsive to certain sensations or pain.

Oral symptoms

Oral defensiveness is where there is an overly strong dislike or avoid certain textures or types of food. They may be over or under sensitive to spicy or hot foods; avoid putting objects in their mouth; and/or intensely dislike tooth brushing or face washing. Some have had a variety of feeding problems since infancy.

Gravitational Insecurity

This is an irrational fear of change in position or movement. Here, individuals are often fearful of having their feet leave the ground, or having their head tipped backwards.

Postural Insecurity



This is a fear and avoidance of certain movement activities due to poor postural mechanisms.

Visual symptoms

This may involve an over sensitivity to light and visual distractibility. Those who experience this problem may avoid going outside in certain light and/or need to wear hats or sunglasses to block out light. They may startle more easily and/or avert their eyes or seem to avoid eye contact.

Auditory symptoms

This reflects an over sensitivity to certain sounds and may involve irritable or fearful responses to noises like vacuum cleaners, motors, fire alarms, etc. Sometimes individuals can be heard making excessive amounts of noise to block out sound.

Hypersensitivity to sound

Where an individual is overly sensitive to sound, they may show agitated behavioural responses. He may also to place his fingers in his ears as if to block out the sound. If there is a lot of background noise or if someone is trying to have a conversation with you they may constantly interrupt, make noises and be generally disruptive. This behaviour can be mistaken for being attention seeking. They may also have difficulty paying attention when there are noises nearby. They are also easily distracted by sounds which go unnoticed by others e.g. the hum of the fridge.

Taste and smell

Other symptoms can include unusual sensitivities taste and/or smell.

Awareness and understanding

One of the most important steps in helping to deal with sensory issues is acquiring awareness of the symptoms and behaviours associated with the problem. This is usually done by going through a careful sensory history interview with the consulting therapist/educator. Some children may have had their behaviour interpreted as something other than a negative reaction to sensation. Behaviours often are hidden in family routines that develop unconsciously in order to protect the individual. For example, some parents routinely remove labels from their child's clothing. Other families avoid restaurants or other crowded places. Some follow rigid routines to keep a child from becoming over aroused. By recognising the sensory avoiding and seeking behaviour we can see that many are doing the best they can to feel safe and to adapt to their problem.