

Sensory Processing



Simon and his Sensitives

Simon seems to struggle most days and can get upset by things in his environment. . Mealtimes are a struggle because he is a picky eater. Getting dressed is frustrating and takes a long time because he can't tolerate the seams on his clothes. When his baby sister cries it can make him angry. At school, he has trouble paying attention and sitting still in class. If other children get into his personal space, or accidentally touch him, he gets either angry or tearful. At bedtime, his parents are exhausted from the nightly battle of getting him to brush his teeth and wash his face. So what is happening with Simon?

What is sensory processing?

We are always taking in information from our eyes, ears, body and skin. This is called 'sensory input'. Nerves throughout our bodies take in the information, and our brains process it (tell us what it means). As you are reading this, you are processing and making sense of sensory input:



• **Visual** or vision input: The words you are reading on this Page



• **Auditory** or sound input: The background noises you're trying to ignore while reading

• **Tactile** or touch input: Feeling the seat you are on and the clothes you're



gadget you're holding, the wearing



• **Olfactory** (smell) input : The smell of dinner cooking or the perfume you're wearing



• **Taste** input: The mint gum you're chewing

• **Movement** input: This has 2 parts: the sense of our position in space (proprioception), and the feeling of gravity (vestibular input). As you're reading, this input would be the feeling of leaning on your arms or tapping your foot.



Our senses all work together to allow us to carry on our daily activities. When we step into the bathtub, we use our movement, tactile, and visual senses. This becomes so automatic, that we don't even think about it. When we are able to

process sensory input well, our nerves and brain control this input without effort. We feel 'just right', and we are calm, alert, focused and ready to learn, work or play.

Hyper-sensitive (hyper-sensitivity):

Being more sensitive than most other people.

Motor coordination: Many muscles working well together to carry out a task (like riding a bike).

Nervous system: Includes the brain, spinal cord and nerves. It controls our senses, movement and thinking.

Self regulation: Keeping the right level of alertness for the task at hand.

Sensory input or stimulation:

Information we take in through our senses.

What are Sensory Processing Issues?

What feels 'just right' is different for every person. Some of us like things quiet. Some of us prefer a little noise or activity so we don't get bored. It often depends on what we're doing. Children with sensory processing issues have trouble interpreting information from their senses (their brains mis-read or distort the information). So their reactions to everyday sensations can be either too strong, or not strong enough. And they have trouble keeping the right level of alertness for the task at hand (self-regulation).

Common types of sensory processing issues are:

Sensory Sensitivity (hyper-sensitivity = too sensitive / over)

Children with sensory hypersensitivity have nervous systems that feel things too easily or intensely. They become overwhelmed from too much sensory information. **For these children, things feel too loud, too fast, or too bright.**



Fight, Flight or Freeze Response.

When children are overwhelmed by sensory input, there are 3 main ways they may react:

'Fight': Getting irritable, angry, having meltdowns because of the distress of the whole situation and not feeling safe and in control.

'Flight': Getting nervous, anxious, panicky or running away and avoiding the situation.

'Freezing': Getting so overwhelmed that the child just 'shuts down'. When children 'shut down', they may not be able to speak or move for a little while.

Motor Coordination Problems

Problems processing sensory information can also cause problems with motor coordination (movement). For example, a child may have a weak grasp, because her tactile (touch) system is not sending the right information to her brain. She may not grasp hard enough or get her fingers in the right place. For this reason, many children with sensory processing issues seem clumsy and awkward. They may also have trouble with stairs, skating or riding a bike.

Different types of sensory ‘hyper’ sensitivity:

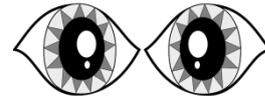
Touch / tactile: These children are easily overwhelmed with touch input, like:



- Tags on clothing
- Food textures that are either too mushy or too crunchy (these children can become picky eaters)
- Being touched by others, especially if it is unexpected

Visual: Children with visual hypersensitivity are easily over-stimulated by:

- Fluorescent or bright lights,
- Places with lots of visual stimulation, like busy classrooms, malls or fairs.



Vestibular: Children with this kind of sensitivity feel movement too intensely, and feel things go ‘too fast’. They may:

- Get car sick easily
- Be afraid of activities where their feet leave the ground (climbing ladders or amusement park rides)



Auditory: These children are easily upset by the noise from:



- Home appliances (like vacuum cleaners or lawnmowers)
- Riding on a busy school bus
- Classrooms or school assemblies

Children may even **create** noise to drown out other distressing sounds.

Sensory-Seeking

Sensory seeking children crave **more** sensory input. They seem to have a never ending desire for sensory stimulation. For example, they may seek out:

- Movement stimulation by rocking on their chairs / spinning
- Oral (mouth) stimulation by chewing on their shirts

Those who can't meet their own sensory needs may complain of 'being bored'.

Sensory Under-Responsiveness



Children who are under responsive to sensory input look quiet and passive. They seem to have no energy or motivation during everyday activities. These children may need much more sensory input to feel 'just right' and be ready to work or learn. Children may find it easier to focus on school work if they:

- Exercise a little before sitting down to desk work
- Have lots of chances for active, 'hands-on' learning

Remember! Children can have a mix of sensory sensitivities and under responsiveness. For example, a child may be sensitive to touch, but seek out vestibular (movement) input. Things might also change from day to day. A child might be very sensitive one day, and not bothered by the same things at all on the next day.

What should we do if we think our child has sensory processing difficulties?

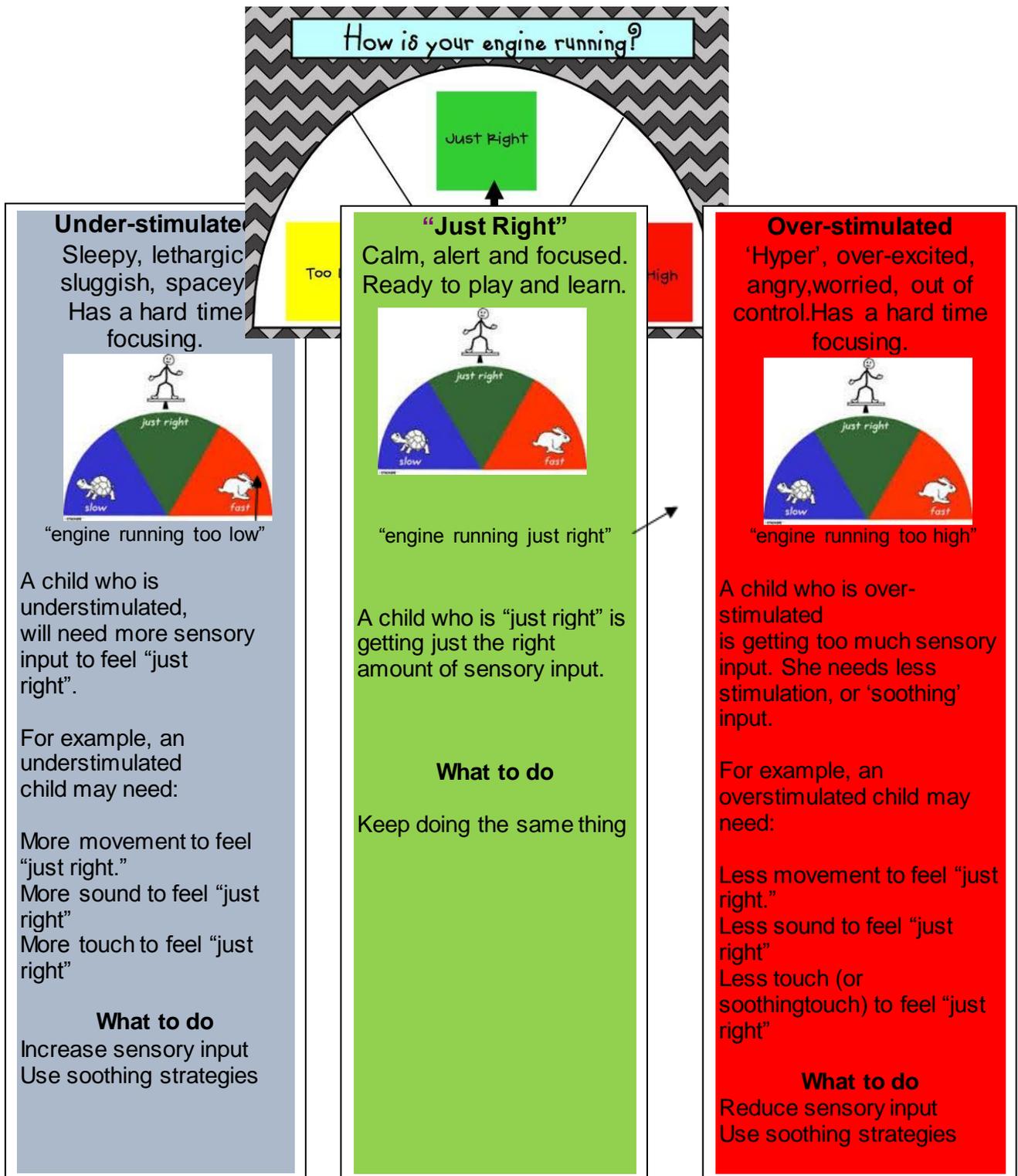
Start by bringing your child to your family doctor (or paediatrician) to check for any medical issues. (If your child has an EHC Plan, then the school can contact CYPIT)

<https://www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/contact-us/make-a-referral/make-a-child-or-young-person-referral/>

Helping Children and with Sensory Processing Issues

Children with sensory processing issues have trouble with 'self regulation', which means keeping the right level of alertness for the task at hand.

There are **3 main states of alertness** described by Occupational Therapists Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger, in their book, *How Does Your Engine Run® A Leader's Guide to the Alert Program® for Self-Regulation* (1996).



An OT can help your child to learn ways to ‘self-regulate’. Teach your child to learn to recognise when they are under-stimulated, ‘just right’, or over-stimulated. And they can learn what to do in each situation.

Ways to adapt the child’s environment:

- Find a quieter place in the classroom / home for a child with sound sensitivity to sit and feel safe and relaxed
- Consider using ear defenders / headphones
- Cut tags out of clothing for a touch sensitive child
- Give them a cushion / wobble cushion to sit on
- Allow them to put their hood up or wear tinted glasses if they feel uncomfortable under certain light.
- Use a weighted cushion to help them feel grounded.
- Learn the signs that the child is getting over-stimulated, and giving the child a soothing space where they can calm down

Workshops that are coming up that you can attend to learn more:

- **Understanding Sensory Processing Difficulties Workshop**
11th March 2020 - 9.45am to 2pm
- **Parent Workshops for SEND Families and those waiting for an ASD assessment.** 11th June 2020 – Sensory 9.45am to 12noon at the Mencap Centre, Enborne Road, Enborne Gate, Newbury, RG14 6AT

Parenting Special Children do run Sensory Workshops so do look on their website for more information

Do look at the CYPIT Toolkit for more ideas:

www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/CYPITtoolkits

Other websites are:

www.sensory-processing-disorder.com

www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/the-sensory-world-of-autism.aspx

www.cheapdisabilityaids.co.uk

Books:

The Out of Sync Child by [Carol Stock Kranowitz](#)

Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children With Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) by Lucy Jane Miller and Janice Roetenberg