

Sensory Sensitivities and Behaviours

Everyone's brain feels the world a little differently, even when we are using the same set of senses for observation. For most kids with autism, sounds can seem super loud, lights can feel too bright, or clothes can feel scratchy, compared to their neurotypical peers. This makes them feel overwhelmed and scared several times daily. Many learn to jump frequently, spin, run, keep pacing and overall become hyperactive for self regulation.

They're not being bad or weird — their senses just work in a different way. Giving them space, being kind, or letting them use headphones or sensory toys can help them feel safe and happy, so they can learn in their own way and interact better.

Sensory Sensitivities:

All of us take in information through our senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, and also balance (vestibular) and body awareness (proprioception).

For many autistic children, the way their brains process these signals is **different**. Signals can feel **too strong (over-sensitive)** or **too weak (under-sensitive)** compared to what most people feel.

Over-sensitivity (Hypersensitivity) examples:

- **Sound:** A normal classroom bell may feel like a fire alarm.
- **Light:** Fluorescent lights can look painfully bright or flicker.
- **Touch:** Clothing tags or light touches may feel scratchy or even painful.
- **Smell/taste:** Strong smells or certain food textures may be unbearable.

This can lead to covering ears, avoiding eye contact, or refusing certain clothes or foods—not “bad behaviour,” but self-protection.

Under-sensitivity (Hyposensitivity) examples:

Some children barely register sensory input and seek **more** of it:

- Rocking, spinning, or jumping to feel movement.
- Touching everything or putting non-food items in the mouth.
- Turning up music or enjoying deep pressure hugs.

This isn't mischief—it's the child trying to get enough sensory feedback to feel comfortable.

Impact on daily life:

Sensory differences can affect learning, attention, social interactions, eating, and sleep. What looks like “meltdowns” or “withdrawal” is often the child’s nervous system being overwhelmed or under-stimulated.

How the Adults can Help:

- **Observe triggers** and patterns.
- **Offer accommodations:** quieter spaces, dimmer lights, soft clothing, or fidget toys.
- **Prepare** the child for changes or noisy events.
- **Respect self-regulation** strategies like wearing headphones or taking sensory breaks.

Key Takeaway:

Sensory sensitivities are not “bad behaviour” but **neurological differences**. With understanding and support, an autistic child can feel safer, calmer, and more able to learn and interact.