Sensory Processing Quick Tips

Why Sensory Processing Matters

Some children experience the world more intensely. Their nervous systems work hard to make sense of everything happening around them, and everyday routines can feel louder, faster or more demanding as a result. Small, thoughtful changes can make those moments feel calmer and more predictable.

The nervous system is always learning. This is neuroplasticity: the brain can change and strengthen its pathways through repeated experience. When children regularly have sensory-friendly moments, their regulation pathways can become more reliable over time.

Sensory needs also shift from day to day. Tiredness, hunger, stress, illness, busy environments and transitions can all make sensations feel bigger or smaller. This is a normal part of being human.

Self-regulation doesn't mean being calm, available or compliant. It means being connected: noticing the alignment between body, mind and emotion. The goal isn't getting into a "green zone". The goal is participation, being connected enough to themselves and the moment to take part.

1. What Is Sensory Processing?

Sensory processing is how the nervous system receives, organises and responds to sensory information. When this feels tricky, children may become overwhelmed, under-responsive, or seek extra input to stay connected.

In the UK, "sensory processing disorder" is not a recognised diagnostic term. Instead, occupational therapists describe sensory processing differences or sensory modulation difficulties. These patterns can appear across many neurodevelopmental profiles and are not currently recognised as a standalone diagnosis. Your child's sensory experiences are still real and worth supporting.

The focus isn't on feeling "just right". It's on participation. Sensory processing affects how children join in, stay involved and take part in everyday routines. When the sensory world feels manageable enough, children can participate in what's happening around them, even if their emotions are big or their body feels busy.

2. The Sensory Systems

- Touch
- Vision
- Hearing
- Smell
- Taste
- Movement (vestibular)
- Body awareness (proprioception)
- Interoception (internal body signals)

For many children, movement and body awareness input are especially regulating.

3. Early Signs to Notice

- Overwhelmed by noise, crowds or busy spaces
- Avoids touch, messy play or certain clothing textures
- Constant movement or seeking pressure
- Difficulty sitting still or sustaining attention
- Strong reactions to unexpected touch or sound
- Tiredness after sensory-heavy environments

These signs relate to how the brain modulates sensory input. This may look like too much, too little, or seeking more to feel regulated.

What matters most is noticing patterns over time, not single moments. All children have days when they are tired, hungry, stressed or overwhelmed. A one-off reaction on its own isn't a sign of a sensory processing difficulty, and these signs are not a checklist for diagnosis. It's the repeated, predictable patterns across different routines that help you understand how your child's nervous system is responding.

4. Regulation Strategies: Lower, Add, Grow

Try to view the world through a sensory lens. When you notice a behaviour, pause and consider which sensory experiences might be influencing it: what the child is seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting or sensing in their body.

If a child is finding an activity or routine overwhelming because of sensory needs (for example, eating a new food or accepting certain clothing), you can use the **Lower, Add, Grow** approach to guide support in a calm, structured way.

Lower: Reduce Sensory Load

Lowering means softening the sensory world around your child. It is not about changing the child. It is about reducing what feels overwhelming right now.

- Lower bright or harsh lighting
- Reduce noise such as hand dryers, echoey rooms or busy corridors
- Minimise visual clutter
- Reduce competing sensory input
- Offer quieter, calmer spaces
- Keep language simple and predictable
- Create a calm space with soft lighting
- Use visual schedules and timers to reduce uncertainty
- Offer simple, purposeful fidget tools
- Provide flexible seating options

Try at home:

- Use a softer light for toothbrushing rather than a harsh bathroom light
- Turn off background TV during morning routines
- Clear one small area for homework instead of tidying the whole room

Lowering the environmental load helps the nervous system settle so your child can engage and feel safe.

Add: Build Sensory Support Into What Already Helps

Adding means weaving regulating sensory input into routines your child already enjoys. It is not about creating new activities. It is about making familiar moments more supportive.

- Add deep pressure before tricky routines, if your child enjoys it
- Add movement or heavy work into existing play
- Add regulating tools such as a wobble cushion, fidget, footrest or chewy snacks
- Add calming elements like soft lighting, cosy corners or predictable steps
- Add sensory input in ways that feel natural and sustainable

Try at home:

- A big squeeze before putting on school uniform (only if your child wants one, and stop if they pull away)
- A movement break between homework tasks
- A chewy snack during car journeys (check for allergies and choking risk first)

Grow: Build Awareness, Confidence and Curiosity

Grow is the final part of the process. It focuses on building interoception, the ability to notice internal body signals. This awareness is key for long-term self-regulation and meaningful participation. In Grow, children begin tuning in to what their body is telling them and become more curious about their needs.

We don't expect primary-aged children to regulate on their own. They are still developing the foundations through co-regulation, sensory awareness and noticing body signals. Adults find this hard at times too. Regulation is a lifelong practice of connection, not a behaviour target.

- Use simple language such as "your body feels busy" or "your body needs calm"
- Help children name sensations like wiggly, tight, buzzy or sleepy
- Notice and name your own body signals
- Offer choices such as quiet, a squeeze or a movement break
- Use visuals like body maps, feelings cards or sensory choice boards
- Reinforce self-advocacy by noticing when your child identifies what helps

Try at home:

- "Your body looks wiggly. What would help?"
- "I can feel my body getting tight. I'm going to take a slow breath."
- "My brain feels busy. I need a moment to pause."
- "I feel a bit wiggly too. I'm going to stretch my arms."
- "My tummy feels fluttery. I think I need to stand up and move."
- "I'm noticing my shoulders are tight. I'm going to roll them to help myself."

What Else Could It Be?

Many things can affect how a child participates in daily routines. Neurodivergent differences (such as in attention or communication), family changes, illness, tiredness or stress can all influence how a child responds to their environment. These factors can make routines feel harder even when sensory processing is not the main difficulty. Noticing patterns over time can help you understand what might be contributing.

When to Seek OT Support

If daily routines feel consistently hard, or you are unsure what your child's sensory profile is, an occupational therapist can help. If you have wider concerns about your child's health or development, speak to your GP or health visitor.

We offer sensory needs assessments that focus on understanding your child as an individual. Rather than a group course, this is dedicated, in-person time with an OT who will observe your child, listen to your concerns, and explore how their sensory processing affects everyday participation.

You will receive practical, day-to-day advice that fits your child's routines and strengths. Many families find that personalised guidance helps them feel more confident and better able to support regulation at home, at school and in the community.

Lower, Add, Grow draws on ideas commonly used in occupational therapy practice.