SENSORY PROBLEMS

OLFACTORY/ GUSTATORY (TASTE AND SMELL)

“I always have difficulties with animals...dogs and cats smell so intensely that I cannot tolerate it, and perfume drives me insane.”
(Stehli “The sounds of a miracle”)

“I had a taste in my mouth as if I had just eaten a bunch of flowers.”
(Donna Williams als Reaktion auf ein Parfum)

Some children are sensitive to smells and can show distress at smells that other children do not notice. Some children like to smell non-food objects and people and gag at the thought of an unappealing food.

Some children can show aversive reactions to everyday odours and seems to try and avoid these by demonstrating behavioural reactions such as screaming or running away.

Most of us automatically tune out most smells other than those that are particularly pleasing or disgusting. But some individuals can't. Certain odours can be so noxious that they overwhelm a child and interfere with learning, playing and every aspect of daily life. A child who is so over sensitive to smells will be unable to shift their focus to anything other than the smells around them. On the other hand, there are children who want to smell everything from materials in the classroom to people's hair or skin.

A child who is under-sensitive to taste often craves extra flavour, preferring spicy food and seasoning. A child who is a picky eater is probably a child who avoids or seeks a particular texture; this is a tactile (touch) issue.

Taste

**Under-sensitive**
- Likes very spicy foods.
- Eats or mouths non-edible items such as stones, dirt, soil, grass, metal, faeces. This is known as pica.

**Over-sensitive**
- Finds some flavours and foods too strong and overpowering because of very sensitive taste buds. Has a restricted diet.
- Certain textures cause discomfort - may only eat smooth foods like mashed potatoes or ice-cream.

Some autistic people may limit themselves to bland foods or crave very strong-tasting food. As long as someone has some dietary variety, this isn't necessarily a problem.

Smell

**Under-sensitive**
- Some people have no sense of smell and fail to notice extreme odours (this can include their own body odour).
• Some people may lick things to get a better sense of what they are.

You could help by creating a routine around regular washing and using strong-smelling products to distract people from inappropriate strong-smelling stimuli (like faeces).

**Over-sensitive**

• Smells can be intense and overpowering. This can cause toileting problems.
• Dislikes people with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.

**Implications for learning**

• Regulating a child’s sensory hyper-reactivity to smells is very difficult in an environment such as school where there are smells from other children, different areas of the school, cooking smells from the canteen etc. all of which are out of the child’s control.

**Strategies that might help**

• Some children can be distressed by staff members that they are assigned to work with if for example, the staff member is wearing perfume/ fragrance, have coffee or food smells on their breath, have strong smelling skin and hair products etc. It may be worth exploring this with the child to find out if this is causing them some distress.

• Some children find it useful to carry a ‘handkerchief’ with a pleasant and comforting smell on it so that they can use this when they are feeling overwhelmed with offensive smells. Some children find some essential oils comforting and it is worth exploring some with your child.

• It may be beneficial to try and play games that gradually introduce smells, with the child activating or controlling the sensation.

• Include play activities with foods or other fragrant items (e.g. spices, flowers, plants) gradually;

• Pairing bothersome smell sensations with activities that involve calming and comforting sensations, such as heavy work, deep-touch pressure, or gentle rocking.

**Useful resources**

- *Raising A Sensory Smart Child* by Lindsey Biel and Nancy Peske
- *Building Bridges through Sensory Integration* by Ellen Yack, Paula Aquilla and Shirley Sutton.