



## Sensory Processing and Autism



Humans constantly respond to sensory input from within our bodies (internal) and from the environment (external).

People with Autism all experience **differences** in the way they perceive and process sensory information. They may be **hypo-** (under) or **hyper-** (over) **sensitive** to:

Tastes

Smells

Sounds

Touch

Sights (light, colours, depth perception, etc.)

Vestibular (balance)

Proprioception (awareness of where body is in relation to objects in the environment)

Interoception (internal awareness, e.g. hunger, need to go to the toilet, pain, etc.)

Differences in sensory processing can have an impact on how an individual feels, thinks, behaves or responds which consequently affects their ability to focus and to learn. It is important that staff understand sensory processing differences specific to the individual and accordingly adapt the:

Environment

Expectations

Communication style

Teaching style

People with Autism who experience hyper-sensitivity will **avoid** or **over-react** to a stimulus, for example, the person who has a very restricted diet. People who are hyper-sensitive to certain stimuli may constantly be 'on edge' all day and consequently experience high levels of anxiety.

People with Autism who experience under-sensitivity will **seek out** or **under-react** to a stimulus, for example, the person who will eat anything and particularly likes very flavoursome food. People who are hypo-sensitive may be working twice as hard to consciously process sensory information that would happen automatically, or subconsciously for neurotypical people. This makes school an exhausting experience each day.

When a person with Autism is over-stimulated and feeling anxious, sensory seeking behaviours may help them feel calmer or safer. In consideration of this, the pupil should be offered regular access throughout the day to a low arousal environment where they can relax and engage in activities of their choice.

Remember: If you have serious concerns regarding sensory differences for any of your pupils, speak to your Line Manager, SENCo, Deputy Head, or Head Teacher who may discuss concerns with parents / carers and encourage them to seek advice from a range of specialist agencies such as:

Occupational Therapy

Dietary Advisory Services

Physiotherapy

Visually Impaired Service

(AET, 2012; AET, 2015; Gerland, 2013; NAS, 2015; Lawson, 2007; Grandin 1995)