SEND & INCLUSION · ALL GRADES

Sensory Strategies

A practical toolkit

What is sensory processing?

Every brain takes in information from the senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, plus body awareness and balance). Most brains filter this input automatically. Some don't — they take in too much (overwhelm) or not enough (under-arousal). This isn't a moral failing or attention problem; it's a neurological difference. Sensory differences are common in autistic children, ADHD, anxiety, trauma, and just ordinary individual variation. Recognising the pattern helps you respond well.

The four common profiles

Sensory seekers Need MORE input than average. Fidget, hum, bump into things, run when others walk, touch everything. Often labelled 'hyperactive.' Their nervous system is under-aroused — they create input to feel right.	**Sensory avoiders** Need LESS input. Cover ears, hide from bright lights, refuse certain food textures, pull away from touch. Their nervous system is over-aroused — they protect themselves from overload.
Mixed Many children are seeker in some senses, avoider in others. Loves loud music but can't bear scratchy clothes. Craves climbing but avoids hugs. Common, not contradictory.	**Unpredictable** Some children's sensory needs change day-to-day or even hour-to-hour. Tired = different from rested. Hungry = different from fed. Watch and ask, don't assume.

Strategies for sensory seekers

What helps	Why
Movement breaks (every 15-20 min)	Gives the input they're craving

What helps	Why
Errands ('take this to the office')	Movement disguised as helping
Heavy work (carrying, pushing)	Calming for the nervous system
Fidget tools at the desk	Channel the seeking quietly
Standing/perching at desk	Some children focus better upright
Wobble cushion on chair	Movement without leaving the seat
Chewy items (necklace chew)	Oral seekers calm with chewing

Strategies for sensory avoiders

What helps	Why
Reduce visual clutter on walls	Less stuff to filter
Quiet zone available always	An exit when overwhelmed
Ear defenders or headphones permission	Reduce auditory overload
Predictable seating, away from doors/windows	Fewer sensory surprises
Warning before transitions	Time to prepare nervous system
Tag-free / soft uniform options	Tactile sensitivities matter
Permission to skip carpet time if needed	Carpet = lots of bodies, lots of noise

A low-cost sensory kit

You don't need a £500 sensory bin. The following can be assembled for under £30: • 2-3 fidget toys (avoid noisy ones) • A pair of ear defenders (£10 from any DIY shop) • A wobble cushion (£12) • A small weighted lap blanket (£15) • A few squishy/textured items in a small bag • A couple of chewable necklaces if oral-seeking is common Label a basket. Store on a shelf children can reach. Frame as 'tools for everyone' not 'for children with problems.'

When to ask for specialist input

Most sensory differences can be supported by good universal classroom design. Specialist OT input is helpful when: • A child's sensory needs are preventing them accessing learning despite reasonable adjustments • Self-regulation strategies aren't working over weeks/months • Sensory needs are affecting safety (the child runs, climbs, mouths objects) • The child appears to be in

distress, not just discomfort Flag with the SENDCo. An occupational therapist can do a sensory profile assessment.