

SENSORY PROCESSING- SUGGESTIONS, STRATEGIES AND IDEAS FOR THE STRANGE TIMES WE ARE IN

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General Principles: Just to remind you, Sensory Processing is: -

Making sense of the world around us and the sensations within us and how we respond to this.

Even though many children are loving being at home, it is DIFFERENT, and there may be raised emotions. There may over excitement, anxiety, a sense of being overwhelmed. You know your child best.

*This goes for parents too!

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You may need to think about reducing expectations. If you see rising emotions, STOP! Try something calming that will soothe your child. You could try :- reducing overstimulation e.g. lights off, noise levels down; snuggling up in an armchair; wrapping up in a blanket, slow rocking maybe to soothing music; doing some gentle exercising e.g. wall press ups, yoga (there is a whole section on calming and coping strategies further on).

*This could help parents too!

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Give your child time to process, understand and respond. This can be much longer than you think, especially during these strange times. Keep your words straight forward, reducing distracting chat can help, make every word matter! Think about when it's all too much, try not to reduce movement or activity by asking the child to go to their room. This may be like trying to put a lid on a volcano! Suggest a run around the garden or check out the section on coping/calming section. Responding to a child's sensory needs has to be unconditional. You know your child best and sometimes have to make the decision if it's a behaviour or sensory processing difficulties.

*This is not easy!

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Try and make sure you keep to your usual routine for getting up and bedtimes. This gives predictability and familiar structure to the day. Ensure you have a written or visual schedule. It may be as simple as a morning activity and an afternoon activity. Something to aim for, something to achieve and be proud of achieving, something that motivates your child to engage in.

It can be high tech, like on your smart phone or tablet or just on the back of a used envelope. In words, pictures, cartoons or photos. There are many Social stories available about Covid 19 available on the internet. Find one that suits your child's level of understanding.

In your schedule, use 'first... next' or 'now...next' to help prepare and organise the activities.

If you need to break a task down further (called task analysis) think about what steps make up each task.

*At least we have got time to do this!

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Involve your child as much as you can. This not only reduces the time they are left to their own devices (literally sometimes!!). When organising the daily activities, you list some tasks that need doing, they can join in how to do them and which order (where possible). It also helps with social communication

*This can be more fun when you find yourselves working as a team!

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Remember to keep in touch with those important to you and your children, using Social Media but timetable this in and plan with those others involved to ensure successful connections! Try and list 'what shall I tell granny?' before starting, giving a sense of anticipation and social togetherness. You can encourage your child to role play a character

*No man is an island!

DAILY ACTIVITIES

- Shower/bath time

Try and increase the variety of sensory experiences: textures such as loofahs, scrunchies; smells; lighting (try lights off but have a candle if safe to do so); music/songs either recorded or sing along, make up your own!

*Have a go at this for parents too!

- Meal preparation/baking. This, of course depends on level, age and safety. Engagement with this increases a feeling of being involved and in control and can help reduce worries over food sensitivities.

For older children treat as a Food Tech lesson!

For other children, try letting them mix the ingredients, increasing opportunity for gross and fine motor skills as well as sensory exploration.

If you are peeling potatoes, cut one in half and use for potato printing.

It can help with modelling and copying what parents are doing, learning new skills and feeling a part of the family. For example, if there is washing up to do, why not allow your child a bowl with washing up bubbles in and plastic or toy cups/plates.

Using dough or pastry, from a baking session to play with, make shapes, use cutters. Put items in for the child to pick out. Mashing uses lots of regulating heavy work, use a plastic masher rather than a metal one if safety is an issue.

Improve memory skills by asking your child to find an item for your recipe. E.g. 'bring me an onion', perhaps increase then to 'bring me an onion and a tin of tomatoes'

*All good practice for when we come out of lockdown!

- Shopping

For older children develop budgeting skills online, e.g. link with recipes, 'what will I need to buy..?' 'how much will it cost?'

Help make the list before you shop, link with recipes, look up recipes and pictures or pretend foods. Give your child a virtual budget to make a recipe of their choice.

Help carry heavy bags when they are delivered (within a safe level)

*All this is building skills for the future!

- Mealtimes

Increase intensity, fun and exploration. Try drinking through a straw. Try shakes or smoothies which give extra intensity. Give a wider variety of textures/colours/smells. If sitting still is an issue, try a small weighted lap blanket on a child's lap or a folded blanket. Try exploring finger foods.

Remember dry textures will be less threatening to our sensory systems than wet, so start with dry textures.

*have fun with food, while you have time!

- Chores

Firstly, remember hoovers, washing machines and products can be overwhelming!

If this is not an issue, hoovers can give intense vibration which can be alerting or calming. Your child could use a pretend Hoover to copy you and feel apart of the activity.

Use carrying or loading laundry for a heavy activity (within safe limits).

Wiping tables (ensure nothing is on it that can get swiped off!) or floor. This involves lots of gross motor skills, crossing midline, shoulder strength.

*Many hands make light work!

- In the garden

Remember the activities you may already have e.g. swings, climbing frames but timetable them in to give a sense of anticipation and control. Try making an obstacle course or assault course. Using the principles of Sensory Circuits can be helpful. This is based on emotional self-regulation. Start the course with 'alerting/focussing activities such as 2 of: 10 star jumps(depends on the child's ability), 10 stair step ups, lie on your side arms stretched out over your head and 'log roll' completely over, trying to stay in a straight line crawl on all fours back to where you started and repeat once more.

Next comes the 'organising' section. Try 2 of through designated items into a hoop or bucket, try while in kneeling or on one leg, adapt by linking colours e.g. red items into the red bucket. Have a game of skittles.

Finish with calming, wriggle under a duvet or through a tunnel. Try some wall press ups. First stand straight about arm length from a wall. Hold arms out straight, hands flat on the wall, fingers pointing up, back straight, feet flat on the floor Then, bend elbows so you are doing a 'press up' against the wall. Start with 5 and increase as you improve. Also try gentle rocking in a rocking chair or 'row, row, row the boat 'on the floor, slowly and rhythmically.

Other activities: Remember playing wheelbarrows at school sports day games? You could include making a 'tent' or suchlike by laying a sheet/windbreak over e.g. a washing line and tying it to be tent shape. You could use this tent for other games, including you needing to 'knock' to come in. This brings back control to your child and feels snuggly and safe.

Digging, planting and 'landscaping' are also all intense sensory activities.

*The garden may end up much more fun to be in!

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Use of a Sensory Diet

All the activities we have listed above are part of a daily Sensory Diet. The brain and nervous system need nutrition just as much as our stomachs!!

The principle of a Sensory Diet is to regulate and nurture our emotional states through our sensory systems.

By increasing these positive and timetabled opportunities through out the day we can help our children to self- regulate. Experience has shown that we need these opportunities, at the least every 2 hours. Natural breaks usually occur in many daily tasks so using these can help activities to flow.

Heavy work such as described in the sections above are very effective parts of a sensory diet, so if you are limited, prioritise these activities. By making these activities into a game helps motivate. For example, action songs for younger children such as Bear Hunt and Hokey Cokey. Treasure hunts or scavenger hunts can appeal to older children. You can use any academic or fun topic for these e.g. counting identified items; looking for bugs, using more complex clues for older children.

*Remember to try this as parents, especially when we begin to feel most frazzled or worn out!

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Coping skills

Allow your child to express their feelings e.g. using creative arts such as colouring, painting, plasticine, play-doh or clay

Use writing, poetry

Use play e.g. what animal do you feel like now?

Music, either to listen to or make (use whatever's available, whether it's a musical instrument or not!)

Use an item like a squishy ball to relate to emotions, e.g. gentle tossing when calm, squeeze and bounce when more agitated.

Use yoga, meditation or physical exercises. Find an appropriate level on the internet and do it with your child.

*Remember to be kind to yourselves.

Suggested resources:

- Spdstar.org
- Affirm.fpg.unc.edu

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