

Sensory Sensitivities and Behaviours

Understanding how sensory experiences influence an autistic child's behaviour, comfort, and ability to learn

We all experience the world through our senses, but we do not necessarily experience it in the same way.

A sound that one person barely notices may be overwhelming to another. A particular texture may feel pleasant to one child but uncomfortable or even painful to another.

For many autistic children, especially those with complex support needs, sensory differences can significantly influence how they experience everyday environments, activities, and interactions.

A classroom filled with voices, a brightly lit shopping centre, an unexpected touch, or a change in routine may create discomfort that is not immediately apparent to the people around them.

Some children may cover their ears, move away, become restless, or withdraw from an activity. Others may seek movement, touch, or particular sounds to help themselves feel more comfortable.

These responses are often misunderstood when we focus only on the behaviour we can see.

Before asking how to change a child's behaviour, we need to consider what the child may be experiencing.

Understanding Sensory Processing

Our brains constantly receive and organize information from different sensory systems.

These include our familiar senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, as well as systems that help us understand movement, balance, and the position of our bodies.

Sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell

These senses help us experience and respond to information from the world around us.

Vestibular sense

This system helps us detect movement and maintain balance. It contributes to our awareness of changes in head position and movement through space.

Proprioception

This system provides information about the position and movement of our muscles and joints, helping us understand where our body is in space.

Interoception

This involves sensing internal bodily signals, such as hunger, thirst, temperature, and the need to use the toilet.

Sensory processing involves how the brain receives, interprets, and responds to this information.

For autistic children, some sensory experiences may feel unusually intense, while others may be less noticeable or actively sought out.

A child may also respond differently to the same sensory experience at different times.

For example, a familiar sound may be tolerable in a quiet room but overwhelming when combined with bright lights, several people talking, and the demands of an unfamiliar activity.

Understanding these individual differences can help us recognize why a child may respond comfortably in one situation but struggle in another.

When Sensory Input Feels Too Intense

Some children experience heightened sensitivity to particular sensory information. This is often described as hypersensitivity.

Everyday experiences that seem manageable to others may feel uncomfortable, distressing, or overwhelming.



Sound

A classroom bell, vacuum cleaner, hand dryer, or several people speaking at once may be difficult to tolerate.

The child may cover their ears, leave the room, become distressed, or avoid places where these sounds occur.



Light and visual input

Bright or flickering lights, visually crowded spaces, or rapid movement may create discomfort.

A child may turn away, close their eyes, or seek a quieter visual environment.



Touch

Clothing tags, certain fabrics, hair brushing, unexpected physical contact, or particular food textures may be difficult to tolerate.

The child may resist certain clothing, move away from touch, or avoid activities involving uncomfortable textures.



Taste and smell

Strong smells, unfamiliar flavours, or particular food textures may be overwhelming.

A child may prefer a limited range of familiar foods or avoid environments with strong odours.

These responses should not automatically be interpreted as defiance or unwillingness to cooperate.

The child may be attempting to protect themselves from an experience they find difficult to tolerate.

When a Child Seeks Sensory Input

Some children appear to notice certain sensory information less readily or actively seek particular sensory experiences.

This may be described as hyposensitivity or sensory seeking, although the two are not necessarily the same.

For example, a child may enjoy spinning, jumping, rocking, or running repeatedly. Another may seek particular textures, press against objects, or enjoy strong movement sensations.

Some children may be drawn to certain sounds, lights, or visual patterns.

These activities can serve different purposes. They may be enjoyable, help the child regulate their level of alertness, or provide sensory feedback that they find satisfying.

It is important not to assume that every repetitive movement indicates distress or that every sensory-seeking behaviour needs to be interrupted.

Instead, observe when the behaviour occurs, what the child appears to gain from it, and whether it interferes with their safety or participation.

Where an activity is safe and helps the child feel comfortable, allowing space for it may support their ability to engage with others.

How Sensory Experiences Influence Behaviour

Sensory experiences can influence a child's attention, emotional regulation, communication, sleep, eating, and participation in everyday activities.

Consider a child who becomes distressed whenever they enter a busy classroom.

The behaviour may be interpreted as resistance to attending school. However, the child may be responding to the combined effects of noise, lighting, movement, unfamiliar people, and expectations placed upon them.

Another child may repeatedly leave a group activity because sitting still in a noisy environment is uncomfortable.

A child who becomes upset during dressing may be responding to the texture of clothing rather than refusing to cooperate.

For children with limited spoken communication, these experiences may be particularly difficult to explain.

Their behaviour may be one of the few ways they can indicate that something is uncomfortable or that they need a change.

However, sensory differences are not the only possible explanation for distress or changes in behaviour.

Pain, illness, fatigue, anxiety, communication difficulties, and other unmet needs must also be considered.

Behaviour gives us information, but understanding its meaning requires us to look at the individual child and the circumstances surrounding it.

How Adults Can Help

Supporting a child's sensory needs begins with observation, understanding, and a willingness to adapt.

Observe patterns and possible triggers

Notice when the child appears comfortable, when distress occurs, and what may have changed in the environment.

Consider sounds, lighting, movement, touch, social demands, and the child's physical comfort.

Look for patterns over time rather than drawing conclusions from a single incident.

Adapt the environment

Offer quieter spaces, softer lighting, comfortable clothing, or opportunities to move when these are helpful to the child.

Reduce unnecessary sensory demands whenever possible.

A child should not have to repeatedly tolerate an overwhelming environment simply to demonstrate that they can participate.

Prepare for unfamiliar experiences

Use photographs, visual schedules, familiar objects, or other accessible communication methods to help the child understand what is going to happen.

When possible, introduce unfamiliar places or activities gradually and provide opportunities for breaks.

Respect the child's ways of regulating themselves

Some children benefit from hearing protection, movement breaks, familiar sensory objects, or access to a quiet space.

Allow safe, helpful self-regulation strategies rather than automatically discouraging them.

Physical contact, including hugs or deep pressure, should be guided by the child's preferences and consent, not imposed as a calming technique.

Help the child communicate their needs

Introduce accessible ways to express messages such as "too loud," "stop," "break," "help," or "I want to leave."

These may include gestures, pictures, written words, or a communication device.

Responding consistently to these messages can help the child influence their environment and communicate discomfort before it becomes overwhelming.

Creating Better Opportunities for Learning

A child's ability to participate in learning is influenced by how comfortable and accessible the learning environment is for them.

A child who is overwhelmed by noise may have difficulty attending to an activity, even when they understand what is being asked.

A child who needs movement may engage more successfully when allowed to stand, move, or take breaks rather than being expected to remain seated throughout a session.

A child who avoids certain textures may be more willing to explore an activity when alternative materials are available.

These adaptations are not about removing every challenge or avoiding all unfamiliar experiences.

They are about creating conditions in which the child can feel sufficiently comfortable to explore, communicate, and participate.

When sensory needs are considered alongside the child's interests, communication abilities, and individual learning profile, we can make more informed decisions about where and how to begin.

Final Thoughts

Sensory sensitivities are an important part of how many autistic children experience the world.

What appears to be challenging behaviour may sometimes reflect discomfort, sensory overload, an attempt to regulate, or a need the child cannot easily communicate.

Rather than focusing only on stopping the behaviour, we need to understand what may be contributing to it.

Observe the child. Consider their sensory experiences. Listen to the ways they communicate discomfort and enjoyment. Adapt the environment and your expectations when needed.

When we understand how a child experiences the world, we are better able to create opportunities for connection, communication, and learning.