



UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S SENSORY NEEDS

This guide is based on Contact's parent workshop *Understanding Your Child's Sensory Needs*. Contact is a charity supporting families with disabled children.

MAKING SENSE OF SENSORY PROCESSING

Every moment, our brains are taking in messages from the world through our senses – sounds, sights, smells, movement, texture, and more. For most of us, our brains automatically filter, organise, and respond to this information without us even thinking about it.

For some children, this process works differently. Their brains may be more responsive to certain inputs or need more sensory input to feel calm and connected. These differences are known as sensory processing differences or sensory integration differences.

This doesn't mean there's something wrong – it simply means that the child's sensory system works differently. Understanding their unique sensory profile can help you create an environment and routines that make daily life calmer and more enjoyable.

Examples:

- **A child might cover their ears when a vacuum cleaner is on but seek loud music later.**
- **Another may dislike the feeling of certain clothes but enjoy being wrapped tightly in a blanket.**
- **Some children crave movement and find it hard to sit still; others feel wobbly or fearful when their feet leave the ground.**

 Our website has lots of information on common concerns like feeding and eating, helping your child sleep, and understanding your child's behaviour, including free factsheets for parents. Visit: contact.org.uk/common-concerns



THE EIGHT SENSES

Most people know about the five main senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell – but we actually use eight to make sense of the world:

1. **Sight (Vision)** – what we see, how we track and interpret visual information.
2. **Hearing (Auditory)** – how we notice, process, and respond to sounds and volume.
3. **Touch (Tactile)** – sensations from our skin: texture, temperature, and pressure.
4. **Taste (Gustatory)** – how we experience flavour and texture through the mouth.
5. **Smell (Olfactory)** – how scents can alert, comfort, or overwhelm us.
6. **Body Awareness (Proprioception)** – knowing where our body parts are and how they move.
7. **Balance & Movement (Vestibular)** – understanding motion, stability, and coordination.
8. **Internal Body State (Interoception)** – awareness of internal signals like hunger, thirst, or needing the toilet.

Every child has a unique sensory profile – a mix of:

- *what they seek out*
- *what they avoid*
- *what helps them feel regulated, and*
- *what they need to co-ordinate their bodies and move around.*

REGULATION: SUPPORTING CALM & CONNECTION

Self-regulation is the ability to manage feelings, attention, and behaviour to meet daily challenges. This develops gradually as children grow. Before they can self-regulate, they rely on co-regulation – when adults help them calm down, feel safe, and learn to manage big feelings.

How co-regulation looks in practice:

- *Using a calm, gentle tone of voice.*
- *Offering physical comfort, like a hug or gentle pressure on the shoulder.*
- *Naming and validating emotions (“That noise was loud – it made you jump!”).*
- *Breathing slowly together or modelling calm behaviour.*
- *Allowing recovery time before discussing behaviour or next steps.*

These moments teach children that emotions can be managed and that adults can be trusted to help them through overwhelm.

LEVELS OF AROUSAL

Children’s sensory systems affect their levels of arousal – how alert, focused, or tired they feel. Think of arousal like an energy dial:

- **Low arousal** – a child may appear tired, slow, or disengaged.
- **High arousal** – a child may be restless, noisy, or overwhelmed.
- **Just right** – the child is calm, alert, and ready to learn or play.
- **The goal is to help children find their ‘just right’ level.** Sensory strategies can either increase alertness or bring calm, depending on what is needed.

Examples:

- **If a child is low energy, try alerting activities** – jumping, swinging, upbeat music.
- **If a child is overexcited, try calming input** – slow linear rocking (forward-back or side to side, not circular).

You can think of this as tuning the sensory system: adjusting input to find balance.

SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES IN ACTION

Children may be over-responsive (reactive), under-responsive (need more input), have difficulty making sense of sensory input (discrimination), or have difficulty using sensory information to plan and organise their movement (praxis).

Over-responsive behaviours may look like:

- *Covering ears or eyes*
- *Avoiding certain clothes or textures*
- *Refusing messy play or hair washing.*

Under-responsive behaviours may look like:

- *Seeking strong movement or loud sounds*
- *Crashing, bumping, or spinning a lot*
- *Seeming unaware of hunger, tiredness, or pain*
- *Appearing as though they have not heard you until you are close to them.*

Discrimination behaviours may look like:

- *Difficulty recognizing different temperatures*
- *Difficulty finding items amongst clutter*
- *Difficulty identifying different textures.*

Planning and organisation (praxis) difficulties may show as:

- *Clumsiness or poor coordination*
- *Struggling to follow multi-step instructions*
- *Difficulty learning new physical tasks like dressing or riding a bike.*

Understanding which senses are affected can help you identify triggers and supportive strategies.

PRACTICAL SENSORY SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Below are everyday strategies that can help children feel balanced and regulated. Try one or two at a time and observe what works best for your child.

General tips:

- **Build sensory breaks into the day** (movement, stretching, chewing, fidgeting).
- **Create calm corners or cosy spaces** for rest and reset.
- **Offer choices:** “Do you want to wear your soft jumper or your cotton one?”
- **Prepare children for transitions** with gentle warnings or visual cues.
- **Keep a small “sensory soothe box” ready** filled with comforting items.

Ideas to try:

- **Hearing:** Use noise-cancelling headphones or play soothing sounds.
- **Smell:** Keep lavender sachets or familiar scents nearby; avoid strong odours.
- **Touch:** Experiment with textures; deep pressure massage, firm hugs or self-massage can help.
- **Taste:** Offer chewy snacks or strong flavours to aid focus.
- **Vision:** Adjust lighting – soft lamps, natural light, and avoiding flicker.
- **Body Awareness (proprioception):** Activities like pushing, pulling, or lifting heavy objects.
- **Balance & Movement (vestibular):** Gentle rocking, yoga, or balancing games.
- **Internal Body State (interoception):** Encourage noticing internal states – “Is your tummy full?”, “Do you feel hot?”

SENSORY BOXES, SPACES, AND CIRCUITS

Sensory soothe box

A sensory soothe box is a personalised collection of items that comfort and calm your child when they feel overwhelmed. Fill it together with things that appeal to their senses – for example:

- **A soft toy or blanket**
- **Favourite photo or small keepsake**
- **Lavender sachet or scented lotion**
- **Stress ball, fidget, or chewy toy**
- **Headphones or a small speaker with calming music.**

Encourage your child to use their box when they need a break or want to feel grounded.

Sensory Spaces

A sensory space is a quiet area where your child can retreat and self-regulate. It could be:

- **A pop-up tent with cushions and low lighting**
- **A corner with beanbags, fairy lights, and soft textures**
- **A designated ‘calm spot’ at home or school where they can relax.**

You don’t need special equipment – just a predictable, safe space that helps them feel calm and in control.

CASE STUDY – MANAGING OVERWHELM AT THE SUPERMARKET

Leo (4) enjoys going to the supermarket after nursery with his dad, but sometimes becomes overwhelmed. Bright lighting, constant beeping at the checkouts, strong smells, crowded aisles and waiting in unpredictable queues can quickly build up. What may look like a sudden angry outburst is often a sign of sensory overload.

Once his dad recognised the patterns, he made small adjustments: shopping at quieter times, using a simple picture list so Leo knows what to expect, choosing a staffed checkout, and watching for early signs of overwhelm. Leo sometimes wears a cap to reduce glare and uses ear defenders if noise feels too intense. If needed, they step outside for a short break.

Leo’s overwhelm hasn’t disappeared completely, but it has reduced and is more manageable. Understanding sensory processing helped Dad respond with empathy and practical changes – reducing stress for both of them.

REFLECTION: UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S SENSORY PROFILE

Every child has patterns in how they respond to sensory input. Reflect on what helps or hinders your child:

Situation	Sensory trigger examples	Helpful strategies
Morning routine	noise, textures	calm music, soft clothes
Mealtimes	smells, taste, texture	use preferred cutlery, dim light
Playtime	seeking movement	trampoline, park play
Bedtime	temperature, noise	deep pressure massage, white noise

Sensory circuits

Sensory circuits are structured routines of movement and sensory activities designed to prepare children for learning. You don't need special equipment – just a predictable safe space that can be adjusted to your child's needs and helps them feel calm and in control. They usually follow three stages:

- Alerting** – Activities that wake up the body (jumping, skipping, bouncing)
- Organising** – Activities that require focus and coordination (throwing, balancing)
- Calming** – Activities that reduce energy and prepare for concentration (deep pressure, yoga stretches, slow breathing)

These circuits can be short (5–10 minutes) and are often helpful before school or during transitions.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS AND EVERYDAY EXAMPLES

You can make small environmental changes that support your child without needing special equipment:

- **Use visual schedules and consistent routines.**
- **Reduce clutter and noise in busy rooms.**
- **Offer sunglasses or visors if bright light causes distress.**
- **Let children wear ear defenders in noisy settings.**
- **Provide a safe retreat space during group activities.**
- **Allow comfort items like soft toys or chewables when out and about.**

Encourage schools and childcare settings to use similar strategies.

CASE STUDY – REDUCING STRESS AT THE SWIMMING POOL

Amira (9) loves swimming and looks forward to her weekly lesson, but sometimes leaves feeling upset or exhausted. Echoing acoustics, whistles, bright reflections on the water, cold air in the changing rooms and the tight feel of swimwear can all add up. Although she enjoys the pool itself, the transitions before and after can be the most difficult.

When her mum began noticing these sensory demands, she introduced small changes: arriving early to avoid rushing, choosing a quieter changing cubicle, bringing loose clothing and a soft towel for afterwards, and allowing time for a calm snack before heading home. Amira sometimes wears tinted goggles to reduce glare and starts slowly to help her body adjust.

Swimming is still tiring, but with these adjustments Amira feels more confident and less overwhelmed. Understanding the sensory aspects of the environment helped her mum keep an activity Amira enjoys while reducing stress.

FINAL THOUGHTS

You are the expert on your child. Supporting sensory needs isn't about fixing challenges – it's about understanding and adapting. Notice patterns, stay curious, and celebrate small successes.

Every positive step – from identifying what helps to creating a safe sensory space – builds your child's confidence and wellbeing.

“Connection before correction” – calm, understanding relationships make the biggest difference.

HOW CONTACT CAN HELP

We can give you advice, information and support about any concern or question you have caring for your disabled child:

- *Getting a diagnosis and medical information*
- *Services your family might be entitled to*
- *Benefits and sources of financial help*
- *Support in the early years*
- *Education, and more!*

Visit our website:

 [contact.org.uk](https://www.contact.org.uk)

Our freephone helpline is for parents and carers in any part of the UK with a disabled child aged from birth to 25.

Your child can have any kind of disability or additional need, and you do not need to have a diagnosis:

 **0808 808 3555**

 helpline@contact.org.uk

You can also join our closed (private) Facebook group to meet other parents and share experiences online:

 [facebook.com/contactfamilies](https://www.facebook.com/contactfamilies)

Guides for parents

We have a range of free guides for parents at:

 [contact.org.uk/publicationslist](https://www.contact.org.uk/publicationslist)

FURTHER RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Listening Ear service from Contact

Book a 1:1 call with a family support adviser for reassurance and practical guidance.

[contact.org.uk/listening-ear](https://www.contact.org.uk/listening-ear)

Fledglings

Non-profit shop offering sensory-friendly products and aids.

[fledglings.org.uk](https://www.fledglings.org.uk)

The Zones of Regulation

Visual tool for supporting emotional awareness and regulation.

[zonesofregulation.com](https://www.zonesofregulation.com)

Sensory Integration Education (SIE)

Sunflower Lanyard and Radar Key Schemes. For invisible disability awareness and accessible toilet access.

[sensoryintegration.org.uk](https://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk)



FREEPHONE HELPLINE

0808 808 3555

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www.contact.org.uk



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