



At St. Anne's we love, learn and grow together as part of God's family. We foster a growth mindset so our pupils have bold aspirations to live life in all its fullness. We let our light shine brightly - continually asking God to show us how best to shine so we can be beacons of His life.

# St Anne's CE Primary SEND Newsletter

## December issue – sensory processing

Welcome to this month's issue of our SEND newsletter, where we shine a spotlight on a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of child development: **sensory processing**.

The holiday period is loaded with additional sensory information, and you may go on extra visits to see family and friends. While this makes Christmas special for many, for children with sensory processing challenges, this time of year can be more difficult due to new lights, sounds, smells, and changes in their daily routine. As we approach the festive period, find out our top tips on how to support your child, keeping them safe and comfortable during the holiday season.



## Contents

1. **Types of Sensory Processing Difficulties** - Delve into common challenges such as sensory over-responsivity and under-responsivity, and get to know the eight key sensory systems.
2. **Sensory-Friendly Strategies in the Classroom** - Practical advice and tools teachers follow to create a sensory-friendly classroom, including the benefits of sensory breaks.
3. **Sensory Activities for Home and School** - A curated list of easy-to-implement sensory activities that parents and teachers can do with children, focusing on things that can be done at home.

4. **Resources and Recommendations** - Discover a range of books, apps, and online resources for further information
5. **Top tips for Christmas**- find out how you can support your child's sensory needs during the holiday season
6. **A Final Note: Thank You for Reading** - I express my gratitude and invite you to share topics you'd like covered in future newsletters or any resources you'd like to contribute.

## What exactly is sensory processing?

Simply put, it's the way our nervous system receives messages from our senses and turns them into appropriate motor and behavioural responses. Whether you are biting into an apple, listening to a teacher, or hugging a loved one, sensory processing helps you understand and respond to your environment.

For most children, sensory processing develops naturally and without much thought. However, for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), this isn't always the case. Some may experience oversensitivity to stimuli, leading to feelings of overwhelm and even meltdowns. Others may be undersensitive and seek out additional sensory experiences, which can result in issues like distractibility or impulsiveness.

So why is understanding sensory processing so important for children with SEND?

Firstly, it directly impacts learning and engagement in the classroom. Imagine trying to focus on a maths problem while the flickering lights or the hum of the air conditioner distracts you relentlessly. Sensory issues can be just as disruptive to a child's education as more commonly recognised needs like dyslexia or ADHD.

Secondly, managing sensory needs can lead to profound improvements in a child's well-being. By recognising and addressing these needs, we can create learning environments where children are better able to concentrate, interact positively with their peers and teachers, and generally feel more at ease. In



essence, a sensory-friendly approach not only supports academic achievement but also fosters emotional well-being and social development.

In this issue, we'll delve deeper into what sensory processing is, its different forms, and how we can create more inclusive, sensory-friendly environments at home and school. So let's embark on this sensory journey together, armed with understanding and compassion for every child's unique needs

## Types of Sensory Processing Difficulties

Now that we have a foundational understanding of what sensory processing is, it's time to discuss some of the specific challenges children with SEND may face. Two common sensory difficulties are over-responsivity and under-responsivity.

### Over-Responsivity

Children who are over-responsive are often sensitive to certain types of sensory input. This could manifest as a child who covers their ears when a fire alarm goes off or becomes visibly distressed by the texture of certain foods. These children may go to great lengths to avoid sensory stimuli that they find overwhelming, making everyday activities a struggle.

### Under-Responsivity

On the opposite end, some children are under-responsive to sensory stimuli. They might not feel pain as intensely, or they may have difficulty noticing when their name is being called. These children often seek out additional sensory experiences—perhaps spinning or jumping—to feel more alert.

Both over-responsivity and under-responsivity can pose challenges in a typical classroom setting. Whether it's avoiding group activities due to noise sensitivity or having difficulty sitting still, these sensory differences can have a significant impact on a child's ability to fully participate in learning.

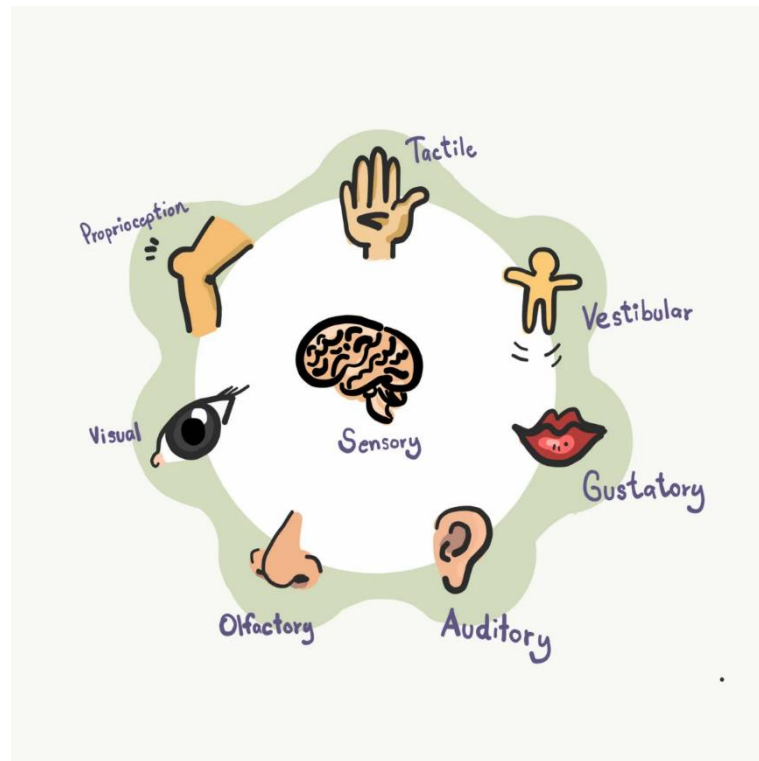
## The Eight Sensory Systems

Understanding sensory processing isn't just about touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing. In fact, there are eight sensory systems to consider:

1. Visual (Sight): Impacts how children respond to light, colour, and movement.
2. Auditory (Sound): Concerns sensitivity or under-responsivity to noise, voice tones, or specific sounds.
3. Tactile (Touch): Addresses reactions to different textures, temperatures, or sensations on the skin.
4. Olfactory (Smell): Refers to responses to different odours, whether they find them pleasing or distressing.
5. Gustatory (Taste): Deals with responses to different tastes like sweet, sour, salty, and bitter.

6. Vestibular (Balance and Motion): Relates to our sense of body position and movement, impacting balance and spatial orientation.
7. Proprioceptive (Body Awareness): Helps us understand where our body is in space, affecting coordination and posture.
8. Interoception (Internal Body Awareness): An internal body awareness sense that controls awareness of temperature, hunger, thirst, and toileting needs.

Each of these sensory systems interacts in complex ways to form our experience of the world. For children with SEND, challenges in one or more of these areas can manifest in unique and diverse ways, which is why a personalised approach is often necessary.



## Sensory-Friendly Strategies in the Classroom

Creating a sensory-friendly classroom can make a significant difference in the learning experiences of children with Sensory Processing Disorders (SPD) or other sensory sensitivities. Below is a list of practical strategies that we employ in school to craft an inclusive and effective learning environment.

### Sensory Tools

1. Noise-Cancelling Headphones: These help mitigate auditory distractions, especially for children who are sensitive to noise. These are accessible to any child, at any given time.
2. Fidget Toys: Small, handheld items like stress balls or fidget spinners provide tactile stimulation, aiding focus and concentration.



3. Visual Timers: These can help children who struggle with transitions or have difficulty gauging the passage of time.
4. Flexible Seating Options: We offer a variety of seating options, like wobble cushions, which can help meet different proprioceptive needs.

### **Sensory Breaks or brain breaks**

Sensory breaks are short breaks from the classroom environment that allow children to self-regulate by engaging in activities that help them focus, calm down, or recharge. Here are some ways they are incorporated:

1. Quiet Corner: A small area in the classroom is designated where children can go to escape overwhelming sensory input - currently this is combined with the reading corner in a classroom.
2. Guided Movement: Short, guided exercises offer a much-needed break. Think 'Simon Says' but with a sensory twist, like hopping on one foot or spinning in a circle.
3. Deep Pressure Activities: Activities like wall-push ups or carrying a weighted backpack or blanket can provide deep pressure, which many find calming.
4. Breathing Exercises: Simple deep-breathing exercises are a quick way to reset the nervous system.
5. Outdoor Time: Brief outdoor breaks also offer a wide range of sensory experiences that are both calming and re-energising.



### **Benefits of Sensory Breaks**

1. Improved Concentration: A well-timed sensory break can help a child refocus, making learning more effective.
2. Better Social Interaction: Sensory breaks can reduce stress and anxiety levels, making social interactions more pleasant and constructive.
3. Enhanced Well-Being: By providing opportunities for self-regulation, sensory breaks can significantly improve a child's overall well-being.
4. Increased Tolerance to Sensory Stimuli: Over time, regular sensory breaks can help children build a greater tolerance to sensory stimuli that they initially found overwhelming.

Incorporating these strategies and sensory breaks results in an inclusive classroom where all pupils have the opportunity to learn in a way that suits them best.

## Sensory Activities for Home: A Practical Guide for Parents/carers

Sensory activities are an excellent way to explore and address the sensory needs of children. Here are some simple yet engaging activities that can be easily incorporated into your daily routine.

### Sensory Bins

1. **Rice and Beans:** Fill a large container with rice and beans. Add spoons, cups, and small toys for scooping and pouring. This activity stimulates the tactile and proprioceptive senses.
2. **Water Beads:** Non-toxic water beads provide a unique texture for exploration. Add some LED lights for visual stimulation.
3. **Sand Box:** Use a tray filled with sand and various small objects like shells or stones. Children can dig and discover, stimulating their tactile sense.



### Textural Crafts

1. **Pasta Art:** Use different types of pasta to create a tactile masterpiece. Glue them onto cardboard in patterns or shapes.
2. **Sensory Bags:** Fill zip-lock bags with materials like gel, buttons, or beads and then seal them. These can be squished and manipulated for tactile and visual stimulation.
3. **Playdough Creations:** Homemade playdough provides a multi-sensory experience. You can add spices like cinnamon for scent, or food colouring for visual stimulation.



### Outdoor Exploration

1. **Nature Scavenger Hunt:** Prepare a list of natural items for children to find. This engages multiple senses as they look, touch, and smell their surroundings.
2. **Water Play:** Filling and emptying containers, or simply splashing about, provides both tactile and proprioceptive input.
3. **Leaf Rubbing:** Collect leaves of different shapes and textures. Place them under a paper and rub with crayons to reveal the leaf's outline and veins.



### Sound and Music

1. **Homemade Shakers:** Fill empty bottles with rice, beads, or buttons. Children can shake them and explore auditory senses.
2. **Musical Stomp:** Create a 'musical walkway' with different textured surfaces. Each step can make a different sound.
3. **Listening Walk:** Go on a quiet walk and identify different sounds you hear. This sharpens auditory discrimination skills.

## Taste and Smell

1. Flavour Tasting: Use cotton buds to taste small amounts of various foods like honey, lemon, or salt. This stimulates the gustatory sense.
2. Scent Jars: Fill jars with cotton balls that have been soaked in different scents like vanilla, peppermint, or lavender. Children can smell and identify each one.

## Take-Home Message for Parents/carers

Many of these activities are easy to set up and can be done with items you likely already have at home. The benefits are immense—from improved sensory regulation and better focus to enhanced learning and overall well-being. So why not make sensory activities a regular part of your child's day?



## Resources and Recommendations: Enhance Your Understanding of Sensory Processing

Whether you're just beginning to learn about sensory processing difficulties or looking to deepen your understanding, there are a plethora of resources available. Here's a curated list for you:

### Books

1. "The Out-of-Sync Child" by Carol Stock Kranowitz: An excellent book for understanding sensory challenges, recommended by many occupational therapists.
2. "Sensational Kids" by Lucy Jane Miller: This book provides valuable insights into sensory processing disorder and offers practical solutions.
3. "Raising a Sensory Smart Child" by Lindsey Biel and Nancy Peske: A comprehensive guide that helps parents understand how to advocate for their children.
4. "Building Bridges through Sensory Integration" by Paula Aquilla, Ellen Yack, and Shirley Sutton: Focused on practical interventions for children with autism and other pervasive developmental disorders.

### Apps

1. Otsimo Special Education: Offers various sensory games designed for children with special needs.
2. Sensory CineVox: An app that uses voice modulation to help children explore their vocal range and control.
3. Breathing Bubbles: This app focuses on emotional regulation and includes exercises that engage the senses.

## Online Resources

1. [The STAR Institute for Sensory Processing Disorder](#): Provides a wealth of articles, webinars, and checklists.
2. [Understood.org](#): Features articles and expert advice on sensory issues and learning challenges.
3. [National Autistic Society](#): Offers resources and articles on sensory differences.

We hope these resources prove to be a valuable starting point for you. Whether you're a parent, teacher, or caregiver, understanding sensory processing is a journey that offers endless opportunities for growth and enrichment for both you and the children you care for.

If you are concerned about your child's sensory needs, please contact your child's class teacher in the first instance. They will be able to share Trafford's sensory checklist with you, developed by an occupational therapist to determine which sensory system your child needs support with. More information can be found here: <https://traffordlco.org/app/uploads/2021/08/Sensory-Pre-referral-Graded-Approach-003-1.pdf>

## Top tips for Christmas:



### Plan well in advance

The Christmas period can often be very different from your child's day-to-day routine. There are lots of things to do and often, unfortunately, there can be added stress associated with fitting everything in. Consider your child's thresholds and what strategies help them regulate to help plan your schedule. Allow yourself to put your child's needs first when making commitments and try to find balance between what you want to achieve and what you feel they, and you, will manage comfortably. If you plan to visit Santa's grotto, some venues allow you to book in advance and have 'autism friendly' times. This will help children with sensory issues, even if they don't have autism, as the focus is on reducing sensory overload.

### **Consider the length, size and venue of the event**

It is useful to think about the length of time of the event you plan to attend, consider your child's triggers and what type of events they have successfully attended in the past. How long were they able to attend the event; how many people attended; and what was the environment was like? Does your child find it easier to be in familiar spaces? Who can help them feel more comfortable? This will help you find a balance that will support your child to successfully attend holiday events.

### **Wear ear defenders**

If it isn't possible to avoid the loud noises, encouraging your child to wear ear defenders or earplugs. This can help to block out noise and reduce anxiety during busy Christmas events. Alternatively, ask your child if they would like to wear headphones to listen to their favourite music. This will help distract them from noises and keep them calm.

### **Use sensory strategies for regulation**

It is useful to have something on hand as a distraction if your child becomes distressed. This may be snacks such as hot chocolate, their favourite toy, or a handheld gaming device. Some parents find having a portable 'calm' or 'sensory' bag which they can take with them helpful. This should include the things that help your child to become calm and regulated, such as reading a book, lollypop, tight hugs, or a massage or bath that they can engage in before attending an festive event. Heavy work (carrying something heavy) can also help your child become calm and regulated.

### **Presents**

Gifts can be an exciting part of Christmas, but they can also be stressful for some children. If your child has tactile sensitivities, or a strong preference for certain types of fabrics, it can be helpful to let other gift-givers know in advance. Making a 'wish list' can be useful. Toys that make noise can also be a challenge for some children, so, again it's advised to make gift givers aware of this. Some children find the excitement of a surprise very overwhelming, therefore it can be beneficial for them to open presents over a longer period or to let them know in advance that their gifts are coming on Christmas day.



### **Exploring new food textures**

It's common for children with sensory processing challenges to have difficulty with new and unfamiliar foods. Try including Christmas food into meals during the lead up to the holidays so that your child becomes familiar with food items often part of a Christmas dinner. It is suggested that you think ahead and try to include foods you know your child will eat on the menu. This can help to reduce stress for everyone.

## Holiday crafts

A good way to prepare children for Christmas is by engaging in activities before the event, such as making pictures of Christmas scenes or characters. This will support their creative ability along with fine motor and perceptual skills. You can also add colourful and textured sensory elements to your holiday crafts, such as wool, sand or bubble wrap. Making salt dough Christmas ornaments will encourage the development of their fine motor skills too.



## A Final Note: Thank You for Reading

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this month's SEND newsletter, focused on "Understanding Sensory Needs." I hope you've found it informative and helpful.

If there's a specific topic you'd like me to cover in a future newsletter, I'd be delighted to hear from you. Similarly, if you've experienced some positive wins or have come across resources you find valuable and would like to share, your input would be most welcome. Together, we can continue to enrich our community with shared experiences and useful information.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch with your suggestions or questions.

Wishing you all a wonderful month ahead and a happy Christmas,

Mrs McLoughlin