Sensory top tips

Resource Library Home

This resource has been created to suggest ways to help your child when it comes to overstimulation like sounds, smells, sleeping, bathing and other aspects of life.

Meal times

Your child might be sensitive to smells or noises and prefer eating in a separate room to others.

Check your child is sitting comfortably and their feet can touch the floor. If they can't, they may need a step to rest their feet on. Your child might prefer to separate different foods and use a dividing plate. A visual distraction like watching TV could help them cope with the sensations of eating.

Remember that your child might need to snack regularly to keep their energy levels up.

Introducing new foods

Try not to introduce new foods too quickly. Let your child see it, touch it, taste a tiny bit, chew it, spit it out or swallow it.

Use a reward chart for new foods, but try not to make a fuss whether your child eats or not.

Coping with smells

If your child smells something they do not like, help your child find an essential oil or fragrance that they like. Add a few drops on a handkerchief or their shirt collar. Tell them to smell this when they come across a smell they do not like. Try using some of these smells to see if your child likes them:

- lavender
- jasmine
- citrus
- pine
- peppermint
- cinnamon
- rosemary
- ylang-ylang

Calming down to sleep

Try the 'steam roller' technique on your child. Firmly roll a gym ball over your child's back when they are laid down on their tummy. Slowly roll the ball up and down their back, arms, hands, legs and feet. Encourage your child to kneel at the gym ball, elbows on the ball, head on hands to watch TV. They will naturally rock themselves.

At bedtime

To calm their body and prepare for sleep, give your child a firm stroke and squeeze down their back, arms and legs.

Consider getting your child heavier bedding or a weighted blanket. This will give your child added pressure through their body to help them feel calm and settled for sleep. Have a consistent bedtime routine and a calm environment.

Chewing

Chewing and sucking can help concentration and reduce anxiety. If your child is chewing, make sure it is on something clean and safe. Don't ask your child to stop chewing without offering an alternative to them like a 'chewy tube' or 'chewellery'. Sucking a drink through a straw or sports bottle gives more sensory feedback than drinking from a cup.

Nails and skin

Lots of children bite their nails and the skin around their nails when they're anxious. Find out what they're worried about. It might stop the biting. If it does not help, reward if they can grow their nails and keep their hands busy with something to fidget with, such as a fidget spinner.

Stopping distractions

Try ear defenders for children who are sensitive to noise but only use them for short periods of time.

A privacy screen on your child's desk can reduce visual distractions.

Coping with overload

Retreating into a 'den' can help children calm down after a sensory-loaded day at school. For example, a sheet over some dining chairs can create a safe and quiet area. Add some cushions and a favourite toy inside. It can be a space for them to be by themselves.

Showering and bathing

Stay calm. If you're calm, then your child will be calmer too.

Have a flannel ready on the side of the bath. Tell your child it's for wiping their face whenever they need to. Give your child some control by letting them have the shampoo on their hand to rub it in. Let your child hold the shower head or jug for rinsing or let your child lie in the bath to rinse their hair.

Use a simple body diagram to encourage independent step by step washing with their face, arms, ears, legs and so on.

Try using goggles in the shower. It may help if they do not like the feel of water on their face or around their eyes. They can even pretend to be a superhero!

Swimming

Go when the swimming pool is quiet. Help your child to get their face and body wet as soon as possible, to help them get used to splashes. Encourage your child to practice wiping the water off their face.

Good sitting

When your child is sitting on a chair, make sure their feet can touch the floor. If they don't, try using a step under their feet.

Movin' Sit cushions are great for children who tend to fidget. Try a weighted lap pad to help your child feel grounded in their seat, this may help them to sit still.

Sitting on a gym ball can help children who need to move, concentrate more. If your child is having problems sitting comfortably, it could be worth a try.

Hair care

Give your child as much control as you can by letting them hold the hairbrush. Try giving them a head massage first to desensitise the scalp. Hold your child's hair while you brush to reduce pulling. Agree how many brush strokes there will be and count together with your child.

Reward your child for brushing their hair.

Hair cuts

Find a friendly hairdresser who understands your child's difficulties.

Take a hand held fan with you to blow the trimmed hair away. Use distraction techniques like taking a tablet computer with you. Make an I-Spy sheet for all the things you'll see in the hairdressers.

Agree a time limit with the hairdresser and make sure they keep to it.

Nail care

If your child is anxious, stay calm. It will help your child feel calmer too.

Massage your child's hands and feet with cream first to desensitise them. Your child could do this for themselves.

Try cutting nails while in the bath or under water when they are softer. Try holding each toe or finger firmly as you trim the nail.

If the clipping sound upsets your child, encourage them to wear ear defenders.

To reduce anxiety, let your child hold the clippers and pretend to trim their own nails. They don't have to cut if they're not able to. Show your child how you cut your nails too. If they are able to, let your child cut their own nails and finish them off with a file if needed. But before cutting nails, try massaging your child's hands and feet with cream first to desensitise them. Your child could do this for themselves.

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