



GIG  
CYMRU  
NHS  
WALES

Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol  
Betsi Cadwaladr  
University Health Board



## Strategies for everyday life for children and young people with Sensory Processing Difficulties



By Jean Pugh and Bernie Fahy (Occupational Therapists)

# SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFICULTIES AND EVERY DAY OCCUPATIONS

The majority of children who present with Sensory processing difficulties (SPD), particularly who are hyper responsive to information from the tactile sense find it difficult to cope with every day activities. Listed below are some strategies that can assist in making this activity less stressful for both parent and child.

## **Pages:**

- 3: Wearing clothes
- 4: Wearing socks and shoes
- 5: Brushing hair
- 6: Hair washing
- 7 – 8: Hair cutting
- 9: Nail Cutting
- 10: Coping with a shower
- 11: Cleaning teeth
- 12 – 13: Fussy eaters
- 14 – 15: Good nights' sleep
- 16: Coping with external environments
- 17 – 18: Visiting the dentist
- 19: Using Public Toilets
- 20: Transition to Primary school
- 21 – 23: Coping in the classroom
- 24: Transition to secondary School

## WEARING 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, long johns etc. 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 and

conditioner. Avoid air drying the clothes and where possible dry in a tumble dryer to ensure the clothes maintain a soft texture.

- ✓ Remove any tags, labels, on the clothes, 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.
- ✓ 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
- ✓ 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
- ✓ Explain difficulties to school regarding wearing the school uniform.
- ✓ Clothing for sensory-sensitive children including seamless socks and underwear are available from [www.sensorysmart.co.uk](http://www.sensorysmart.co.uk). Marks and Spencer's also sell a range of clothing for sensory sensitive children.
- ✓ 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.

## WEARING SOCKS AND SHOES



- ✓ Whenever possible apply deep pressure massage to desensitize the child's feet prior to trying on new shoes.
- ✓ Use seamless socks or turn the socks inside out.
- ✓ Ensure that 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. Slip on shoes, canvas shoes and crocks may be more comfortable.

- ✓ Try placing soft insoles into shoes to increase comfort, ensure these are securely fastened down to avoid creasing
- ✓ Try Velcro fastening shoes, as the tightness of the shoe is easier to adjust to allow the 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 prior to frequent use
- ✓ Whenever possible buy the same make of shoes or socks as they will be familiar and perceived as safe.

### Hints and Tips:

## BRUSHING HAIR



brush hair

- ✓ Whenever possible ensure that your child is in a calm state before attempting to brush hair. Massage the scalp prior to hair brushing as this can help to reduce sensitivity.
- ✓ If children 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 others hair” at other times,
- ✓ Have the child sit in a comfortable chair or bean bag (whichever they feel most comfortable in) when brushing the hair.
- ✓ Having the child sit on an adult’s lap can help them feel more secure while having their hair brushed
- ✓ Use a tangle free conditioner when washing the hair.
- ✓ Try to use a soft bristled brush which will be easier to tolerate and that won’t yank on the hair.
- ✓ If the hair is long then hold it at the shank to avoid pulling on the scalp. Brush 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

Be aware that some children struggle to tolerate hair ties  
e.g. bobbles and hair bands

## HAIR WASHING

- ✓ Whenever possible massage the scalp prior to hair washing as this can help to reduce sensitivity.
- ✓ 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 the child's face. A very suitable visor that fits child or adult can be purchased from [www.littlepumpkin.co.uk](http://www.littlepumpkin.co.uk). This is called the Lil rinse baby hair wash visor.
- ✓ Ensure that the child has a thick hand towel nearby at all times to allow them to dry their face.
- ✓ If tolerated use earplugs to stop the water going in the child's ears.
- ✓ Use a jug or water rather than a shower head to wet and rinse the



child's hair as children with tactile sensitivity find it difficult to tolerate the sprinkling effect of a shower on their head or face. Be aware that some children who are tactile defensive may be sensitive to the temperature of the water and may interpret the water as being too hot or too cold.

- ✓ Inform the child of how many jugs of water you will need to use as this can give them an idea of how long the activity will last. Counting the amount of jugs may help them to cope better with the activity.
- ✓ Whenever possible give the child a plastic jug or mug of water to help, this helps them to feel that they have an element of control over the proceedings.
- ✓ If the child's tolerance level is very low, you may need to start with just washing the ends of the hair and then building up to washing the scalp which can be the sensitive part.
- ✓ Use non-rinse shampoo available from **www.southpaw enterprises** or some department stores and an all in one shampoo to cut down on the time scale of hair washing.

- ✓ Use a tear free shampoo whenever possible as this will allow the child to keep their eyes open during hair washing. Children with tactile sensitivity often have difficulties processing information from the proprioception and vestibular senses, which inform them of their head position and body position in space. Having their eyes closed can be scary for these children.



- ✓ Whenever possible avoid tilting the child's head backwards as this can make them feel even more insecure and anxious particularly if they also have difficulty processing information from the vestibular sensory system.
- ✓ 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. Playing soft calming music such as Mozart can also help
- ✓ Use of a picture or written schedule can also assist the children with ASD as it can help them to understand what is happening. Using a laminated sheet with Velcro strips can help as the child can pull them off as each stage finishes and this is a physical cue as to how long the process will take.

## HAIR CUTTING



- ✓ Whenever possible have the child's hair cut in an environment that he/she perceives as familiar and safe. If 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 tolerated, provide the child with a deep scalp massage prior to the visit to the hairdresser to reduce sensitivity.
- ✓ If appropriate have the child take a piece of equipment/toy that helps to calm e.g. vibrating toy/cushion, weighted cushion to place on their lap, favourite fiddle toy etc.
- ✓ Whenever possible have the 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.

- ✓ If possible have the child orientate to the environment by taking them there when you or one of their siblings are having a cut, before they have their haircut.
- ✓ Whenever possible use the same hairstylist and if appropriate talk through the child's difficulties with hair cutting with the stylist prior to visiting the salon.
- ✓ If the child has auditory sensitivity, encourage the stylist to use a calm reassuring voice low voice when talking to them.
- ✓ Playing calming music such as Mozart or other classical/calming pieces of music rather than louder pop or stimulating music.
- ✓ An electric hair cutter may be more tolerable as it avoids having the stylist touch their hair when cutting. Be aware that the noise may be difficult for the child with auditory sensitivity.
- ✓ Prior to the visit, discuss the process with the child, giving ideas of procedure, time scale etc. If appropriate prepare a picture schedule for the child or use social stories.
- ✓ Whenever possible ensure that the visit to the hairdressers is followed by a favoured activity/reward. If appropriate let the child know about this prior to the visit or put it on his schedule.
- ✓ Allow the child opportunities to wipe off stray hairs during the cut as they may irritate his face, neck etc. Provide them with a suitable brush or cloth to assist with this.
- ✓ Beware of capes with Velcro fastenings as they may irritate the child's neck; button or fasteners are better. It may be better to bring your own cape/towel or blanket that is familiar to the child.
- ✓ Bring an extra top for your child to wear after the cut as he/she may be irritated by stray hairs. Note that stray hairs can stay in the clothing after several washes.
- ✓ Holding the 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 him/her still for a whole hair cut may be too stressful for you and the child
- ✓ Give the child a time frame for the activity.



## **NAIL CUTTING**

- ✓ Whenever possible massage the child's hands prior to cutting the 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
- ✓ Ensure that the child is sitting in a comfortable supportive chair.
- ✓ If tolerated sitting on an adult's lap can help the child to feel more comfortable when having their nails cut.
- ✓ Trim nails after a bath or shower when they are softer.
- ✓ When you cut the 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 are sensitive to the tactile system.
- ✓ Give the child a favoured toy, fiddle toy or lollipop (if acceptable) to distract them from what is happening.
- ✓ Having some soothing music or the child's favourite TV/DVD playing while cutting their nails can help to distract.
- ✓ Try not to prolong the activity, and maybe cut one nail of the hand/foot at a time. Stop the activity if the child is getting really distressed.
- ✓ Build it into the routine i.e. cut one or two nails every day.
- ✓ Nail clippers can be easier but may look scary. Consider buying 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.

## COPING WITH A SHOWER



- ✓ Where possible consider that the child/young person may prefer to bath as children/young people with tactile sensitivity find it difficult to tolerate the sprinkling effect of a shower on their head, face or skin. They can

also be sensitive to the temperature of the water and may prefer to the water to be cooler or hotter to the touch.

- ✓ Whenever possible engage in calming activities prior to having a shower as this can help to reduce anxiety levels and sensitivity. i.e., listening to soft music e.g. Mozart, or using deep breathing techniques can help calm
- ✓ Where possible adjust the pressure of the shower to a level that is tolerable. A slower heavier sprinkle is more calming than a fast needle shower. Using a hand held shower will also provide the young person with more control and thus reduce anxiety levels and sensitivity.
- ✓ Ensure that there is a thick hand towel nearby at all times to allow them to dry their face.
- ✓ If tolerated use earplugs to stop the water going the ears. Use firm touch when washing as it will assist with calming. Trial using a wash mitt/flannel, loafer or back brush for washing as this may be more tolerable on the skin.
- ✓ Encourage the child to wash with textured soaps and to use different textured bath scrubbers. The use of textured soaps and scrubbers can assist in the reduction of tactile sensitivity.

To increase tolerance, use a timer for showering i.e., 5 minutes and then gradually increase the time

Children/young people who are sensitive to information from the oral system can find it difficult to tolerate cleaning their teeth.



- ✓ To increase tolerance trial using a flavour free and non- foaming toothpaste such as Ora Nurse available from [www.oranurse.co.uk](http://www.oranurse.co.uk)  
Your local dentist or community dentist may also be able to provide you with a similar product
- ✓ Trial using an electric or battery operated toothbrush as the vibration of the toothbrush will help desensitise
- ✓ Children/young people who are sensitive to the tactile system may find the sensation of the bristles in the mouth uncomfortable. Experiment with soft and medium bristled toothbrushes including those made of silicon.
- ✓ Trial dipping the toothbrush in warm water
- ✓ Trial using a three-sided toothbrush which helps reduce the time required for cleaning teeth.
- ✓ Encourage your child to stand in front of a mirror when brushing their teeth. Encourage their independence with verbal instructions or use a tooth brushing app. This will give your child more control and may reduce their distress.
- ✓ Try using a timer so that the child has awareness how long the activity will last. You may want to start from a few seconds and gradually build up the time into minutes.

## FUSSY EATERS

- ✓ Allow your fussy eaters to explore and play with their food. This will enable them to experience different textures through the tactile system, which will ultimately help. If oral sensitive they will feel "safer" exploring textures



- with their hands first, rather than their mouths. It is much less threatening and will lead to a better overall response.
- ✓ Pay attention to textures; fussy eaters with oral defensiveness are infamous for only being able to tolerate one or two food textures or temperatures. Make sure you try to introduce new foods to ultimately include: hot, cold, and neutral temperatures for food and drinks, pureed food, smooth, chunky, hard, soft, crunchy, "slippery", sticky, and mixed textures.
- ✓ Once you find a particularly successful food, try introducing similar foods.



- ✓ Try providing distractions while they are eating such as conversations, favourite stories, poems, pictures, songs, relaxing music, a toy he/she can hold or squeeze, or anything you can think of... just try it and see what works.
- ✓ Set up a reward system. Use suitable items or established methods to reward your child for trying a new food. Find a reward system which works for both you and your child that will encourage him to try new foods, tastes, and textures. Once you find a food, get him to eat more of it and begin gradually adding it to his usual repertoire.

- ✓ Give the child as much control as possible: For example give a choice of two new foods to try. Let the person know he only

needs to eat one bite to see if he likes it. Praise him for trying, even if it doesn't keep it in his mouth.

- ✓ Give your picky eaters condiments to go with food, whatever it takes to get them to eat i.e., ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, salad dressing, spaghetti sauce, barbecue sauce, salt, pepper, creamy soups, 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.
- ✓ Give lots of praise and positive reinforcement! If they achieve more than the time before they have accomplished something. If they played with it, smelled it, licked it, tasted it, chewed it and spit it out, or actually swallowed it, then praise them for what they did do.
- ✓ Encourage the person to try new foods in different contexts i.e. playing tasting games, feeding Mum and Dad etc.



The person with sensory difficulties may be sensitive to smells or the noise of others eating. Placing them at the end of the table, near the door of the dining room or creating opportunities to eat alone can help.

## GETTING A GOOD NIGHTS SLEEP

- ✓ Whenever possible allow the child to engage in active deep

our bedtime routine	
	<b>Pajamas</b>
	<b>Brush Teeth</b>
	<b>Drink of Water</b>
	<b>Go Potty</b>
	<b>Read Stories</b>
	<b>Lights Out</b>

pressure activities throughout the day/afternoon, particularly if they have been sitting still in school all day. This can help them to calm and to tire before bedtime. Examples of suitable activities are bouncing on a trampoline, swimming, cycling, soft play, climbing, pulling/pushing/carrying weighted object etc.

- ✓ Give your child notice i.e. "half an hour until bedtime" or "you can play that game for another 5 minutes etc. Use visual timers if necessary

- ✓ Establish a bedtime routine and stick as closely as possible.

- ✓ A warm bath can be soothing before

bedtime. Using textured scrubs and/or textured flannels can help to calm as can wrapping the child snugly in a towel following the bath.

- ✓ A massage, back and/or head rub and deep pressure to the arms and legs (if tolerated) prior to bedtime can also help to calm. Alternatively, get your child to lie on their tummy on the floor. Role an exercise ball over their body whilst applying pressure on the ball. If the child is lying on their back roll the ball over their legs and outstretched arms (Avoid rolling the exercise ball over the stomach area)
- ✓ Read bedtime stories in as calm as voice as possible.

- ✓ Provide comfortable pyjamas for the child, you may need to experiment with different ones to get it right. Some children with proprioceptive difficulties may feel more secure wearing tighter clothes at night i.e. leggings, leotards or stretchy pyjamas. Some children with tactile defensiveness can react negatively to some materials and again it's a matter of trying different materials to get it right. Also be aware that lace trims, labels etc can be irritating to the child with these difficulties. Wash new pyjamas before wearing



- ✓ Warm pyjamas on a radiator prior to putting them on
- ✓ If tolerated encourage the child to listen to some calming background music when settling for the night, Mozart can be very calming.
- ✓ Some children may like to listen to more noisy repetitive sounds to help them settle e.g. the vacuum cleaner, hairdryer, fan etc. There are tapes of “white music” available to purchase.
- ✓ Using a heavy blanket/ bedspread on the bed or a sleeping bag, body pillow or pillows along the length of the child's back can help the child to feel more secure in bed and to settle to sleep.
- ✓ Placing their beds against a wall rather than in the middle of a room can also help the child with Proprioceptive difficulties feel more secure. Sometimes it helps if they can press their feet or body against the wall or their head against the headboard.
- ✓ Using soft comfortable sheets such as flannelette can assist the child in sleeping better; again some children can find crisp cotton sheets scratchy. Wash sheets in familiar unscented detergent and softener. Trial using fitted sheets which are less likely to crease and may be more comfortable.
- ✓ Washing new sheets prior to using them can make them more tolerable.



- ✓ Ensure that the bedroom has the right lighting for the child i.e. blackout curtains can help to reduce light stimulation for the visual sensitive child and use of night light can help if the child dislikes the dark.
- ✓ Reduce distractions in bedroom or on walls.

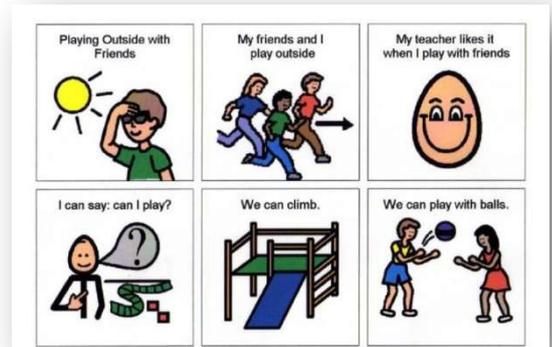
## COPING WITH EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTS

Many people who present with sensory difficulties may find it difficult to cope with the sounds, smells, lighting, crowds etc. that they have to cope with when accessing certain environments e.g. the supermarket, swimming pools, cinemas, restaurants, theatres, MacDonald's etc.

Sometimes what can be a treat for us can be a nightmare for these children particularly if they are not prepared for them. The following suggestions can help to make these outings easier for them to cope with

- ✓ Use of visual supports, social stories (whatever works best with the child) to prepare them for visits to potentially stressful environments. There are a number of suitable social stories available on line or from the National Autistic Society or else you can ask the child's Speech and language Therapist for some suitable stories.
- ✓ Make the visits as motivating as possible for the child e.g. if visiting the supermarket include one or more item that the person is motivated to buy, favourite movie at the cinema etc. favourite food in a restaurant etc.
- ✓ Whenever possible choose quiet times to visit these places. Some supermarkets and shops are now offering an "Autism Hour" when background music is switched off, lights are dimmed making it less stressful for those who are sensory sensitive.
- ✓ Allow gradual exposure to the environment and build on this
- ✓ Prepare a schedule for the visit by using lists of objects to buy, time of the picture show finishing etc. and whenever possible do not deviate from this schedule

- ✓ Schedules, timers etc can also be used to advise the person on the timescale of the visit.
- ✓ If the child uses a schedule or PECS to communicate ensure that they have access to this when out in the community.
- ✓ It can initially be helpful to take the child's favourite toy/ comforter or familiar safe object with them to assist with the visit
- ✓ Allowing the person to wear a hat pulled over his ears (if tolerated), or ear muffs/ear defenders or noise cancelling headphones can also help to block out sounds.



headphones can also help to block out sounds.

- ✓ Playing familiar/favoured/calm music through the headphones can help to distract from stressful situations.
- ✓ Wearing sunglasses or tinted goggles, a peaked cap can reduce the effects of light sensitivity.
- ✓ Prepare the child for the visit well in advance

## **VISITING THE DENTIST**

- ✓ Provide as much information as possible to the dentist prior to the visit. It is particularly important to list the child's communication and sensory needs relating to sound, light, taste, smell etc. Also list any specific triggers for the child especially if they are based on previous visits to the dentist.
- ✓ As much as possible inform the dentist on the best procedures to use to manage any behaviour, what works and does not work.
- ✓ Ensure that the dentist is aware that the child with ASD can take things very literally and therefore it is important to say exactly what you mean.
- ✓ If possible carry out a prior visit to the surgery without the child; this could help to identify any possible triggers that may cause



problems. Alerting the dentist to these triggers or preparing the child for them can reduce stress associated with the child's first visit. Allow them opportunities to meet the dental staff, explore the room, sit on the chair etc.

- ✓ It is very important to prepare the child for the visit. Try to inform them as early as possible. This can be difficult if the child's concept of time is poor.
- ✓ Use visual supports, social stories (whatever works best with the child to prepare them for the visit. There are a number of suitable social stories available on line or from the National Autistic Society or else you can ask the child's Speech and Language Therapist for some suitable stories.
- ✓ Role playing a visit to the dentist can also be helpful.
- ✓ Whenever possible have the appointment at the beginning or end of the day. This can avoid the child having to wait, which can increase anxiety and may allow extra time for treatment without having to rush.
- ✓ If appropriate use picture schedules, lists or sequence of pictures to inform the child of what is going to happen.
- ✓ Take the child's favourite toy or comforter with you and this can help to occupy or distract them. If they are calmed by wrapping them in a blanket then bring along a suitable blanket.
- ✓ Bring a tape of the child's favourite/calming music and either ask for it to be played on the sound system or bring a player with headphones. Using headphones can help to block out other sounds.
- ✓ Allowing the child to wear a hat pulled over his ears (if tolerated), or ear muffs can also help to block out sounds.
- ✓ Wearing sunglasses or tinted goggles can reduce the effects of light sensitivity.

If possible ask for the child's treatment to be carried out standing up, this will avoid the fear of the moving dentists chair and the child feeling insecure. If this is not possible then ask if you can have the child on your lap or sit close to them holding their hand.

If the waiting room is crowded or noisy then ask if you can wait outside until your turn, crowded, noisy waiting rooms can cause the child to become distressed before the visit.

If possible giving the child a time framework of how long it will take and use whatever method possible to indicate this to the child. Whenever possible try to follow a trip to the dentist with a favoured outing/activity for the child.

## USING PUBLIC TOILETS



- ✓ Have a quick look in the toilet area (if possible) prior to the child using them to assess for potential triggers i.e. crowds, noise (toilet flushing, hand dryers etc), smells etc. that the child may find difficult.
- ✓ Whenever possible try to go in when the toilet is quiet
- ✓ Allow the child to get in and out as quickly as possible, if necessary and appropriate, explaining the situation to others in the toilet.
- ✓ If a busy time, then carry antiseptic wipes for hand washing to reduce the amount of time the person needs to spend in the toilet.
- ✓ Allowing the child to listen to favoured music through headphones can help to eliminate noise and reduce stress.



## TRANSITION TO PRIMARY SCHOOL FROM HOME

- ✓ Use visual supports, social stories (whatever works best with the child) to prepare them for the transition to school. There are a number of suitable social stories available on line or from the National Autistic Society or the child's Speech Therapist.
- ✓ Ensure that the school staff are aware of the child's needs relating to their diagnosis prior to them starting school and have adequate provision in place to meet these needs.

- ✓ Assess the classroom environment prior to the child starting and identify any possible triggers that may cause problems. Alerting the staff to these triggers or preparing the child for them can reduce stress associated with transition
- ✓ Whenever possible reduce or eliminate possible triggers
- ✓ Carry out visits to the school prior to the child starting and make these visits interesting and fun for the child. It is best to start these visits at a time when the school is quiet and gradually introduce them to noisier and busier times
- ✓ If the child is to have 1-1 support in school, whenever possible introduce the child to this person prior to them starting school.
- ✓ If the child uses a schedule or PECS to communicate ensure that these are in place prior to them starting school
- ✓ It can initially be helpful to allow the child to take a favourite toy or comforter with them to school to assist with the transition.
- ✓ Allowing the child to wear a hat pulled over his ears (if tolerated), ear muffs or ear plugs to help to block out sounds.
- ✓ Wearing sunglasses or tinted goggles can reduce the effects of light sensitivity in bright classrooms.
- ✓ Use visual supports, social stories (whatever works best with the child) to prepare them for the transition to high school. There are a number of suitable social stories available on line or from the National Autistic Society or else you can ask the child's Speech and Language Therapist for some suitable stories.

- ✓ Continually monitor the situation and identify potential triggers



## **COPING IN THE CLASSROOM**

- ✓ If the child uses schedules, ensure that they are readily available to the child and that all staff working with the child is familiar with their use.
- ✓ Whenever possible have quiet transitions between activities e.g. carry furniture instead of dragging it, quiet music etc
- ✓ Monitor noise levels in the classroom.
- ✓ Try not to sit the child next to a window where they can get distracted.
- ✓ Avoid sitting the child near equipment that they may find noisy and distractible. E.g Projectors/ laptops / buzzing lights/ ticking clocks.

- ✓ Encourage staff to use quiet calm voices when talking to the child especially in stressful situations where the child may be anxious.
- ✓ Whenever possible provide a workstation or screened off area in the classroom to lessen distractions and provide safe space. Suitable portable workstations are available from [www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com) or they can be made with a cardboard box.
- ✓ Provide equipment to sit at their desk for sedentary activities e.g. move'n'sit or disc'n'sit cushions, fiddle box/toys, bungee cord on the leg of the chair etc. Lap or shoulder weights, move'n'sit cushions etc. can be used to assist the child with Proprioceptive difficulties stay seated for longer periods of time. Suitable ones are available from [www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com)
- ✓ Whenever possible provide quiet/calm/dark area in the classroom (if possible) where the child can go to calm down when stressed. A pop up tent or a quiet reading area with beanbags may be useful.
- ✓ Do not sit child directly under fluorescent lighting or in direct sunlight.
- ✓ Whenever possible place the child at the end or the start of a row of desks or at the end of the circle during circle time to lessen the child's anxiety about being touched accidentally or the potential for other children to crowd their space.
- ✓ Whenever possible, remove the child during noisy phases in the classroom, build in a plan of escape for them e.g. taking messages to another class, fetch the snacks etc.
- ✓ Monitor interruptions to the classroom during lessons and reduce whenever possible
- ✓ Avoid unnecessary conversation between staff
- ✓ Be aware of potential triggers or that the child is starting to become over aroused or anxious and change the situation.
- ✓ Be aware that wearing aprons for painting can be difficult for the child with sensory needs, the elastic cuffs or Velcro neck fastenings can irritate the skin and the child may find it difficult to have the apron placed over their heads. Allow the child to wear an old familiar soft shirt or old comfortable clothes.
- ✓ Be aware that the child may experience difficulty changing for PE; if possible allow them to wear the same comfortable clothes.
- ✓ Be aware that the child may find school toilet areas difficult to cope with i.e. the sound of the hand dryer or toilet flushing, the smell of chemicals, lots of children using the toilet at the same time etc. Whenever possible provide

alternatives i.e. using paper towels or avoiding toilets with hand dryers, allowing the child to use the toilet at quieter times or on their own, avoid using strong smelling toilet cleaners, etc during the school day.

- ✓ Provide regular breaks throughout the school day and whenever possible provide access to movement at the start of the day particularly if the child has travelled by taxi/car
- ✓ Encourage movement games in the playground
- ✓ When lining up in the yard allow the child with SPD to be placed at the start or the end of the row to reduce their anxiety about being touched or jostled.
- ✓ Be aware that the child may find assembly or other gatherings in the hall and attending the school dining room difficult to cope with. Allow the child to join the gathering when everybody is settled. Gradually introduce them to this setting and to build up tolerance. Allow them to sit on the end of the row near the door, this will limit the amount of people sitting close to them and also allow them opportunities to leave if it becomes too difficult.
- ✓ Hang coats or provide lockers at the end of the row of pegs to avoid frustration or to prevent the child getting caught up in a scramble with other children.
- ✓ Allow the child to leave class earlier if corridors are crowded
- ✓ Wearing ear phones/ear defenders to dampen down noise
- ✓ Wearing sunglasses or visors to dampen down light
- ✓ Provide warning of potential loud noises i.e. bell, fire alarm test etc.



## TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY

- Ensure that the special needs department are aware of the child's needs relating to their diagnosis prior to them starting at the high school and that all staff who will be teaching them are aware of their needs and have adequate provision and structures are in place to meet these.
- Be aware of potential new triggers e.g. large volumes of people in the corridors, large gyms and assembly areas, large noisy and potentially smelly dining areas, lack of structured break time, large chemical smelling toilet areas with hand dryers and chemical smelling science rooms etc. and put strategies as suggested above in place to assist the child in coping with areas they may find difficult.
- Assess the different classroom and other environments prior to the child starting and identify any possible triggers that may cause problems. Alerting the staff to these triggers or preparing the child for them can reduce stress associated with the child's first visit to the school.
- Carry out as many as possible visits to the school prior to the child starting to familiarise them with this new environment and to orientate them to different classrooms etc.
- Put a buddy system in place if appropriate.
- Schools to consider allowing the young person to enter or leave the classroom a few minutes before their peers. To reduce the young person being in busy environments and crowds.

## Further Reading:

- ▶ **(A. Jean Ayres) Sensory Integration and the Child**
- ▶ **(Sharon Heller) Too loud too bright too fast too tight- what to do if you are sensory defensive in an over stimulating world**
- ▶ **Carol Stock Kranowitz (2006) The Out-of-Sync Child**
- ▶ **Angie Voss (2011) Understanding Your Baby's Sensory Signals**
- ▶ **Angie Voss Understanding your Child's Sensory Signals: A practical daily use handbook for parents and teachers**
- ▶ **Angie Voss (2011) Your Essential Guide to Understanding Sensory Processing Disorder**
- ▶ **Sensory Integration Network UK**  
***[www.sensoryintegration.org.uk](http://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk)***

**Developed and collated by:**

**Jean Pugh and Bernie Fahy Occupational Therapists**