

INTRO TO SUPPORTING SENSORY NEEDS

1 START WITH YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Notice what the child is experiencing around them: lighting, noise, visual clutter, and movement. Small changes can make a big difference.

2 USE VISUAL SUPPORTS

Simple visual timetables or cues help children understand what's happening next and reduce uncertainty.

3 KEEP ROUTINES PREDICTABLE

Consistency helps children feel safe. When they know what to expect, their bodies are more likely to stay calm.

4 BE MINDFUL OF YOUR OWN SENSORY IMPACT

Things like strong perfume, jangly jewellery, bright patterns, or a loud voice can add extra sensory input.

5 BUILD MOVEMENT INTO THE DAY

Regular opportunities to move, climb, push, pull, and wiggle help regulate growing bodies.

6 FOLLOW THE CHILD'S LEAD

Children show us what they can cope with. Their reactions are meaningful communication.

7 CREATE CALM, SAFE SPACES

Make sure there's a low-arousal place the child can retreat to when things feel too much — a quiet corner, tent, or cosy den.

8 SUPPORT BODY AWARENESS

(interoception) Offer chances to notice hunger, thirst, tiredness, and emotions through gentle check-ins and routines.

9 GET CURIOUS ABOUT TRIGGERS

Try to see situations from the child's perspective and notice what feels tricky for them.

10 SUPPORT DIFFERENT SENSORY NEEDS

- Some children enjoy strong movement and play: active play followed by calm time can help them settle.
- Some children prefer less input: cosy spaces with familiar, comforting items can help them feel secure.

No matter what... Assume the child is doing their best. Behaviour is a response to how the world feels, not a choice to be difficult. Respond with validation and acknowledge their feelings and experiences, even when you can't change the situation. When a child avoids certain experiences (foods, clothes, textures, touch), support them gently at their own pace and respect their sensory boundaries.

Top Tip: Keep it simple! Everyday items like blankets, cushions, boxes, and soft toys can be just as valuable as specialist equipment.



Hearing (Auditory)

Possible signs of difference:

- Fear of sudden, loud noises eg. hand dryers, motorbikes
- Distracted or overwhelmed in noisy places (parties, soft play etc)
- Not hearing you, even when their hearing is ok.
- Making their own noise, that occurs more when they are in a busy place.

Strategies and Ideas:

- Consider the environment and reduce noise where possible
- Have a quiet area to retreat to
- Classical can be calming and organising
- Music with rhythm and beat can be alerting and organising
- Be aware of background sounds
- Prepare for loud sounds and situations
- Offer ear defenders
- Consider use of white noise or preferred background sound to block stressful noise

Touch (Tactile)

Possible signs of difference:

- Increased sensitivity, distress shown or avoidance of:
 - Messy play, clothing fabrics,
 - light touch personal care - brushing hair, teeth, cutting nails, changing nappy.
- Pulling away from light or tickly touch.

Strategies and Ideas:

- Slower, deep pressure touch is calming, faster, lighter, tickly touch is alerting.
- Deep pressure touch - massage, pat dry rather than rub after a bath.
- Apply deep pressure to help with tolerating nail or hair cutting.
- Consider textures of clothing, bedding, often soft, fleece fabrics are favourites.
- Consider seam free clothes, remove labels.
- Provide a box of different tactile fidgets and toys.
- Sensory bins - bury toys in lentils, sand, pasta.
- Water play
- Feely objects fidgets attached to clothing
- Oral motor activities e.g. chewies, blow bubbles

Seeing (Visual)

Possible signs of difference:

- Easily distracted in busy places.
- Increased sensitivity to sunlight.
- Distress when there is lots of artificial light.

Strategies and Ideas:

- Increasing or decreasing visual stimulation can affect arousal levels
- A clear organised space may be calming and organising for some and too limiting for others.
- Consider lighting
- Visual distractions
- Sunglasses or baseball hats to shield
- Have a low stimulation area - eg blanket over table





Taste (Gustatory)

Possible signs of difference:

- Difficulty weaning.
- Picky eater - may limit to similar taste, texture or colour.
- Excessive drooling can indicate reduced muscle tone around the mouth - can impact on which food they can manage, and affect speech development.

Strategies and Ideas:

- Always offer safe foods
- Divider plates or separate bowls so foods don't touch
- Sharing plates in middle of table
- Never force feed
- Plain flavour toothpaste
- Crunchy food is regulating
- Chewing, sucking, blowing games
- Try a vibrating toothbrush
- Offer chew toys

Smell (Olfactory)

Possible signs of difference:

- Dislike of certain places
- Gagging at smells

Strategies and Ideas:

- Be aware of smells that might be upsetting - may refuse to go somewhere
- Can be linked with food avoidance
- Fave smell on cuff.

Body Awareness (Proprioception)

Possible signs of difference:

- Tiptoe walking
- Constantly moving and fidgeting
- Seeking out crashing and jumping activities
- Clumsiness - bumping into objects and people
- Being 'heavy handed' - accidentally breaking toys or pushing other children too hard.
- Restless, wriggly sleeper, wakes frequently.
- Needs to have parent in bed to settle.

Strategies and Ideas:

- Movement is good and is necessary for all development!
- Active heavy muscle work is regulating - carrying, pushing, pulling
- Deep pressure is calming and regulating - cuddles.
- Try some intense activity before bedtime routine
- Use of weighted items such as lapmats and toys.
- Rough and Tumble play
- Resistive movement opportunities can provide increased feedback to the body and result in a calming and organising.
- Going to the park - climbing, running, jumping.



Balance and Movement (Vestibular)

Possible signs of difference:

- Prone to car sickness
- Fearful of new movement
- Need to spin
- Needs drive or push in buggy to fall asleep

Strategies and Ideas:

- Swinging back and forth e.g. on a garden swing/ rolling on a therapy ball
- Visits to the park - swings, roundabouts, slides, zipwires, balance beams
- Rocking back and forth e.g. rocking chair



Internal Body Awareness (Interoception)

Possible signs of difference:

- A very placid baby
- Delay in toileting readiness
- Not crying when hurt
- Going outside without a coat
- Not asking for food or drink

Strategies and Ideas:

- Point out things you notice
- Start with body feelings - simple to start with hot, cold, wet dry eg when changing nappies, when washing hands, when going outside, when having a bath.
- Move on to more complex sensations
- Help them to notice in the moment - eg my heart is beating fast because I have been running
- When you are angry I notice you clench your fists.
- When you need a wee you hop from one leg to the other
- Label your own feelings and sensations.
- I know I am hungry because..... How do you know when you are hungry?



Resource created by Nicci Paine, Leap Children's Therapy for Dingley's Promise.

