



## Understanding Sensory Issues and their Impact on Mealtimes and Feeding

Our lives are full of sensory experiences. We all respond to sensory information through touch, moving, seeing, hearing, tasting and smelling.

We are aware or subconsciously aware of where we are and how we interact with the environment.

When we manage to interpret sensory information with ease, it impacts on our behavior at a subconscious level.

- Sometimes we seek sensory information to make us feel better, for instance a cuddle.
- Sometimes we retreat from sensory information if it makes us feel overwhelmed, like loud noise.

### Understanding Sensory Issues:

By thinking and planning positive sensory experiences we can help understand how to best manage situations some children find over/under-whelming.

Avoiding a disliked or upsetting sensory experience may help the child with the sensory issue calm down and be able to take part in daily tasks, for instance mealtimes and eating.

It is important to recognise that difficulties interpreting sensory information can have an impact on how we feel, how we think and how we behave or respond.

We have constantly to make responses to sensory input from within our bodies (internal) and from the environment (external).

If a child has difficulty making sense of the sensory information received, their behavior may not meet the demands of the environment.

If the sensory information is not processed smoothly, we might pay too much attention to unnecessary sensory information or not enough attention to the necessary sensory information to perform an activity, feel calm or pay attention. This can cause challenges...

### Reading the signs:

The best way to find out what your child's sensory sensitivities are is to look at the activities or sensory experiences that they might be avoiding or seeking. This would allow you to use strategies to help regulate the sensory experience for the child, making daily activities like mealtimes a less stressful event for them.

Here are some signs that could be seen during mealtimes:

	OVER-SENSITIVE	UNDER-SENSITIVE
<b>HEARING</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Repeated eye blinking <input type="checkbox"/> Startling to noises <input type="checkbox"/> Avoids highly crunchy foods	<input type="checkbox"/> Likes to make loud noises <input type="checkbox"/> Seem to tune people out or ignore them

	<input type="checkbox"/> Covers ears during the meal <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty eating in loud environment i.e lunch room or restaurant	
<b>VISION</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Avoids eye contact <input type="checkbox"/> May look away from food or close eyes <input type="checkbox"/> Moves chair back from table <input type="checkbox"/> Repeated eye blinking or eye watering <input type="checkbox"/> May attempt to scatter foods off the table, as it's visually overwhelming <input type="checkbox"/> Squinting <input type="checkbox"/> Vomiting	<input type="checkbox"/> Have a hard time distinguishing between objects that look similar, for instance food on a plate of the same colour <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys looking at moving or spinning objects
<b>SMELL</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Covering nose with hand/ shirt <input type="checkbox"/> Eye watering <input type="checkbox"/> Turns head away <input type="checkbox"/> Makes a funny face <input type="checkbox"/> Coughing/ gagging to smells	<input type="checkbox"/> Explore non-food objects or people by smelling them <input type="checkbox"/> Seem to ignore or not notice strong odours that others react to
<b>TASTE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Gagging <input type="checkbox"/> Vomiting to tastes <input type="checkbox"/> Grimacing/ lip splays <input type="checkbox"/> Shudders	<input type="checkbox"/> Act as though all food taste the same <input type="checkbox"/> Crave certain foods, taste or smells, for instance strong flavours <input type="checkbox"/> Explore by tasting <input type="checkbox"/> Chew or lick non-food items
<b>TOUCH</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Lip splays <input type="checkbox"/> Uses teeth to clear utensils vs. lips <input type="checkbox"/> Grimacing <input type="checkbox"/> Frequent hand wiping <input type="checkbox"/> Seeks out or avoids utensil usage <input type="checkbox"/> Avoids touching different food textures <input type="checkbox"/> Uses least amount of surface area possible to manipulate food <input type="checkbox"/> Finger splaying	<input type="checkbox"/> Seem less aware of messy hands or face <input type="checkbox"/> Mouth objects or clothing often <input type="checkbox"/> Uses too much force when holding things <input type="checkbox"/> Pockets food in mouth <input type="checkbox"/> Overstuffs mouth
<b>MOVEMENT</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Startles when chair is pushed up to table <input type="checkbox"/> Avoids highly chewy foods <input type="checkbox"/> Avoids drinking from open cup <input type="checkbox"/> Chin tuck to drink vs backwards in space <input type="checkbox"/> Fearful when feet leave ground to climb into chair	<input type="checkbox"/> Likes to rock or spin <input type="checkbox"/> Finds it difficult to stay sitting still during mealtimes <input type="checkbox"/> Might prefer walking around the room while eating
<b>BODY AWARENESS</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Holds objects so loosely that it is difficult to use, for instance using cutlery	<input type="checkbox"/> Holds objects so tightly that it is difficult to use the object <input type="checkbox"/> Chews on toys, clothes or other objects more than other children

**Advice and strategies that could help:**

Use these activities as a sensory routine before mealtimes to help your child to be in the most calm-alert state during mealtimes.

This should support them to stay seated for longer and cope better with the sensory experience of mealtimes that they find challenging.

**Start with the alerting activities, which can be done for a few minutes.**

**Progress to the calming strategies for a further few minutes.**

### *Alerting Strategies*

When the young person is not alert enough to pay attention to a task, these activities/strategies may help:

#### **Quick Fix**

- Up/down movements, jogging/running, fast movement (for short periods only)
- Jumping, jumping jacks
- Clapping activities
- Making faces e.g. open mouth wide
- Stamping on spot
- Sucking a sour sweet
- Eating crunchy food
- Drinking cold drinks

#### **Longer Lasting Ideas**

- Regular routine of jumping/chair push-ups
- Timetable the 'Quick Fix' that works into regular routine, immediately before the young person has to pay attention to a task.

### *Calming Strategies*

When the young person is over-stimulated and feeling anxious, these activities/strategies may help them feel calmer:

#### **Quick Fix**

- Sitting under a big, heavy blanket
- Hands on head and pressing down
- Tucking legs up and squeezing
- Deep pressure massage
- Slow rocking e.g. rocking chair
- Giving themselves a hug
- Lavender scents
- Squeezing and relaxing a small fidget toy
- Squeezing and relaxing face and/or hands
- Snuggling into a small space
- Sucking a "sweet" sweet
- Sucking yoghurt/thick milkshake through straw
- Bear hug

#### **Longer Lasting Ideas**

- Walk after coming home from school (with backpack on)
- Press ups or chair press ups regularly through the day e.g. before school, lunch time, after school
- Allow chill out time, prior to homework in a daily routine
- Help with moving furniture e.g. pushing sofa – relocating plant pots, hoovering
- Help with heavy manual tasks in the garden e.g. digging
- Swimming
- Put on a heavy coat or heavy blanket over the shoulders as part of chill out time
- Have a corner with favourite sensory activities to go to at any time
- Squeeze/rock against gym ball

**Washing hands:** Encourage your child to rub their hands together firmly when washing and drying their hands. This will make the hands slightly less sensitive for a time, which could make it easier for your child to touch food and utensils that they find more challenging.

## Calmer Eating Strategies

Many children with sensory sensitivities have eating and drinking difficulties.

Difficulties can range from very restricted or limited diet (due to taste or dislike of how it feels/habit) to mouthing or chewing objects (food and non-food). Some food or drinks make us feel calm, others make us more awake. Everybody is different but you and your child will know what works for them. Use this information to plan a calmer meal time.

Introducing some of the activities prior to mealtimes may help your child accept new foods or experiences. If your young child is drawn to one particular food type it may be he/she is doing so either to wake themselves up or calm themselves down. Using activities that stimulate the mouth can have an organising effect on the child's behaviour as deep pressure through biting can help organise and calm. Using these ideas at the right time can help decrease biting and help the child 'feel' where their mouth is so activities such as feeding or drinking are easier.

<b>DEEP PRESSURE TOUCH</b>	<p>Heavy pressure across the roof of the mouth is usually calming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food (particularly chewy food)</li> <li>• Allow the young person to use a baby toothbrush to provide deep touch pressure to the roof of the child's mouth</li> <li>• Toothbrushes with a mouth guard, which prevent over-insertion, are available from many baby shops and catalogues. Vibrating toothbrushes can be a good way to reduce sensitivity in the mouth, but make sure it is on the child's terms and never forced</li> <li>• Food textures that encourage biting and crunching are also sometimes helpful and are worth trying</li> </ul>	
<b>EXPERIENCING TASTE AND TEXTURES</b>	Food can be an easy way to give sensory and tactile experiences to the mouth.	
	<p><i>Cold (to wake up)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ice poles</li> <li>• Fruit juice frozen in ice cubes</li> <li>• Frozen grapes</li> <li>• Frozen bananas</li> <li>• Frozen peas, carrots etc.</li> <li>• Ice drinks</li> </ul>	<p><i>Chewy (to organise/calm)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard cheese or string cheese</li> <li>• Cereal bars</li> <li>• Dried fruit</li> <li>• Chewy sweets e.g. gummy bears, toffee bars</li> <li>• Chewing gum</li> <li>• Bagels</li> </ul>
<p><i>Crunchy food (to alert)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raw vegetables</li> <li>• Fruit e.g. apples</li> <li>• Bread sticks</li> <li>• Crisps</li> <li>• Dry cereal</li> <li>• Nuts</li> <li>• Crackers</li> <li>• Popcorn</li> </ul>	<p><i>Spicy food (to alert)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hot salsa</li> <li>• Cinnamon cereal</li> <li>• Curries</li> <li>• Chilli or Mexican food</li> </ul>	

*Mouth Movement Exercises*

Sucking and blowing during play can help ‘work out’ the muscles in the mouth and can give positive experiences involving the mouth (not connected to eating).

<b>Sucking</b>	<b>Blowing</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using longer, curly, thinner straws or bundles of straws</li> <li>• Use a straw to drink yoghurt</li> <li>• Use a straw to drink fruit puree</li> <li>• Use a straw to drink fruit smoothies - an easy one to grade the consistency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blowing bubbles using a straw in a cup/bowl</li> <li>• Blowing bubbles in drinks</li> <li>• Blowing bubbles with a bubble wand</li> <li>• Musical instruments</li> <li>• With straw or mouth, blow football using cotton wool balls, paper or feathers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sucking frozen fruit or ice cubes</li> <li>• Lollipops</li> <li>• Hard sweets</li> <li>• Water bottles with ‘sports tops’</li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="764 638 1471 669"><b>Tugging, Biting, Pulling, Chewing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liquorice</li> <li>• Straws</li> <li>• Chewy toys designed to improve jaw strength (Chewy Tubes)</li> <li>• Toffee bars</li> <li>• Water bottles with ‘sports tops’</li> </ul>

*Orofacial Massage Exercises*

Children who have had negative experiences associated with touch and texture around and in face and mouth can benefit from targeted interaction to build positive experiences. Some reasons behind why children can become sensitive include:

- Heightened sensitivity to foods other than specific textures like smooth puree, and not feeling comfortable to try new food textures
- History of NG tube feeding with insertions and taping on their face
- History of suctioning through their nose/mouth
- History of, or a specific occasion of coughing or choking with their eating and/or drinking

**Ideas to try:**

- Build up a consistent twice-daily toothbrushing routine – modeling and song can help!
- Introduce a routine of fun and positive facial massage before mealtimes – this can include firm touch with both hands around the outside of the face, then from the ears in towards the corners of the lips, then from the base of the nose down the upper lip. Try doing it to each other!
- Introducing tools such as “Chewy Tubes” and Chewlery can help to desensitise the tongue and jaw without the more sensory-challenging elements or differing sight, smell, touch, taste, sound, or needing to swallow the food – chewing should be encouraged on the deeper part of the jaw, right in on the sides using the molar teeth to promote tongue lateralization as well