



TIPS FOR PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS:

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO **SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES**

Olga Bogdashina, PhD, MSc, MA, MAEd

There is a continuum of sensory perceptual problems/differences in autism. While some children have severe sensory distortions, others may experience only mild but still confusing sensory problems. To effectively teach and treat autistic children, it is necessary to understand how the qualitative differences of sensory perception associated with autism affect each particular child.

Since children are unable to cope with the demands of a world that they are not equipped to deal with, they are likely to display behavioural problems, such as self-stimulation, self-injury, meltdowns, avoidance, rigidity, high anxiety, panic attacks, and more. It is important to remember that these children have no control over their problems as they are caused by neurological differences. The following strategies may be helpful for both parents and professionals in addressing the sensory processing issues of young people with autism.

1 Protect from Sensory Overload

Many autistic people are very vulnerable to sensory overload. They may become overloaded in situations that wouldn't bother other people. The overload comes when they have taken in more than they can keep up with.

It is vital that parents, teachers and other professionals working with autistic individuals, learn how to recognise sensory overload since preventing it is better than dealing with the consequences. As soon as you notice the early signs of impending sensory overload, which are different depending on the individual, stop the activity and provide time and space to recover. For example, invite the child to go outside or to a quiet place. It is useful to teach the child how to recognise the internal signs of overload and to ask for help, or how to use different strategies, such as relaxation, to prevent the problem.

2 Create Sensorily Safe Environments

The sensory environment is very important for autistic individuals. They lack the ability to adjust to sensory assaults that other people accept as normal. If we accommodate each person's sensory profile and try to 'keep it clean' in order to meet their very special needs, the world would become more comfortable for them. When their sensory needs are met, problem behaviour becomes less of an issue. If there is no danger of attack, there is no need for a defense.

Many of the behaviors that interfere with learning and social interaction are, in fact, protective or sensory defensive responses of children to “sensory pollution” in the environment. Children cannot learn if they are bombarded with painful and confusing stimuli that they are not equipped to process.

Consider the following steps to create a safe sensory environment.

- Monitor stimuli and reduce those that are irrelevant.
- Having structure and routines in place makes the environment predictable and easier to control. Routine and rituals help to facilitate understanding of what is going on and what is going to happen next.
- Introduce any change slowly, and always explain beforehand what will change and why.

3 Hypersensitivities

Many children with autism are hypersensitive to a range of sensory stimuli. The following suggestions can help address such sensitivities.

- Identify the stimuli that the child finds disturbing, and either reduce or eliminate them. This could include using natural lighting instead of fluorescent lights, or providing the child with sensory aids such as tinted glasses or earplugs.
- Consider the effect of the colours and patterns of the clothes you wear and of your perfume, and make adjustments as needed.
- Remember that what we think is enjoyable (e.g., fireworks) may be uncomfortable, fearful or overwhelming for an autistic child.
- Always warn children about the possibility of a stimulus that they fear, and show the source of it. It is often not the stimulus itself that triggers what we call difficult behaviours, but the inability to control or predict it.
- Desensitising the child’s ability to tolerate the stimuli via a sensory diet can be helpful.

4 Work with Autism, Not Against It

Autistic individuals seem to develop, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, the ability to control their awareness of incoming sensory stimuli in order to survive in a world that bombards them with extraneous information. Two common ways of doing this are mono-processing (using only one sense at a time) and peripheral perception.

Mono-processing

- A person with mono-processing may have problems with multiple stimuli. Find out which sensory channel is open at the moment and reduce all irrelevant stimuli.
- Always present information through the person’s preferred sensory channel. If you are not sure what it is or, in the case of fluctuation, which channel is on at the moment, use multi-sensory presentation and watch which modality works. Remember, however, that the individual can switch channels.

Peripheral perception

- Autistic individuals are often hypersensitive to direct perception. Some autistic individuals actually understand what is being said better when they are not looking at you! They seem to be hypersensitive when approached directly by other people. For some, when others look at them directly, they may feel it as ‘a touch.’ It could be described as ‘distant touching’ with actual tactile experience.
- Autistic individuals can understand things better by attending to them indirectly, such as by looking or listening from the periphery. This could include looking out of the corner of one’s eye, or looking at or listening to something else. The same can also be true for other senses. Indirect perception of smell or touch is often a defensive mechanism to avoid sensory overload.
- Never force eye contact.
- Do not approach children directly in their hypersensitive channels. When hypersensitivity of the affected channel is addressed and lessened, direct perception becomes easier.

5 Adjust the Way You Interact with Children

Autistic people learn better with concrete information, whether it comes in visual, auditory or tactile form.

Allow them to use their own ways to explore the world. In many ways, autistic perception is superior to that of non-autistic individuals. Autistic individuals can often appreciate colours, sounds, textures, smells and tastes to a much higher degree than those around them. Their gifts and talents should be nurtured and not, as it is often the case, ridiculed.

When autistic individuals have problems with information that is presented verbally, there is currently a great emphasis on using pictures to help them comprehend the information. However, not all autistic people are “visual thinkers.” That is why it is important to choose a method of instruction that matches the child’s mental language. Thus, tactile aids are better for tactile thinkers. The goal is to identify the interaction style to be used with the child, whether direct or indirect communication, and to determine the preferred sensory channel used by the child in order to select the appropriate communication system — not all autistic children think in pictures.

Give children with autism time to take in your questions or instructions and to work out a response. Be aware that autistic individuals often require more time than others to shift their attention between stimuli of different modalities. They find it very difficult to follow rapidly changing social instructions.

The tips and strategies outlined above can be a useful guide for those seeking to understand and assist autistic individuals with sensory processing differences.

Suggested Further Reading

Bogdashina, O. (2022) *Autism: Becoming a Professional Parent. (1) Exploring the Sensory World of Autism*. Life&Learn.

Grandin, T. (2008) *The Way I See It*. Future Horizons.

Williams, D. (1996) *Autism: An Inside-Out Approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.



Olga Bogdashina has a Ph.D. in Linguistics, a MSc in Psychology, an MA in Teaching methods, a MA Ed in Autism, is an honorary Professor and Honorary Doctor at KSPU. She is also the co-founder of the International Autism Institute and a Programme Leader (Autism courses). She is a visiting Professor in Autism Studies, co-founder of the International Autism Institute and an author of 10 books (translated in 13 languages).

Dr. Bogdashina writes not only study resources for Universities but also guide books for parents and carers working with autistic people, providing valuable insights and the latest research. Her field of expertise is sensory and perceptual issues in autism; language and communication in autism, and autism and spirituality.

Dr. Bogdashina resides in the UK and has an adult son (34) with autism. To read more about her work, visit her [website](#) where you can also subscribe to follow her latest updates.

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