

Strategies for everyday activities

For children and young people with sensory needs

Information for parents and carers



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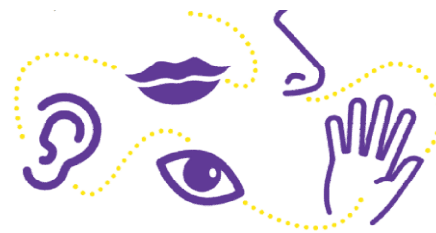
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Introduction

Navigating each day with a child with sensory needs can be challenging. We hope that some of the strategies included within this booklet will help you and your child find managing everyday activities a little less stressful.



All children are different and have their own preferences, therefore trying to find strategies that work for your child can take some trial and error. It is important to try strategies consistently and regularly to see the effect.

Dressing

- Consider the type of fabric, use comfortable clothes. Buy softer fabric clothes such as cotton and flannel.
- Avoid polyester or other man-made fabrics especially next to the skin.
- Wearing a soft/snug/familiar vest, t-shirt, thermals, under their clothes can help.
- Tucking a vest into a trousers or skirt can reduce the irritant of having waistbands etc. next to the skin.
- Wash new clothes a couple of times before your child wears them. Use familiar laundry products or try unscented. Avoid air drying the clothes and where possible dry in a tumble dryer to ensure the clothes maintain a soft texture.
- If your child cannot tolerate tags/labels, then try removing them. Ensure these are fully removed and no raw or scratchy edges are left.
- Use seamless undergarments or socks and tights, if this is not possible then turn the garments inside out so that the seam is on the outside.



- Clothing for sensory-sensitive children including seamless socks and underwear is available from:

www.sensorysmart.co.uk



and www.adaptiveclothing.co.uk



- Marks and Spencer's also sell a range of clothing for sensory sensitive children.
- Watch out for other irritants on clothes, i.e., Velcro fastenings next to the skin, clothing with transfer pictures, scratchy backing on logos, tight waist bands etc.
- Warming the child's clothes on the radiator before dressing.
- Learn to compromise with the child i.e., if you wear your shirt to dinner then you can change into your comfortable clothes when you get home.
- If possible, match up something new or formal with a familiar comfortable item of clothes.
- Allow the child some choice/control over choice of clothes i.e. choosing between 2 items.
- Explain difficulties to school regarding wearing the school uniform.
- When shopping for shoes and clothing with you child, consider whether retailers offer an "Autism Hour". This will be a quieter time for shopping and less stressful for your child.

When your child is ready to practice dressing more independently try these simple top tips:

- Dressing can be done in front of a mirror to provide visual cues to assist with sequencing, motor planning and body awareness.
- Practice dressing skills at home when there is plenty of time to complete the activity.
- Organise drawers and put a picture label, if necessary, in front to enable the child to choose their own clothes.
- If the child has balance difficulties, try dressing sitting down on the edge of the bed or a small chair/bench.
- Play with dolls or teddy bears that require to be dressed to practise skills.
- Grade the activity so that the parent does some and the child does some.
- A dressing chart with pictures may assist to sequence the activity.

Wearing socks and shoes

- Whenever possible apply deep pressure massage to prepare your child's feet prior to putting socks or shoes.
- Use seamless socks or turn the socks inside out. Turning socks inside out will reduce the feeling if the tight seem. You can also try silk type socks.
- Ensure that your child's socks fit correctly and are not too tight or too loose around the leg.
- Look for shoes that are soft in texture and avoid hard or unfinished seams, fittings for buckles or tight laces. However, if your child likes deep pressure tying their shoelaces tightly may help them tolerate shoes more.
- Try placing soft insoles into shoes to increase comfort, ensure these are securely fastened down to avoid creasing.
- Try Velcro shoes as the tightness of the shoe is easier to adjust to allow your child more control over the tension.
- Try buying shoes well in advance and encourage your child to wear them for short periods around the house gradually increasing tolerance.
- The use of social stories to help your child understand why we need to wear socks/shoes on a daily basis. You could also discuss why socks/shoes are important through doll play (encourage your child to dress teddy/doll whilst explaining the importance of each item of clothing).
 - Visit the link or scan the QR code below which includes lot of really information on what social stories are and how to use them:



www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/social-stories-and-comic-strip-conversations



- It is important to remember to allow your child to have time in bare feet, don't force this. It is ok to give them time around the house with no socks or shoes on.
- If your child is able to identify a piece of clothing they like/tolerate then maybe consider bulk buying to minimise distress.

Hair washing

Children with sensory needs find it difficult to tolerate the sprinkling effect of a shower on their head or face and can find this overwhelming. It is also important to be aware that some children who are tactile defensive may be sensitive to the temperature of the water too and may interpret the water as being too hot or too cold. It may take some trial and error to figure out the temperature of water your child can tolerate.



Top tips:

- Whenever possible massage the scalp prior to hair washing as this can help to reduce sensitivity.
 - Whenever possible give the child a plastic jug of water or the shower head to help, this helps them to feel that they have an element of control when getting their hair washed.
 - Don't let the activity go on for too long. Give time limits e.g. "Let's count to 10 then we can stop" and give deep pressure immediately after to calm your child. Counting the number of jugs may help them to cope better with the activity and will give them an idea of how long the activity will last.
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- Encourage the child to engage in role play i.e. washing their dolls hair or your hair prior to having theirs washed.
 - Use a plastic visor protector or facecloth to stop the water getting onto your child's face.
 - Have a hand towel nearby at all times to allow your child to dry their face. If tolerated use earplugs to stop water getting into their ears.
 - Try starting to just wash the ends of your child's hair and then build up to washing the scalp as this can be the most sensitive part.
 - Use non-rinse shampoo available or an all-in-one shampoo to cut down on the time of hair washing.
 - Use a tear free shampoo whenever possible as this will allow your child to keep their eyes open during hair washing. Having your eyes closed can be very disorientating for children with sensory needs and can make this a scary experience.
 - Whenever possible avoid tilting your child's head backwards as this can make them feel even more anxious about getting their hair washed.
 - Singing a song to the child while washing their hair may work e.g. "this is the way I wash your hair" may help the process. You can also play calming music or a favoured song to try and relax your child when getting their hair washed.
 - Use of a pictures or a schedule can help your child to understand what is happening and what is expected of them when getting their hair washed.

Hair brushing

- Whenever possible ensure that your child is in a calm state before attempting to brush their hair.
- Have your child sit in a comfortable chair or bean bag (whichever they feel most comfortable in) when brushing their hair. Alternatively, sit your child on your lap as this helps them feel more secure while having their hair brushed.
- Massage your child's scalp/head prior to hair brushing as this can help to reduce sensitivity.
- If your child can see themselves in a mirror while their hair is being brushed it can give them a greater sense of control and make it easier to tolerate the brushing.
- Practise hair brushing or "doing each other's hair" at other times. You can use your child's dolls or teddies to make this a fun play activity.
- Try to use a soft bristled brush or wide-toothed comb which will be easier to tolerate and won't pull on your child's hair.
- If your child has longer hair, then hold it at the top of the head to avoid pulling on the scalp.
- Brush your child's hair from bottom upwards to reduce any snags.
- Try not to prolong the activity and maybe avoid looking for perfection. Stop the activity if the child is getting really distressed.
- If appropriate encourage your child to brush their own hair as they will have more control, and this is likely to be less stressful for them.
- Use a tangle free conditioner when washing the hair to reduce tugs when brushing hair.

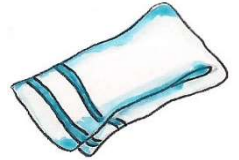


Hair cutting

- Whenever possible have your child's hair cut in an environment that they feel safe and familiar in. If it is not possible for the hairdresser to come to the home, use a quiet salon or arrange to visit the salon at a quiet time i.e. late opening etc.
- If possible, take your child to the hairdresser before they have their haircut. Try taking them there when you or one of their siblings are having a haircut.
- Provide your child with a deep pressure head/scalp massage prior to getting their haircut to reduce sensitivity.
- If possible, take a piece of equipment or toy that helps to calm your child e.g., vibrating toy/cushion, weighted cushion to place on their lap or a favourite fidget toy.
- Whenever possible, consider having your child's hair cut by a person who is familiar to the child and who has built up a relationship with the child i.e. family member or close friend.
- Try to use the same hairstylist and if appropriate talk through the child's difficulties with hair cutting with the stylist prior to visiting the salon.
- Playing calming music rather than louder pop or stimulating music can be helpful.



- An electric hair cutter may be more tolerable as it avoids having the hairdresser touch your child's hair when cutting. Be aware that the noise may be difficult.
 - If your child finds the noise challenging try earphones or earplugs to block out the noise of clippers or hairdryer.
- Before going to the hairdresser, discuss the process with your child, giving them ideas of what will happen, time scale etc. If appropriate prepare photos, visuals or social stories.
- Whenever possible ensure that your visit to the hairdressers is followed by a favoured activity or reward. If appropriate let your child know about this prior to the visit or put it on their schedule.
- Allow your child opportunities to wipe off stray hairs during the cut as they may irritate their face, neck etc. Provide them with a suitable brush or cloth to assist with this. A damp cloth with firm pressure can be more tolerable.
- Beware of capes with Velcro fastenings as they may irritate your child's neck; button or fasteners are better. It may be better to bring your own towel or blanket that is familiar to your child.
- Bring an extra top for your child to wear after the cut as they may be irritated by stray hairs. It is important to remember that stray hairs can stay in the clothing after several washes.
- Holding your child on your lap if tolerable or wrapping them tightly in a towel or blanket can help them to remain calm while having their hair cut.
- If your child's tolerance for hair cutting is very low, you may need to cut it over the course of a couple of days or even weeks. Keeping them still for a whole hair cut may be too stressful for you and the child.



Nail Cutting

- Before cutting your child's nails make sure they are sitting in a comfortable position on a supportive chair. Or alternatively, try sitting them on an adult's lap as this may help your child feel comfortable when having their nails cut.
- Massage your child's hands prior to cutting their nails as this can help to reduce sensitivity. Pressing down gently at the centre of each nail before cutting the nail may also help in reducing sensitivity.
- Trim your child's nails after a bath or shower when they are softer.
- When you cut your child's nails always make sure that you leave a white edge rather than cutting them right up to the skin as short nails can be very painful for children who have sensory needs.
- Give your child a favoured toy, fidget toy or iPad to distract them from what is happening. You could also play some calming music or your child's favourite TV programme or movie.
- Try not to prolong the activity, and maybe cut one nail of the hand/foot at a time. Stop if your child is getting really distressed.
- Build cutting your child's nails into their routine i.e. cut one or two nails every day.
- Nail clippers can be easier but may look scary to your child. You can buy child friendly clippers e.g. animal shapes.



- If your child cannot tolerate clippers, try using baby nail scissors that have a rounded tip or try using a nail file.
- If the child has very low tolerance, their nails could be cut while they are asleep.

Showering/bathing

- Often children with sensory needs prefer a bath as they can find it difficult to tolerate the sprinkling effect of a shower on their head, face, or skin.
- Your child may also be sensitive to the temperature of the water and may prefer the water to be cooler or hotter to the touch. Therefore, it may take some trial and error to figure out your child's preferred temperature.
- Use calming techniques before bath time e.g. Use hands to give moderate deep pressure to the shoulders, listening to relaxing music or use deep breathing techniques.
- Be aware of your bathroom lighting and minimise any noises e.g. run bath before entering bathroom. Too much sensory information can be overwhelming.
- Consider using non perfumed soaps.
- When drying your child use a large towel, quickly and firmly wrap it around your child.



Give your child some control:

- Encourage your child to wash themselves using large sponge, rubbing firmly. You may need to physically demonstrate and model this.
 - When showering try using a handheld shower and let the child control the direction and force of the water.
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- Talk to your child let them know when you are going to touch them with soap or a towel.
 - Consider the temperature in your bathroom e.g. is it too cold when they undress or step out of the bath/shower.
 - Where possible adjust the pressure of you shower to a level that is tolerable for your child.
 - Use firm touch when washing as this can calm your child. You could try using a wash mitt/flannel, loafer or back brush for washing as this may be more tolerable on the skin.
 - Try different textures of soaps and sponges i.e. rough sponges or thick firm sponges. It can be trial and error to find one your child likes.

Teeth brushing

- Prepare for teeth brushing by applying gentle pressure to the outside of the lips and along the jaw.
- Try using an electric or battery-operated toothbrush as the vibration of the toothbrush will help desensitize your child and can often be more tolerable for children with sensory needs.
- Your child might find the feeling of the bristles in the mouth uncomfortable. You could experiment with different toothbrushes including soft, medium or silicone.
- Before brushing your child's teeth try dipping the toothbrush in warm water as the cold water can be overwhelming for your child.
- Trial using a three-sided toothbrush which helps reduce the time required for cleaning teeth.
- Use a timer or song so that your child has an awareness of how long the activity will last. You may need to gradually increase the time if your child is very distressed during teeth brushing.
- Use less, or start without using any toothpaste.
- Try using different types of toothpaste. You can get non-foaming toothpaste or flavourless or flavoured toothpastes. Your dentist may be able to provide some advice.



- www.oranurse.co.uk

- When brushing your child's teeth make sure they are standing in front of a mirror. Being able to see what is happening may reduce their distress.
- Encourage your child to be independent with teeth brushing or provide hand over hand support. Giving your child more control may reduce their distress.
- There are lots of helpful and fun apps to encourage your child's independence.
 - Pokémon Smile
 - BrushDJ
 - BrushUp



Mealtimes

- If your child can find it difficult to sit still and stay at the table during mealtimes, introduce a movement seeking activity to their routine before dinner. For example going on the trampoline or playing outside. You can then use deep pressure to calm them and get them ready to sit at the table. A firm squeeze at your child's hips can be helpful before sitting.
- Make sure your child is seated comfortably at the table with their feet planted on the floor.
- If your child struggles using cutlery or doesn't like holding cutlery try different types of cutlery. Thicker, heavier cutlery is often easier and more tolerable to hold.
- Try providing distractions while your child is eating such as conversations, favourite stories, poems, pictures, songs.

- Allow your child to explore and play with their food.
- Praise any interaction with new foods i.e. touching, looking, smelling, licking.
- Some children can be sensitive to the temperature or texture of food. Try to introduce a variation of temperatures (hot, cold and room temperature) and textures.
- Once you find a particularly successful food, try introducing similar foods.
- Give your child as much control as possible. Give a choice of two new foods to try. Let your child know they only need to eat one bite to see if they like it. Praise your child for trying, even if they don't keep it in their mouth.
- Getting your child involved in meal preparation will help them know what food is being served during the mealtime.
- Try 'serve yourself' type dinners as this gives your child control over what goes on their plate. Put the food on the middle of the table and get your child to add their plate. You as the adult are in control of what goes on the table.
- Give your picky eaters condiments to go with food, whatever it takes to get them to eat i.e., ketchup, mayonnaise, spaghetti sauce, gravy, etc. Eventually you can begin fading out the condiments, using less and less, each time as he begins to get used to the food.
- Encourage your child to try new foods in different contexts i.e. playing tasting games, feeding Mum and Dad etc.

