

Have You Tried?

Responses to sensory input can vary from child to child and from day to day for each individual student. When inappropriate behaviours occur, it is often a response to discomfort, fear or anxiety created by sensory overload or sensory input which the student is not able to handle.

Here are some sensory strategies to try (where possible, the applicable sensory system is indicated):

1. Reduce Stimulation (calming)

Tactile

- Place a tactilely sensitive child at the edges of the group or row.

Visual

- Reduce visual stimulation in the student's working environment (e.g. walls, desk). Avoid locations by windows, doors or walkways.
- Use natural light. Try activities in less light (e.g. snack, reading a story).
- Provide a study corner with limited visual distractions.

Auditory

- Reduce auditory stimulation in the student's environment.
- Earphones or earplugs can be used to limit noise distractions.
- Play slow, rhythmic, classical music in the background for quiet activities.
- Rugs or carpeted areas decrease noise; use Hush-Ups on chairs.

Olfactory

- Be aware of scents (e.g. perfumes, cleaners or food).

2. Routine (calming)

- A consistent/structured routine is comforting and may reduce anxiety.
- Consistent expectations and consequences for unacceptable behaviour will reduce fear/anxiety.
- Students need to be able to anticipate the day's activities, especially if there are changes to the routine.
- A visual schedule is helpful. Pictures and symbols can provide information to help with transitions (place on desk, blackboard, wall or in a small book).
- Consistently give a prior verbal reminder before changing activities.
- For changes in the routine, let students know in advance. Remind them close to the time of the event (e.g. fire drills, assemblies).

. Modify Stimulation

- Determine if the student is a visual learner, auditory learner, a kinesthetic learner, etc. Try to limit input to other sensory channels. Overload can deter learning.

Tactile

- When physically assisting or touching a student, always approach from the front so they can anticipate the sensory input.

Vestibular

- Provide a cozy corner with pillows and low light where the student can read or retreat when over-stimulated.
- Allow a variety of working positions (e.g. standing at a bookcase, kneeling at a table or lying on the floor).

Proprioceptive

- Create personal space by using cookie sheets, trays, laminated construction paper, placemats or electrical tape.

Proprioceptive and Visual

- Provide visual cues to define the physical space (e.g. using a carpet square for circle time or use of a movement cushion for circle time).

4. Provide Opportunities for Sensory Input

Tactile

- Provide children with sensory experiences such as a sensory table or bins, texture box or Play-Doh.
- Include dramatic play clothes, shoes and bags of varying textures (e.g. silky, soft, furry, stiff).
- Provide activities such as finding objects (e.g. puzzle pieces, counting beans) in a rice or bean tray or Play-Doh.
- Putting on lotion.

5. Provide Movement Opportunities

Vestibular

- Schedule activities so that periods of sitting are alternated with periods of movement (e.g. going for a drink, going to the bathroom, handing out papers, taking a note to the office).
- For some students, fidgeting promotes attending to activities/instruction including doodling, rocking in a chair, holding a toy or sitting on a ball.
- Provide opportunities for movement during transition times (e.g. hop or crawl).
- Give the student an opportunity to write on the board before beginning written work.
- A rocking chair can be used for reading time.
- Provide a fidget box with small items (e.g. squishy ball, putty, pipe cleaner) to be used when attention to a speaker is needed.
- Use different seating options to provide some movement while attending to seat work (e.g. gym ball, T-stool, air cushion on chair).
- Placement of supplies in a box on the floor or across the room will build in extra movement.

Proprioceptive and Vestibular

- Try to ensure that movement activities are used to the maximum – recess should be spent running hard, playing, using playground equipment or playing sports (e.g. dribbling a basketball).
- Do some wake-up activities before seatwork such as finger plays, calisthenics, running in place, jumping, stretching, push-ups (on chair or desk) or moving furniture (e.g. putting down chairs from desks).

6. Heavy Work (calming)

Vestibular

- Staple paper onto bulletin boards (with supervision).
- Fill up a big toy truck with heavy blocks; push with both hands to knock things down.

Proprioceptive

- Heavy work or proprioceptive activities will often help a student focus. Many examples to try are included here.
- Being the filling of a mat or pillow “sandwich”.
- Lifting weights.
- Carrying books or lunch baskets or wearing a heavy backpack during transition times.
- Push-ups on the floor, desk or chair.
- Jumping (e.g. with a rope or on a mini trampoline).
- Writing in clay trays.

- Push-pull activities such as “rowing” with a partner.
- Place chairs on desks at the end of the day or take down at the beginning of the day.
- Open doors for people.
- Sharpen pencils with a manual sharpener.

Proprioceptive and Tactile

- Use firm touch (strong, short pushes on the shoulders) rather than light touch.

Proprioceptive and Vestibular

- Erase chalkboard or dry erase board.
- Help with recycling or garbage.
- Shred paper (with supervision).
- Fill bins with books and carry to the library or other classrooms.
- Complete classroom or school errands (e.g. lifting or carrying).

7. Oral-Motor Activities (sour, crunchy – alerting; sweet, soft – calming)

- Many times, keeping the mouth busy will enhance attention and the learning process.

Proprioceptive

- Teach and encourage deep breathing for calming and attention.
- Sucking through a water bottle with a straw (thick straw).
- Gum chewing at appropriate times.
- Chew on Thera-tubing.
- Use whistles and blow toys (there are some that do not produce sound).

Proprioceptive and Gustatory

- Sucking on hard candy – remember some flavours are more appealing and alerting than others (depends on the student).
- Eating a crunchy snack such as crackers or carrot sticks.

*Sensory Strategies such as weighted vests or blankets, brushing programs, swinging and spinning could be potentially harmful and should not be tried without Occupational Therapy assessment and consultation.