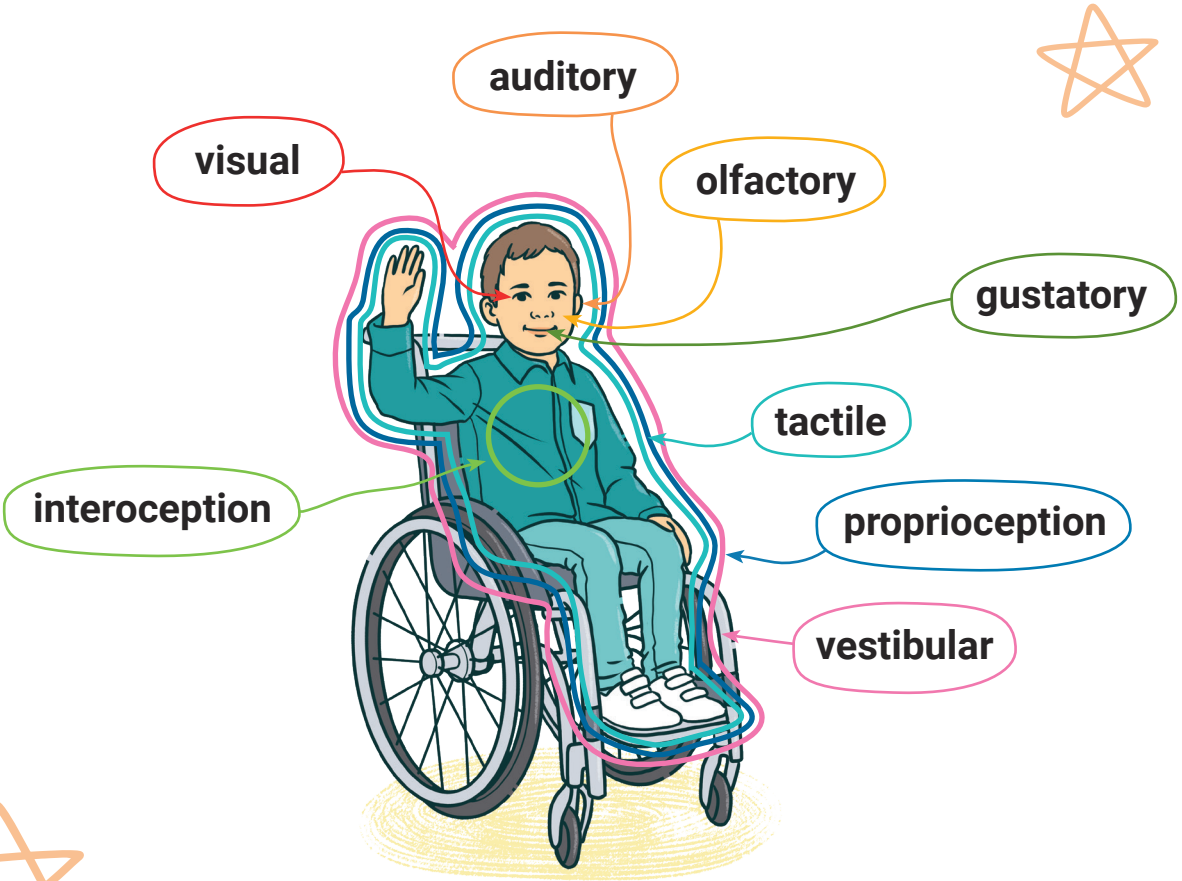
# A Parent Guide to Sensory Processing Differences

## What is sensory processing?

Sensory processing, as the name suggests, is all about the ways in which the nervous system processes information from the senses. A child who has sensory processing differences might process sensory information differently – for example, they may appear to be more or less sensitive to certain sensory information, such as bright lights or loud noises, than others.

This guide will help you to understand the eight (yes, eight!) senses and the different ways in which they might be processed. If a child's nervous system receives too much information from a sense, this is known as being **hypersensitive**. If their nervous system receives too little information, this is known as being **hyposensitive.** It's possible to be hypersensitive to one sense and hyposensitive to another.



## Visual (Sight)

How our brain receives and interprets information through our eyes.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

- feel discomfort or pain around bright or harsh lighting or strong sunlight;
- find it overwhelming or uncomfortable to look at busy patterns;
- find clutter, excessive colour or crowding overwhelming due to too much visual stimulation.

**Try** providing tinted glasses, avoiding bright lights and creating a clutter-free environment.

A child who is **hyposensitive** might:

- seek out visual stimulation by looking at bright or flashing lights;
- struggle to find information, e.g. finding keywords in a text;
- find it difficult to notice or respond to visual cues or changes in what they are looking at.

**Try** providing highlighter pens to aid in finding key information in a text and providing sensory lights or lava lamps to give visual feedback.

## Auditory (Sound)

How we receive and interpret information through our ears.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

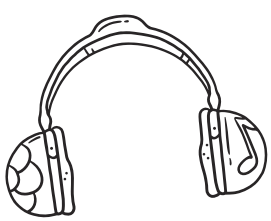
- feel discomfort or pain hearing loud noises;
- find everyday sounds unbearable that others can ignore, such as the sound of electrical equipment;
- become distressed hearing sudden loud noises.

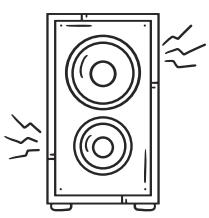
**Try** providing ear defenders, listening to soft music and using visual cues rather than audio.

A child who is **hyposensitive** might:

- seek out auditory stimulation by listening to or creating loud sounds;
- struggle to focus, e.g. on one particular voice amongst a crowd;
- find it difficult to respond to sounds, or not notice them at all, e.g. someone calling your name.

**Try** giving time to process sounds such as speech and listening to music together.





## Olfactory (Smell)

How we receive and interpret information through our nose. The olfactory sense is closely linked to the gustatory sense.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

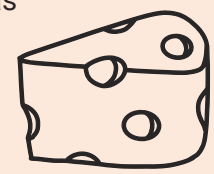
- feel discomfort or even nausea when experiencing aromas;
- avoid using certain products in order to avoid strong smells;
- have strong reactions to certain aromas, which may be linked to emotions and memories.

**Try** engaging in sensory play with scented items, using mildly scented soaps and deodorants and providing a 'safe' scent on a tissue for use when encountering 'unwanted' aromas.

A child who is **hyposensitive** might:

- seek out olfactory stimulation by craving strong or unusual odours;
- be 'unbothered' by scents that others find unbearable;
- be unable to identify strong smells such as soiled food or smoke.

**Try** exploring different smells together through sensory play, cooking and tasting foods with strong aromas and teaching alternative skills to avoid any unsafe situations.



## Gustatory (Taste)

How our nervous system reacts to information through the taste buds. There are five different tastes (salty, sweet, bitter, sour and umami), and so some people might be more or less sensitive to different tastes.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

- be strongly averse to certain flavours;
- prefer plain flavours and unmixed food;
- feel discomfort or nausea when experiencing strong flavours.

**Try** using special plates that separate different flavours of a meal, cooking new things together and trying ingredients, and finding alternative ways to supplement a child's diet.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

- seek tactile stimulation by chewing things, picking at skin or stroking certain fabrics and textures;
- have little or no reaction to sensations such as pain or temperature changes;
- be described as 'touchy-feely' with others.

**Try** providing fidget toys for your child to play with rather than picking at their own skin or hurting themselves, exploring messy play to learn about new textures and using weighted blankets or compression clothing to provide deep pressure.

## Tactile (Touch)

How our brain receives and processes information from sensations such as pressure, temperature, texture and pain.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

- feel discomfort around different textures, for example, labels in clothes or soft foods;
- avoid physical touch;
- avoid washing due to disliking the sensation of water on skin, or the sensation of scrubbing the skin.

**Try** sticking to fabrics that your child finds comfortable, carrying additional layers so your child can adjust based on temperature and avoiding crowded spaces to limit the frequency of accidental and unwanted touches.

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**Try** providing fidget toys for your child to play with rather than picking at their own skin or hurting themselves, exploring messy play to learn about new textures and using weighted blankets or compression clothing to provide deep pressure.

## Vestibular (Movement)

The vestibular sense is all about movement and balance. Vestibular receptors are located in the inner ear.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

- feel dizzy when making fast body movements, such as spinning;
- experience motion sickness while travelling;
- struggle to balance.

**Try** practising balancing skills at home, teaching your child strategies to tackle motion sickness and work with your child to recognise any triggers.

A child who is **hyposensitive** might:

- seek vestibular stimulation by 'stimming', e.g. making repetitive movements, rocking or spinning;
- move constantly, e.g. climbing on furniture or frequently getting out of their chair;
- struggle to notice their own movements and those of others around them.

**Try** to engage your child in activities that include rocking, swinging and spinning, use alternatives to chairs such as wobble chairs and avoid forcing your child to stay still.

## Proprioception (External Body Sense)

Proprioception refers to how we experience our body and our spatial awareness. The receptors are found in our muscles, joints, ligaments and tendons.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

- seek out personal space;
- feel discomfort when in a crowded place;
- struggle with coordination.

**Try** reducing clutter around your home, avoiding crowded places and working on coordination at home through physical games.

A child who is **hyposensitive** might:

- seek out proprioceptive stimulation through deep pressure;
- use excessive force, e.g. rough play;
- struggle with judging where their body is in relation to the rest of the world, leading to bumping into furniture, being unable to catch a ball, etc.

**Try** providing opportunities to do heavy work, such as carrying or pushing heavy items and using weighted blankets to give pressure feedback.

## Interoception (Internal Body Sense)

Interoception refers to our internal experiences, such as detecting changes in our emotional state and recognising sensations such as feeling hungry or tired.

A child who is **hypersensitive** might:

- have strong reactions to sensations such as hunger, thirst or a full bladder;
- become anxious about managing their bodily sensations;
- frequently complain about pain

**Try** reassuring your child that their experience is normal and building in plentiful snack and toileting breaks throughout the day.

A child who is **hyposensitive** might:

- ignore or not notice indicators that their body has a need, such as hunger, thirst or a full bladder;
- go to the 'extreme' – either over- or under-indulging in activities such as eating, drinking or sleeping;
- be unaware that they have an injury or illness.

**Try** building meeting basic needs into your child's daily routine (for example, including 'toilet break' on a daily schedule) and supporting them to recognise other signs of injury or illness, such as visual signs like redness or auditory signs like coughing.