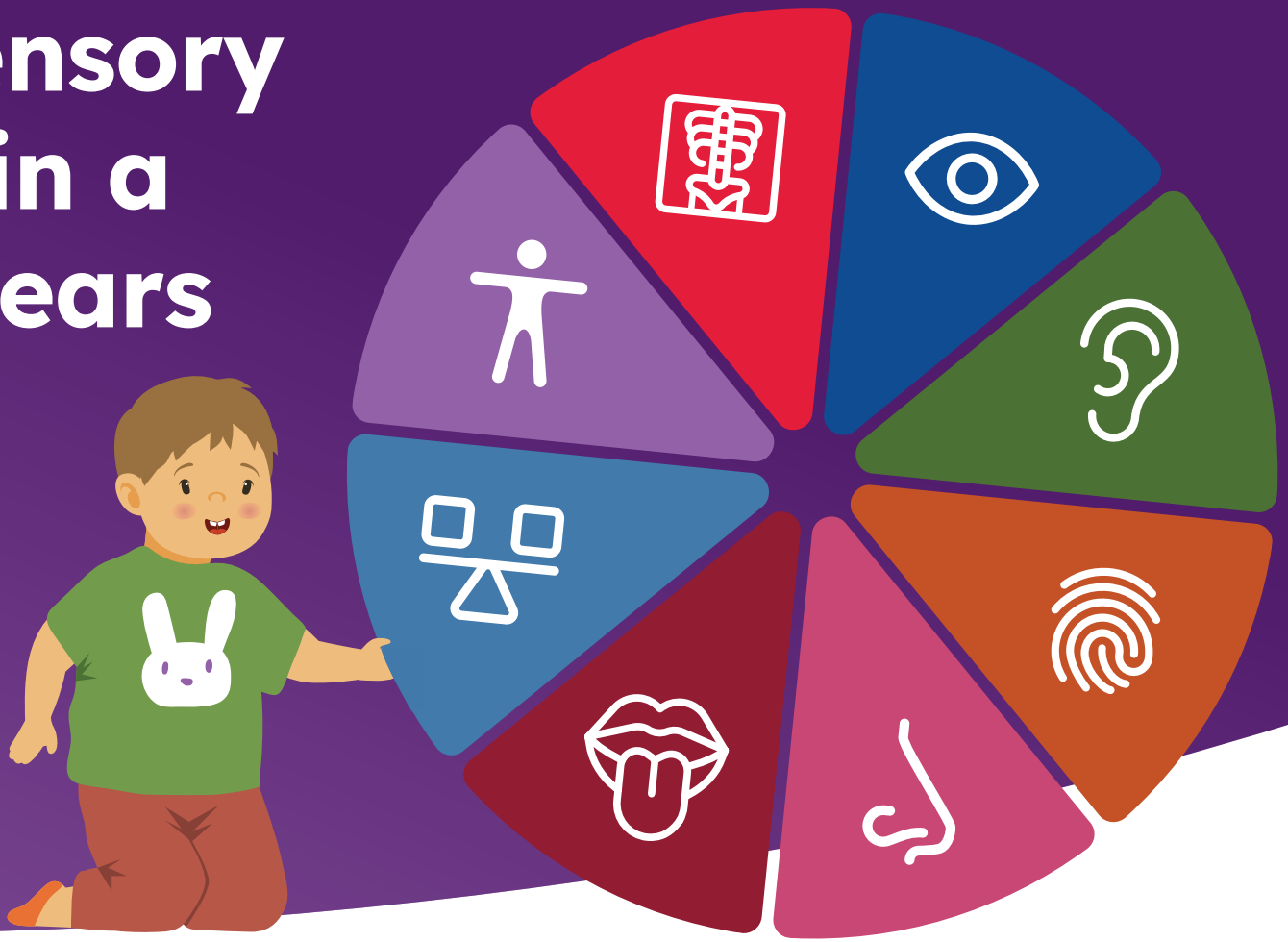
Essex County Council
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Supporting sensory development in a child's early years

Understanding children's sensory behaviours and how to support them



This resource supports families, carers and practitioners in early years settings (birth to end of reception year).

Provide

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This guide has been produced in collaboration with representatives from health and social care.

How to use this guide

This is guidance for parents/carers, education providers and other people involved in supporting early years children (0-5 years). It is designed to equip the reader with knowledge and understanding of how our senses impact on our ability to participate in everyday life.

As you read this guidance the basic things to keep in mind are:

- we are all sensory beings both adults and children. We make sense of the world around us by using our senses
- our senses work together to give us the information we need to live and keep us safe
- every child's sensory system is unique. They will prefer certain sensory experiences but find other sensory experiences challenging
- young children's sensory systems are developing. This development is supported by exploring sensory experiences
- development happens at different rates for different children

- an organised sensory system allows young children to participate appropriately in activities related to their daily lives
- children's sensory preferences and needs may require us to adjust activities and settings in order for them to function. If they are not able to function in spite of these adjustments, it may be necessary to seek specialist support

Early years settings, schools and further education colleges will be referred to throughout as education providers. Children and young people will be referred to as CYP.

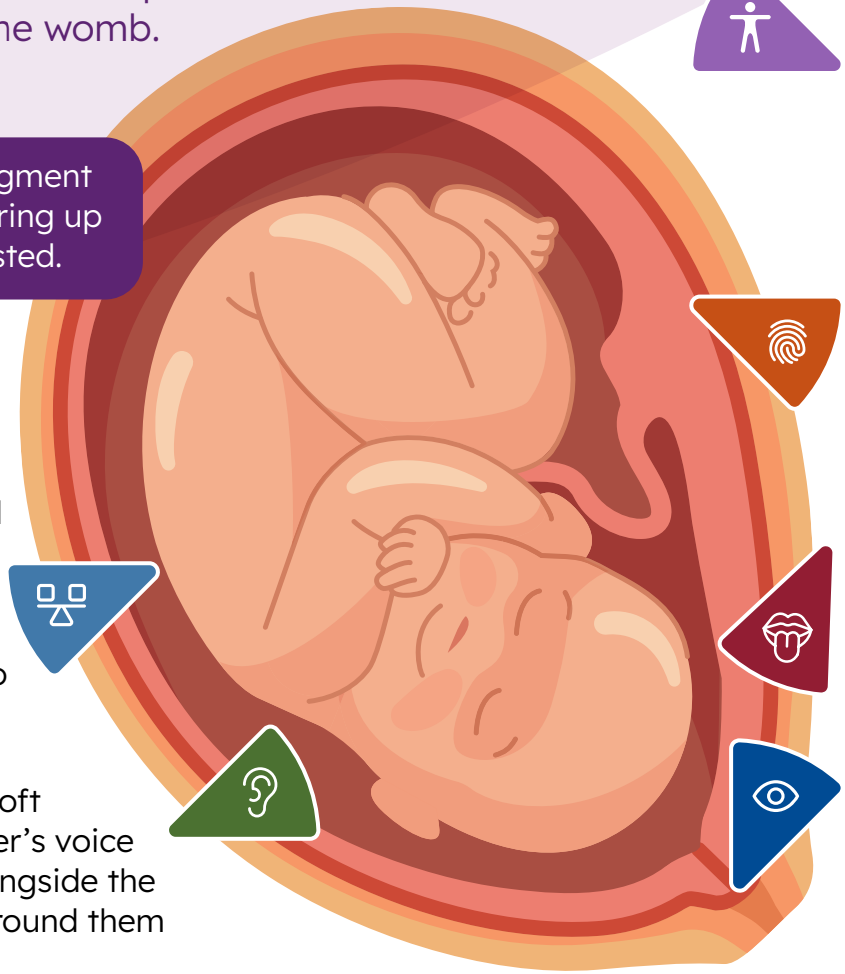
This guidance is split into different interactive clickable chapters for each sense to break down the learning, however it is important to remember that our senses do not work in isolation. Information from all of the senses is received by the brain, then processed, and used to coordinate our responses.

Please note there is also a 'Sensory Awareness Toolkit', that is aimed at school aged children.

Supporting a child's sensory needs, right from the start

The first 1001 days of life are crucial in supporting and nurturing a child's development. This includes the development of sensory processing skills, which are the foundation blocks for all development. Development of the sensory systems starts inside the womb.

Each sensory system has its own segment on the picture, click on any one to bring up the page with all sensory systems listed.



Proprioception: baby will push off of the uterine wall, this gives them lots of information about where their body is and helps build an awareness of how their body can move in space.

Touch: baby explores the umbilical cord with their hands, they will suck on their hands/ fingers and hair receptors are activated by amniotic fluid.

Taste: baby has changes in flavours from mum's diet and will taste amniotic fluid.

Sight: in utero it is dark, with muted light.

Vestibular: baby's movements are slow and gentle, floating in amniotic fluid. Baby will move with the movement of their mother and with time begin to explore their own movements in preparation for birth and also as space reduces in utero.

Sound: baby listens to the soft muffled tones of their mother's voice and rhythmic heartbeat, alongside the swishing of amniotic fluid around them

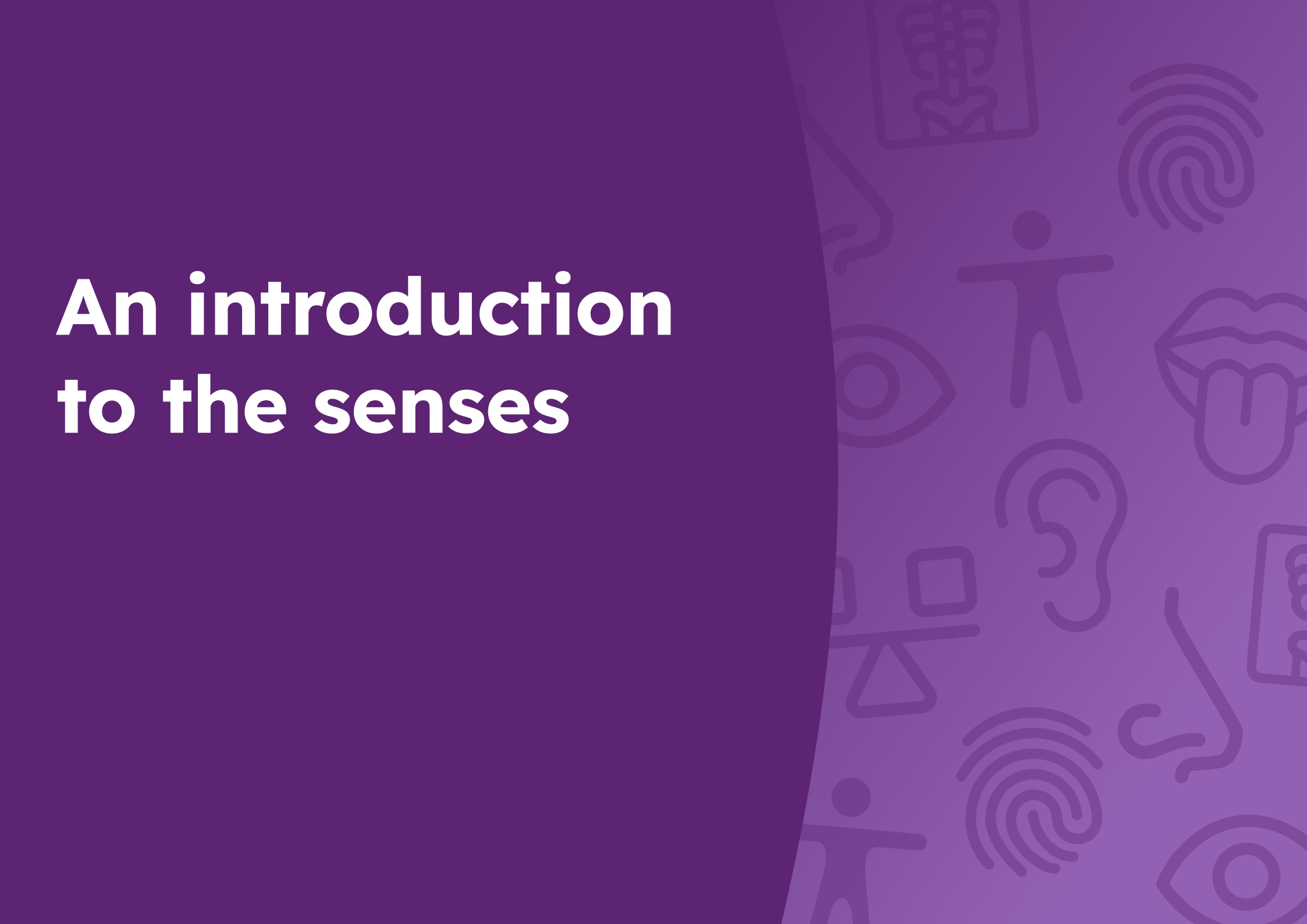
Life outside of utero offers a very different sensory experience: one that is very unpredictable and not as calming as life inside the womb. As baby enters the world, they need to begin to adjust, adapt to, and learn from their new environment. With time, they also need to learn to self-soothe and regulate (co-regulate too with the help from supporting adults initially).

If a baby is premature, this can impact on their sensory development as they are thrust into this busy world, with underdeveloped systems. They might need a bit of extra time and support with this adjustment.

What do our sensory systems do for us?

- they keep us safe
- regulate our brain and body
- regulate our nervous system and attention
- drive our behaviours
- build our body and brain
- help us to learn new skills
- drive exploration and motor skills

An introduction to the senses



There are eight senses, which are:

You can find out more about each sense by clicking on each segment title.

What do our senses do?

- our senses are constantly collecting information from our environment which is sent to the brain to help us to understand what is going on around us
- our senses also provide information to our brain about ourselves, our physical state, our positioning and how we feel
- this information helps us to plan our interaction with our environment and participation in daily life
- our brains are constantly receiving information from our sensory receptors, and we cannot turn it off, but most of us can learn to filter it

What is a receptor?

It is the part of the body that receives the sensory information from the environment and sends it through our nervous system through to the brain.

Video:
pathways.org/watch/babys-8-senses/

Chapter one:
Vision (visual) sense

Visual processing is the interpretation of what our eyes see, rather than the eye's ability to see.

Where is the receptor?

The eye.

What does it do?

It gives information about; distance, edges, boundaries, colours and shapes.

How do we use it?

We use the information to see what is in our environment and to plan our responses.

What could impact on how we interpret this information?

Past experiences, memories, learning, emotional state and visual perceptual skills.

When does this sense develop?

In the womb, baby's pupils begin to slowly constrict in response to light at 30-32 weeks. At term, babies can distinguish between patterns and movement. Colour vision develops around three months of age.

Chapter two:
Hearing (auditory) sense

Sound processing is the interpretation of the sound that we hear, rather than our hearing ability.

Where is the receptor?

The ear.

What does it do?

It gives information about; language, tone, pitch, rhythm, sequences, volume and location of sound.

How do we use it?

We use the information to hear what is in our environment and to plan our responses.

What could impact on how we interpret this information?

Past experiences, memories, learning, emotional state and sound processing skills.

When does this sense develop?

All structures of the ear are in place by 25 weeks gestation. At birth, baby will recognise mother's voice, respond to emotional tones in voice and discriminate between sounds.

Chapter three:
Touch (tactile) sense

Where is the receptor?

The skin.

What does it do?

It gives information about; types of touch (light, deep, hard, soft, sharp, dull, vibration and duration) temperature, pain and comfort.

How do we use it?

By feeling we use the information to build up an understanding of the properties of objects and materials, and to discriminate between these (i.e., to tell the difference between a soft blanket and rough sandpaper).

What could impact on how we interpret this information?

Past experiences, memories, learning, emotional state and sound processing skills.

When does this sense develop?

Develops from eight weeks in the womb. Baby will begin to suck thumb from 12 weeks gestation. By 24 weeks their touch pathways are intact.

Chapters four and five:
Smell and taste (olfactory and gustatory) sense

Where are the receptors?

The nasal cavity and the 2,000 to 5,000 taste buds in the tongue.

What do they do?

It gives information about taste and flavours (i.e. salty, sour, bitter, sweet), smells and fragrances.

How do we use them?

To protect ourselves, we may smell something before putting it in our mouths or if something tastes bitter, we may spit it out, as we naturally associate a bitter taste as harmful.

What could impact on how we interpret this information?

Past experiences, memories, learning, emotional state and taste and smell processing skills.
The brain has an instant connection with the receptors of the nose, therefore processes smell more quickly, which is why we have strong memorable associations of smells.

When does this sense develop?

From 17 weeks gestation a baby will swallow liquid. From 28 weeks gestation a baby can smell and respond to odours in the amniotic fluid.

Chapter six:
Balance (and movement) sense

Where is the receptor?

In the inner ears.

What does it do?

It gives information about linear (backwards and forwards) and rotational (circular) movement.

How do we use it?

As it supports development of good muscle tone, it to keep us upright. It helps us balance and helps us to make sense of gravity when we are moving, no matter the direction or speed. It provides us with information about the movement and rotation of the head and works closely with our body position sense.

What could impact on how we interpret this information?

Opportunities to experience movement against gravity (i.e., jump, run, spin, rock, hop, walk, sit, stand, crawl, kneel), memories, learning, emotional state and balance processing skills.

When does this sense develop?

In the womb, a baby senses gentle rotational movements, where the body is supported in a foetal position and is floating in amniotic fluid. After birth, baby needs to move against gravity, making movement more difficult and uncontrolled. Baby needs support with their positioning and movement initially.

Chapter seven:
Body position and movement (proprioception) sense

Where is the receptor?

In the joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments, including those in the jaw and mouth.

What does it do?

It gives information about where the body is in space and how much force we are using through our muscles.

How do we use it?

It is mainly unconscious but developed through experience of the body moving through space. It gives us an awareness of where our body parts are and the force we are using, even when we cannot see them (i.e., when driving we do not look at our hands on the gear stick or our feet on the pedals).

What could impact on how we interpret this information?

Opportunities to experience movement (i.e., push, pull, stretch, pick, lift, press, squeeze, clap, kick, run, jump, stamp and slam), learning, emotional state and body position and movement processing skills.

When does this sense develop?

This sense starts developing in the womb, as early as 7-8 weeks. The baby has full body movements at 9 weeks and will start to bring its hand to the placenta around 11 weeks.

Chapter eight:

Internal awareness (interoception) sense

The sensory system that gives us info regarding our body - emotions connections. Awareness of thirst, hunger, bladder, and bowel fullness, pain and discomfort, heart rate etc.

Interoception awareness includes:

- **Noticing** signals (stomach growling)
- **Connecting** signals to its meaning (I am hungry)
- **Reacting** to address the need (eating something)

Where is the receptor?

The internal organs and connective tissue inside the body.

What does it do?

It gives information about the state of the organs, the pressure, pain they may be experiencing and the body emotion connections (the feeling of an empty stomach that tells us that we are hungry).

How do we use it?

Initially we notice the signals (stomach growling) then we connect the signals with its meaning (I am hungry), then we react to respond to the needs (eating food).

What could impact on how we interpret this information?

Opportunities to recognise the link between the body signals.

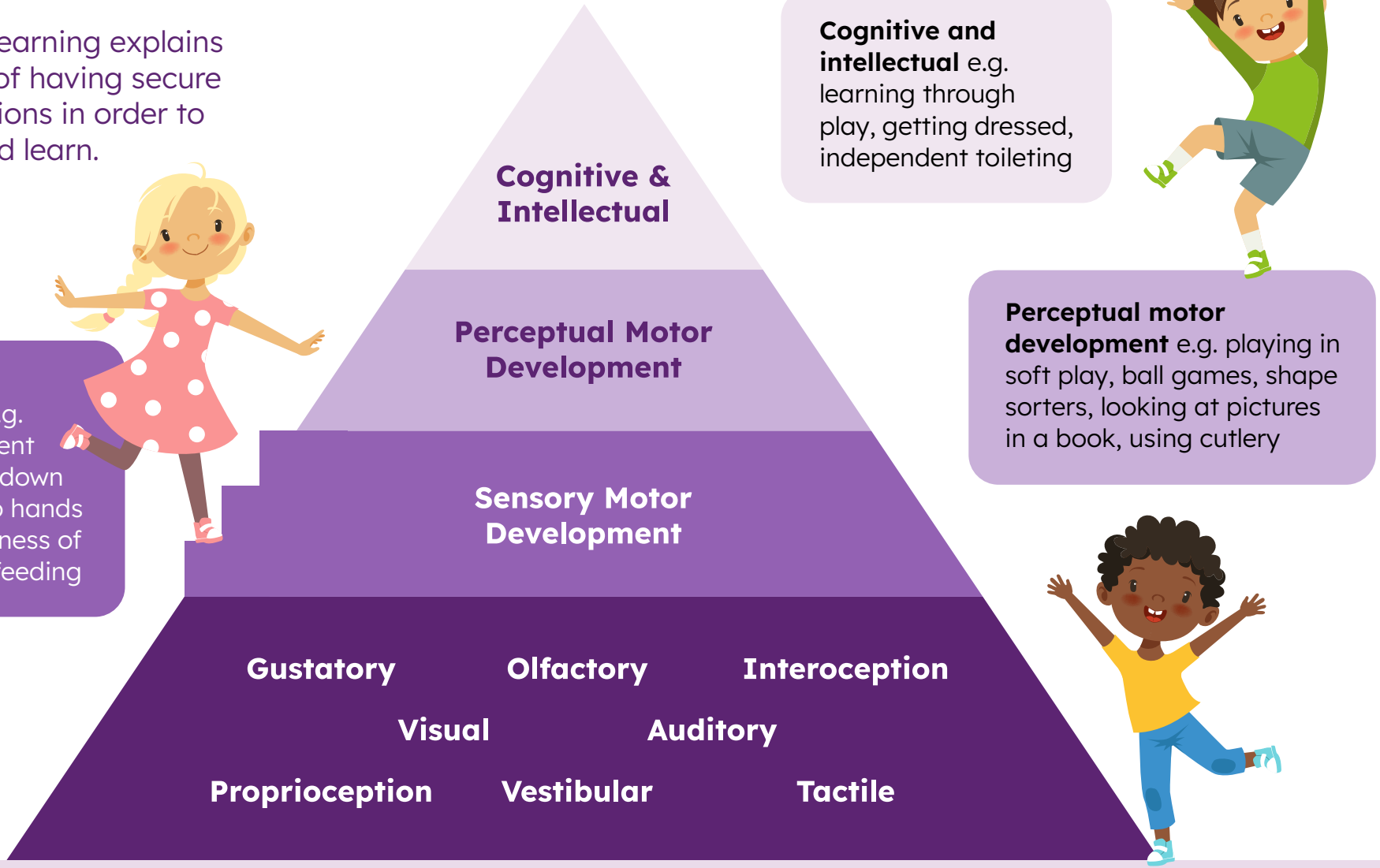
When does this sense develop?

This system begins to develop early on whilst the baby is in the womb.

Video: kelly-mahler.com - Interoception & Early Intervention

Foundations for learning and development

The pyramid of learning explains the importance of having secure sensory foundations in order to develop skills and learn.



Cognitive and intellectual e.g. learning through play, getting dressed, independent toileting

Perceptual motor development e.g. playing in soft play, ball games, shape sorters, looking at pictures in a book, using cutlery

Sensory motor development e.g. safe and confident walking up and down stairs, using two hands together, awareness of own body, self-feeding

Adapted from William & Shellenbeger - Pyramid of Learning

Poem: Toddler Sense

If it is on, I must turn it off, if it is off, I must turn it on

If it is folded, I must unfold it

If it is liquid, it must be shaken, then spilled

If it is a solid, it must be crumbled, chewed or smeared

If it is high, it must be reached

If it is shelved, it must be unshelved

If it is pointed, It must be run with at top speed

If it is plugged, it must be unplugged

If it is in the trash, it must be removed, inspected and thrown on the floor

If it is closed, it must be opened

If it is full, it will be more interesting emptied

If it is a stroller, it must under no circumstances be ridden in without protest, it must be pushed by me instead

If it has a flat surface, it must be banged upon

If Mummy's hands are full, I must be carried

If Mummy is in a hurry and wants to carry me, I must walk alone

If it is paper, it must be torn

If it has buttons, they must be pressed

If the volume is low, it must go high

If it is a drawer, it must be pulled upon

If it is a bug, it must be swallowed

If it doesn't stay on my spoon, it must be dropped on the floor

If it is not food, it must be tasted

If it is dry, it must be made wet with drool, milk or toilet water

If it is a car seat, I must protest

If it is Mummy, it must be hugged

I am a toddler, watch me grow

Sensory processing

Sensory processing is an integral part of a baby's development that is interlinked with other developmental areas e.g. social interaction, gross motor skills, interaction with books/toys, hand skills and body awareness.

Your toddler is learning and developing their sensory system. Human babies need to be able to breathe and feed, this is what their sensory system at birth is "set" for. Examples: e.g. smelling mummy, feeling the breast against their cheek, moving their head to forage for the nipple/teat.

A child learning to walk will fall over. A toddler in a new space will bump into things! In those early days of going up and down stairs your child may be nervous and anxious – this is a typical part of sensory development.

Giving your child opportunities to learn and develop through a range of sensory experiences will help cement that learning into skills for living.

Video example of typical sensory milestones up to age one: pathways.org/watch/important-sensory-milestones-babys-first-year-part-1

Key points to remember

Mouthing

Young children will explore objects and environment by using their mouths. This typically occurs up to 2 years old but may be longer if your child is delayed in their development.

Movement

Children need to move to learn. Their bodies need to experience movement to understand their body's position in relation to other objects/people. Young children are not expected to sit still for long periods.

Boundaries

It is expected that young children will push back against boundaries and feel frustrated. However, boundaries help young children feel safe and secure and it is important that there is consistency around boundaries for young children.

Sensory preferences versus sensory difficulties

Every person has sensory preferences for particular sounds, tastes, environment etc. However, sensory integration difficulties are chronic and disrupt everyday life and everyday activities.

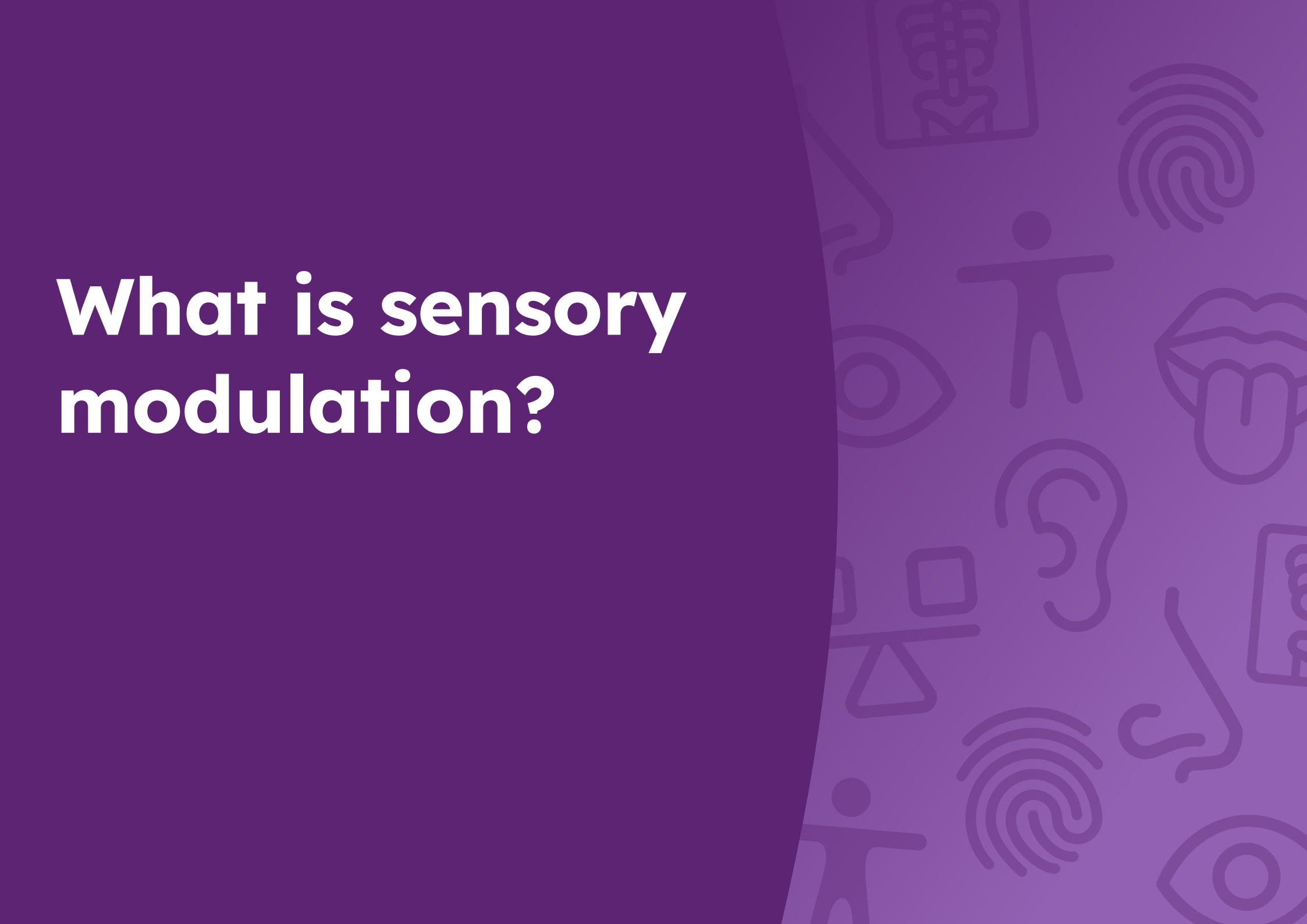
Sensory processing disorder

Within the UK, Sensory Processing Disorder is not a recognised diagnosis.

When to worry?

- not showing any signs of fear in new situations
- constantly falling because of lack of caution with "a high pain threshold"
- consistently afraid of movement
- reluctant to try new things with adult support
- no awareness of hunger/ thirst
- no awareness when nappy needs changing
- highly irritable and uncomfortable during self-care tasks e.g. bathing/ hair care/ tooth brushing
- development in movement seems slow compared to other children of the same age

What is sensory modulation?



Sensory modulation

‘Modulation’ is the word used to describe our brain’s ability to notice or ignore sensory stimuli, as is appropriate to the task or situation.

Example: Getting dressed

- as you pull on your trousers, you feel them move across your legs and over your hips. This helps you to know that they are there and in the right place
- you move onto the next item of clothing. At this point you no longer actively feel the sensation of the trousers on your legs and hips
- you can concentrate on the next clothing item and dampen your attention to the item that is in place
- you are calm, regulated and achieving the desired outcome

- you feel the trousers moving across your legs as you pull them on. You can also feel the label prickling your legs, then your back. At the same time, the carpet feels rough on your feet and a loose hair makes an annoying tickly feeling on your neck
- you attempt to move onto your socks, but the trousers continue to brush against your legs each time you reach down. This is distracting and irritating
- dressing takes a long time
- you feel uncomfortable and frustrated
- for a toddler this can lead to sensory overload and meltdown

Overwhelm and ‘overload’ analogy

With too much sensory input, it is easy for a child to become overwhelmed or overloaded and their ‘cup’ overspills, for example;

- car alarm/ roadworks
- busy bus
- scratchy label or seam in clothes
- people ‘bumping into’ me
- bright lights
- sunshine in my eyes
- rain
- humidity
- messy art activity
- ‘smelly’ food cooking in the kitchen
- change in routine or expectations (substitute teacher, forgot water bottle)
- favourite toy is not available
- feeling tired
- feeling hungry

What happens when the internal and external inputs become too much to manage?

Video: YouTube - Example of a sensory overload

If you are unable to effectively modulate you are likely to become overloaded and dysregulated. This then presents as the fight-flight-freeze response. However, it is not just sensory overload that can lead to this response, other demands can also contribute to or cause a fight-flight-freeze response.

Fight

When overloaded, the child may hit out, kick, shout, scream and respond physically and confrontationally to the situation.

Flight

When overloaded, the child may run away and flee to get away from the situation.

Freeze

When overloaded, the child may not be able to move or act in response to a situation, this can include being unable to speak or communicate.

These demands include:

Sensory

The information on page 25 breaks down how different sensory demands can impact on how a child responds to a situation.

Social

Having to speak in front of the class, having to make chit-chat with unfamiliar people, being forced to greet someone or make eye contact.

Task

Having to do something difficult or that I am not sure how to do, doing something unfamiliar or attempting something where I am not sure what the outcome will be, having to transition between activities

Environmental

Having to be in busy spaces such as a classroom or playground, being in or around large groups of people, having to cope with change, having to deal with bright lights or loud noises or being asked to sit still, busy wall displays, having to work within a routine that doesn't suit the child.

Past experiences

Remembering an unpleasant experience that happened last time in this setting or when interacting with this person.

The fight-flight-freeze response (survival mode) includes physiological reactions:

- increased heart rate
- feeling flushed
- sweating
- changes in breathing
- changes in vision

Meltdowns versus tantrums

It is part of typical development for young children to have ‘tantrums’ when they cannot express their feelings, they can’t communicate what they need, or when things aren’t going the way, they want them to.

Meltdowns/ shutdowns* can occur when people of all ages are in intensely overwhelming situations that they cannot cope with.

Co-regulation

Co-regulation refers to the supportive process by which adults help young children manage their emotions, behaviour, and actions. Adults need to notice changes in behaviour and offer support.

Development of co-regulation

Co-regulation is a part of development. Before a child can self-regulate, they need to co-regulate.

Co-regulation begins in infancy

Before a young child can self-soothe, they need a parent to help them. When an infant is crying a parent picks them up, holds them close, rocks, and wraps them up in a tight swaddle, and offers a pacifier. All of these strategies are tools to provide correct sensory input that calms and regulates the baby’s system. This is co-regulation; the parent is offering tools and strategies to support the infant’s needs.

As caregivers we play a huge role in helping children calm down. When children are upset or overwhelmed, they look to us for help with regulating their emotions. A caregiver needs to project calmness in order to soothe their infant. This is very difficult for an anxious or upset parent.

* a shutdown is an intensely overwhelming situation leading to a person closing down, withdrawing, being unable to communicate in their usual way, unable to follow instructions or ask for help.

The importance of recognising your own sensory needs as a care provider.

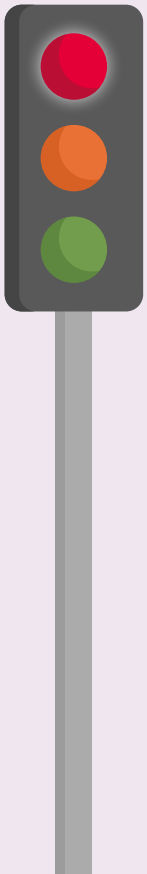
As well as being observing and being aware of a child's sensory needs, it's really important to be aware of your own needs, and how you are feeling as their supporting adult. A child's behavioural states affect the caregiver or adult's feelings and needs.

We all have sensory preferences, and this can influence how supporting adults function and what they need to do, to support themselves to remain in a 'calm/alert' state. Some supporting adults will notice they don't like loud noises like crying. Others can struggle with a newborn who requires lots of touch. Some parents need their own personal space for periods of time. Try and be a detective into your own sensory needs and get some support to enable to you refill your own sensory cup where needed. This will support you, to support your baby.

Importance of reading your child's cues

In the first few weeks of getting to know baby, you will be supporting them during daily tasks like feeding, nappy changes, interaction, dressing and supporting your baby to sleep. With time, you will notice your baby's preferences over certain sensory stimulation, and their likes/ dislikes begin to evolve. Your baby's sensory needs may adapt and change as your baby grows and learns and has different experiences. Your baby will attach memories to the sensations they experience.

You will notice signs that tell you your baby is feeling good, or if you may need to slow down/adapt or stop the activity. Consider using the concept of a traffic light to help guide you.



Red light

The sensory information is too much for your baby/ child they need the activity to stop. They are seeking security and comfort.

Amber light

Your baby/ child may look tense, tired or become restless or fussy. They are telling you they need support, or they may continue to the red zone. They may need you to slow the pace of the activity or adapt it in some way to meet their needs.

Green light

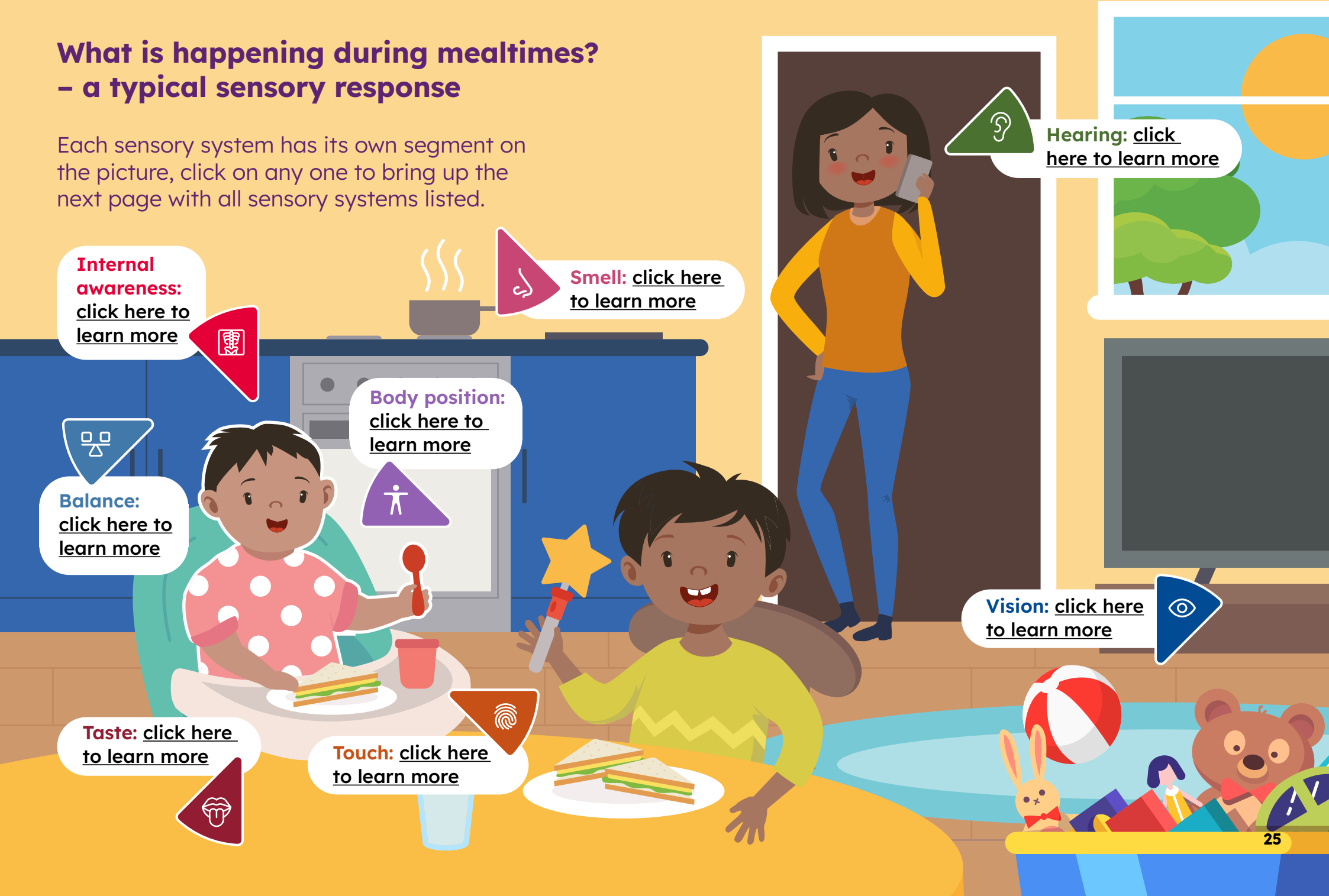
Your baby looks comfortable, relaxed and alert. This is a great time for paying attention and being sociable.

A quick guide to calming and alerting sensory input

	Vision	Hearing	Touch	Smell	Taste	Balance and movement	Internal awareness
Calming sensory input	Soft and constant lighting; pastel colours; toys with minimal lights; reduced clutter; warm glow lights; lava lamps	Quiet and calm voices; consistent rhythms and noise levels; white noise	Deep, firm pressure; hugs; warm bath and wrapping in a big towel or wrapping a blanket firmly round them; fidget toys; soft tactile object	Sweet smells, such as vanilla, cinnamon or lavender	Sweet flavours such as vanilla, milk chocolate	Slow rhythmic movement e.g., rocking in a chair; rhythmical bouncing on a trampoline or therapy ball; slow swinging backwards and forwards; sucking through a straw, eating chewy or crunchy snacks	Warmth, such as heat pad or hot water bottle; ensuring eating regular filling meals to keep satisfied, warm drinks such as milk, malt drink or hot chocolate
Alerting sensory input	Bright lights; toys with flashing lights; bright colours; screens (e.g. tablets, games console)	Loud music with a fast beat; unexpected noise; screaming and high pitched sounds	Vibration; messy play e.g., cold, and gloopy; misting cold water from a spray; cold air; tickling and light touch	Strong or pungent smells such as citrus, mint, perfumes, aftershave, air fresheners	Sour, salty, spicy, or bitter tastes	Fast and unpredictable movement; bouncing on a ball or trampoline; swinging fast; spinning; roundabout	Drinking very cold drinks, crunching/ suck ice, very hot or very cold foods

What is happening during mealtimes? – a typical sensory response

Each sensory system has its own segment on the picture, click on any one to bring up the next page with all sensory systems listed.



What is happening during mealtimes? – a typical sensory response

I can see:

My lunch on my tray and my toy box on the floor. The light is coming in through the window.

I can hear:

The sounds of the wind outside in the trees. I can hear my mum talking in the other room on her phone.

I can touch:

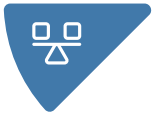
The different textures of my food, as I eat with my hands. I am comfortable sitting in my highchair.

I can smell:

My lunch as I touch it and eat it. I enjoy the smell of tonight's dinner that is cooking, it is making me feel hungry.

I can taste:

My favourite sandwich with a new flavour yoghurt to try.



I can balance:

I feel steady and secure sitting in my highchair.

In my body position:

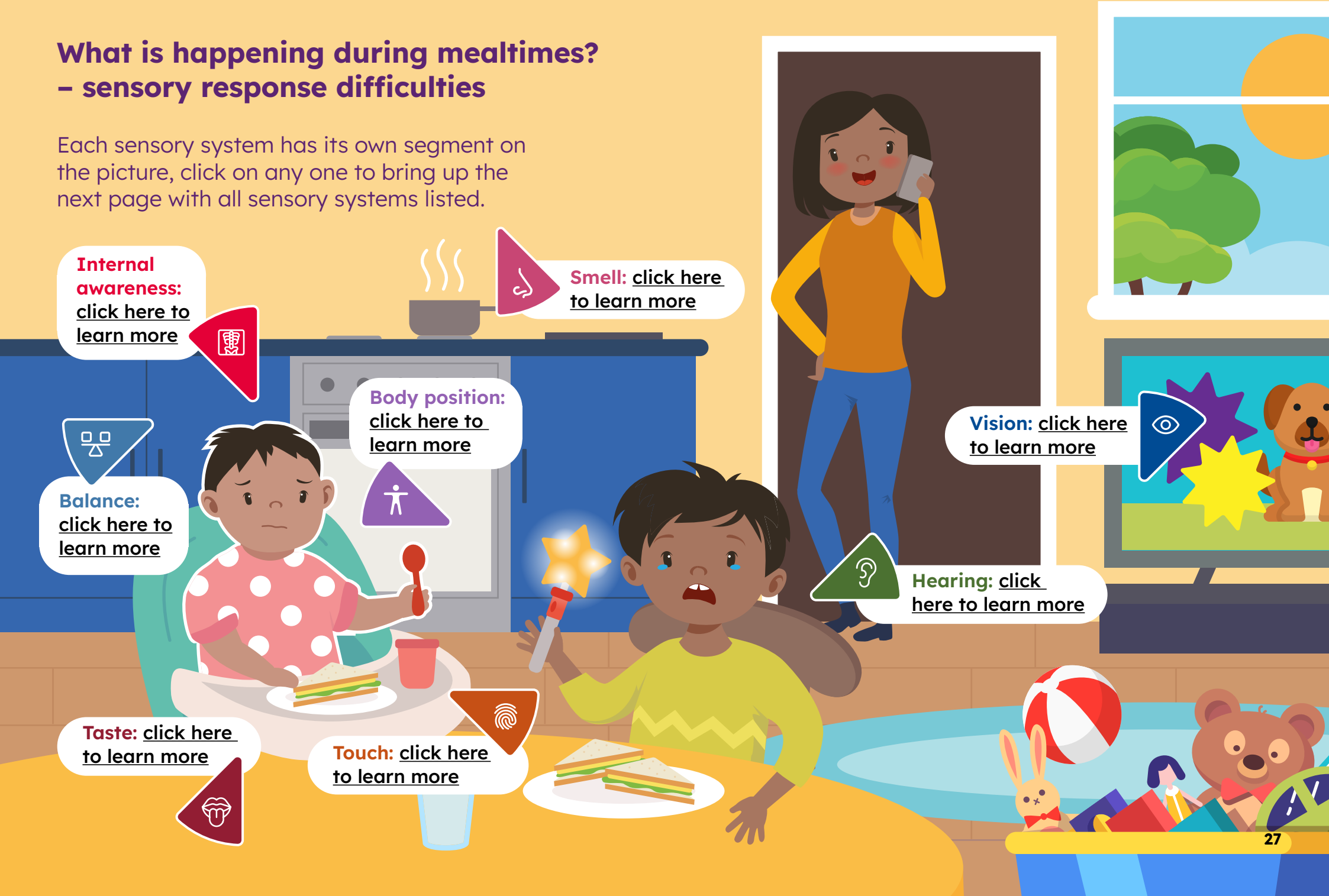
I am sitting upright in my highchair; I can reach the tray with my hands. My feet are supported on the footrest, I can pick up my food with my hands and my spoon and I can put my food to my mouth.

My internal awareness is telling me:

I am well-rested; I feel comfortable with my temperature. I have emptied my bowels; I am in a calm-alert state for feeding.

What is happening during mealtimes? – sensory response difficulties

Each sensory system has its own segment on the picture, click on any one to bring up the next page with all sensory systems listed.



What is happening during mealtimes? – sensory response difficulties

I can see:

There is a lot more food on my plate than I like. I start to watch the TV. My sibling brings me their new flashing toy to shine at me. I'm then distracted.

I can hear:

My sibling who is upset and starts crying, mum turns the TV on to try and distract them. This extra noise distracts me from eating my food.

I can touch:

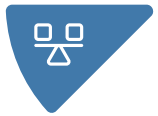
The straps on my highchair, which are wet from them being wiped and too tight around my tummy. The liner on the highchair is cold. My sibling comes over to me and tries to take my food off my plate.

I can smell:

Dinner for later, which is being cooked in the kitchen, it is a strong, unfamiliar smell which I find difficult to ignore. The new flavour yoghurt is opened by Mum and smells different. My sibling has a dirty nappy.

I can taste:

The spoon of yoghurt being put to my mouth. The strong smell of dinner cooking means my lunch tastes different. My favourite sandwich tastes different as it's been in the fridge and is cold.



I can balance:

My highchair has a wobbly leg which means as I move, it moves, which makes me feel unsafe. My feet are dangling as I don't have anything to support them on the highchair, which makes me feel more unsteady.

In my body position:

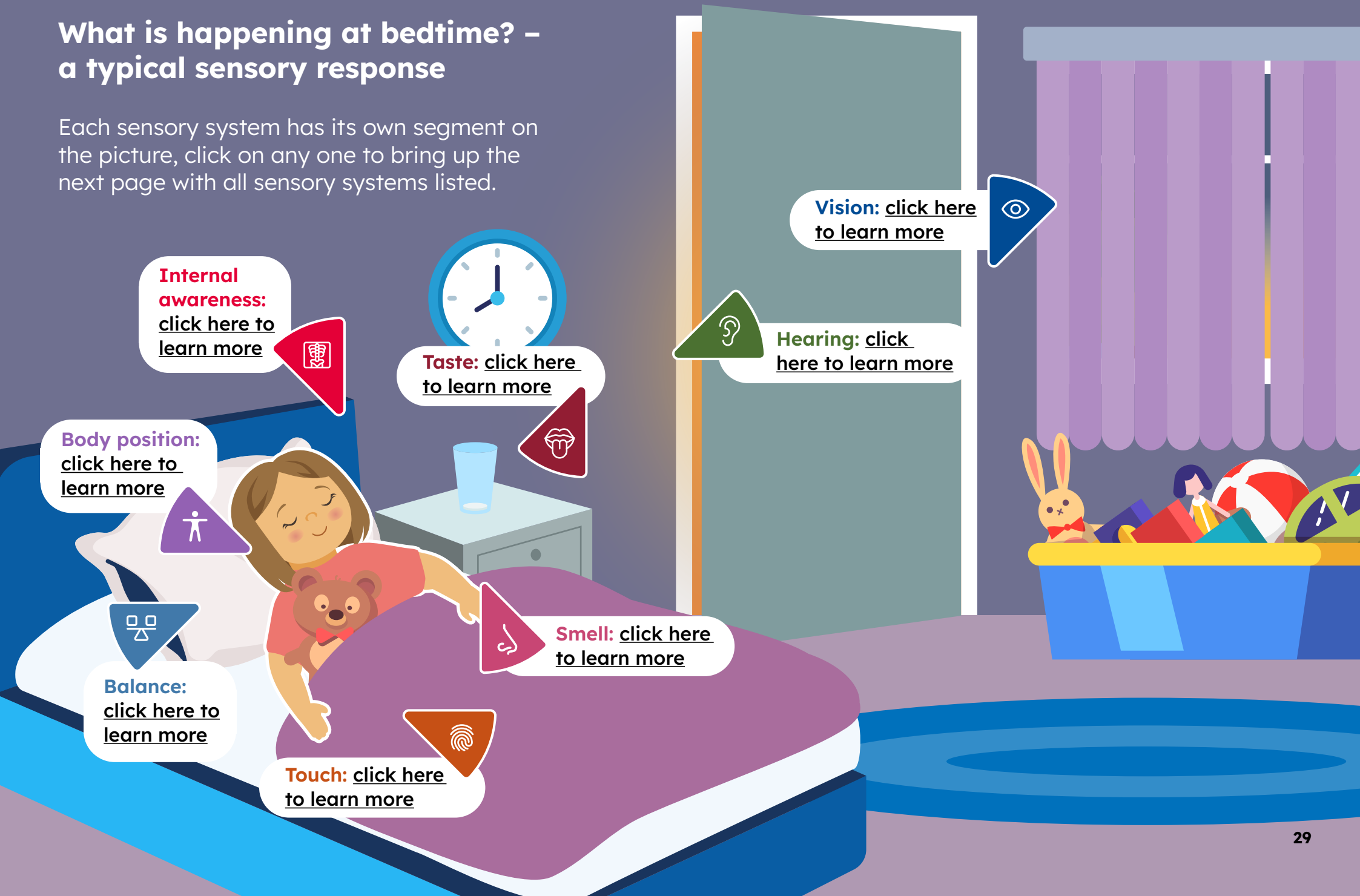
I'm not able to sit up right comfortably, I am leaning to one side, my arm is stuck under the tray. I am not able to reach my food with my hands, and my feet are not supported, so I feel wobbly.

My internal awareness is telling me:

I've had lots of snacks this morning, so I do not feel hungry for lunch. I didn't sleep well last night so am feeling tired and don't feel like eating.

What is happening at bedtime? – a typical sensory response

Each sensory system has its own segment on the picture, click on any one to bring up the next page with all sensory systems listed.



What is happening at bedtime? – a typical sensory response

I can see:

Darkness, there is no light coming through my window. There's nothing in my bed to distract me.

I can hear:

White noise to help me settle to sleep.
The room is quiet.

I can touch:

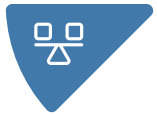
My pyjamas and bedding, which are soft and fit me well. I have had a cuddle before bed. I've got my favourite comfort blanket/teddy. I am comfortable.

I can smell:

Familiar things, including my comfort blanket/teddy.

I can taste:

My evening milk, which I have just had, and I have been helped to clean my teeth using my preferred toothpaste.



I can balance:

I have had some calming movement before bed and feel ready to wind down to sleep.

In my body position:

I am lying down comfortable in my bed, I feel safe and supported.

My internal awareness is telling me:

I feel sleepy and cosy. I've eaten well so don't feel hungry. I feel settled to be within my own room.

What is happening at bedtime? – sensory response difficulties

Each sensory system has its own segment on the picture, click on any one to bring up the next page with all sensory systems listed.

What is happening at bedtime? – sensory response difficulties

I can see:

A bright light outside my window. One of my toys is flashing in the corner of the room. The door is ajar, and I can see a light coming through from the hallway.

I can hear:

The TV is on downstairs, it is very loud. There is a car outside playing loud music. I can hear my sibling singing and someone is clattering in the kitchen. The clock in my room is loud.

I can touch:

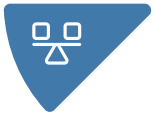
My sheets, they feel scratchy from being washed. My pyjamas are riding up around my calves and feel tight across my back as I have grown.

I can smell:

My bedding, it smells different, and my favourite toy has been washed so doesn't smell like me anymore. There is a dirty nappy in my room. I can smell dinner cooking.

I can taste:

The toothpaste, which tasted different tonight and was too strong in my mouth. My milk tasted different; it wasn't the usual temperature.



I can balance:

I have been running around playing tickling games and spinning in circles and now I don't feel as sleepy.

In my body position:

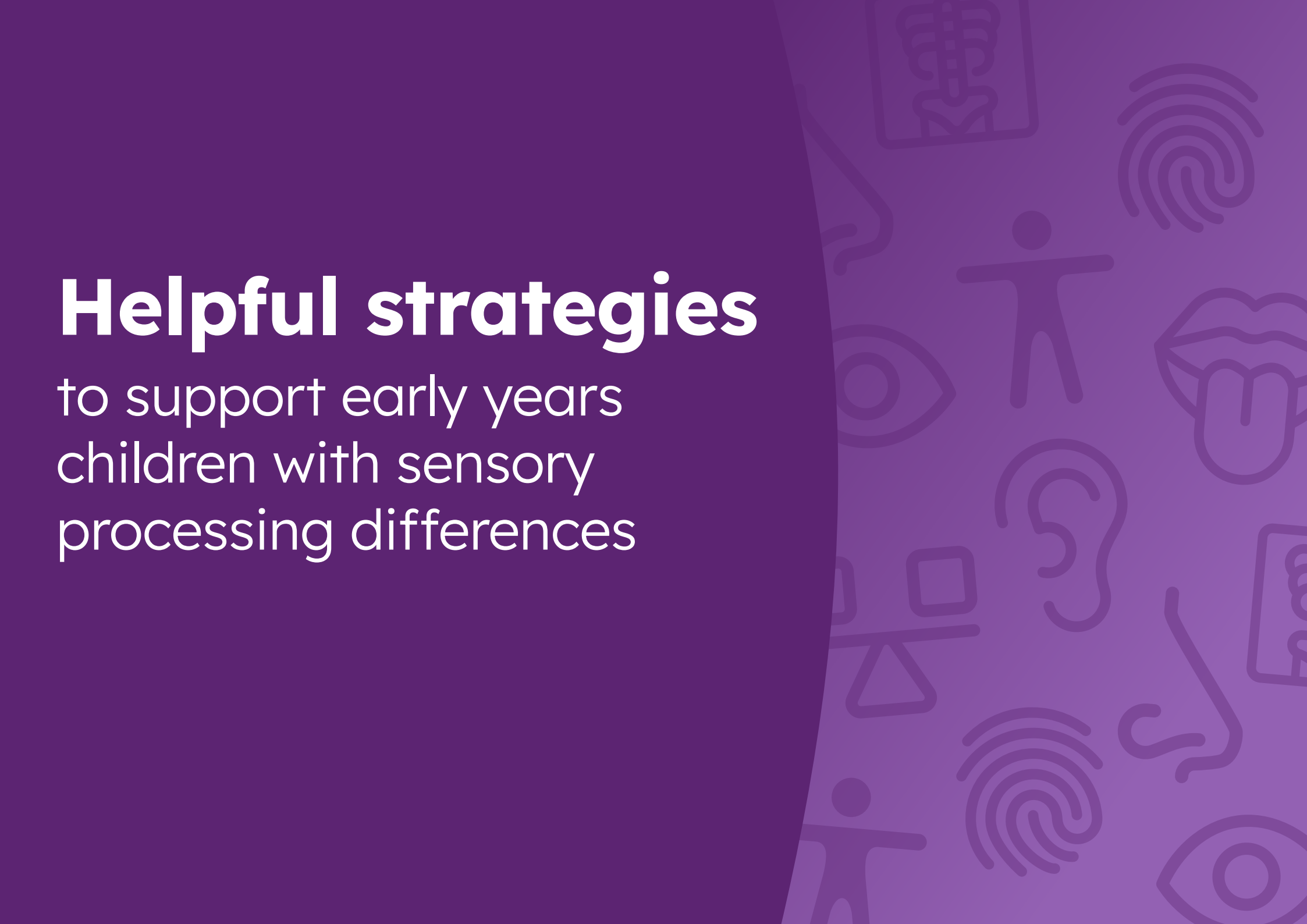
I feel uncomfortable, there is clutter on my bed, there are too many toys and clothes on my bed, I can't lay down comfortably.

My internal awareness is telling me:

I don't feel sleepy, I feel excited to play and be with my family. The cut on my knee is irritating me and feels sore. I feel cold. I had a disagreement with my sibling before bed and still feel upset.

Helpful strategies

to support early years children with sensory processing differences



There are practical strategies that you can put in place to support pre-schoolers with and without sensory processing differences.

Sensory supports work best when they are implemented everyday as part of a child's daily routine. There are many simple strategies that when implemented regularly will make a difference to the child's ability to participate.

Planning sensory strategies

Think proactively!

Thinking ahead of the time you might need a resource, or a strategy will mean you have it to hand when the child needs it.

Observe the child

Children with sensory differences are all unique and are likely to respond to sensory input in different ways. It is important to observe the child and notice their cues, take note of early warning signs, note how their behaviour might change and what their response is to different inputs. Once you know this about a child, you can then put something in place to support them before they become dysregulated, withdrawn or meltdown.

Through your observations you can then create a set of strategies that you have put together based on your observations of their actions. If the child is able, you can do this jointly with the child – they may be able to tell you what helps to calm them down or increase their alertness.

Think about the demand of the activity

Think about the energy state the child. How busy has the child been before the activity, are they tired/hungry, what is the age of the child – is it suitable to their cognitive level? Adapt activities dependent on a child's sensory needs. For example, if the child does not like putting their hands into playdough- have it available and use tools to poke in so they can develop confidence without pressure.

Getting started with sensory strategies

On the following pages there are some ideas to support engagement in daily tasks, with a child with sensory processing differences.

Observe the child's engagement and behaviour as you introduce new things. A small change can make huge difference to an individual with sensory processing differences.

On the following pages you will find ideas for:

- **sleep**
- **play**
- **feeding**
- **bathing**
- **toileting**
- **dressing**
- **grooming**

Sleep

Sleep consumes 1/3 of your life and it is a lifetime occupation. It impacts on the health and wellbeing of our brains and bodies. Sleep is important for the repair and recovery, and growth in children.

Sleep requirements vary depending on age and babies will need more support to develop routines and rely more on coregulation.

Effects of sensory differences on sleep behaviours

Children that struggle with regulation, may struggle to fall asleep and/ or have challenges with the quality of their sleep.

Children with sensory sensitivities to sight, touch, movement, and sound can experience more challenges in protecting their sleep and are disturbed easily.

Some children don't yet have the ability to self-soothe and therefore require additional co-regulation, adaptive strategies, and use of external sensory inputs to support sleep.

We need a well-functioning interoception sense to tell us that we are tired.

Sleep - ideas to support healthy sleep routines

Supporting regulation for bedtime

- try to ensure your child engages in lots of movement and heavy work activities during the day. However, at least one hour before bed, change to quieter activities/ play, reading, singing, puzzles, drawing etc
- developing a consistent routine before bed helps the mind and body prepare for sleep. It may take some time to discover what works best for you and your child. Routines will need to be adapted as the child grows
- try to avoid bright screens (TV, computer, phone, iPad). Especially in the 1-2 hours right before bedtime. Research tells us that blue light is alerting and can have a negative impact on melatonin production, which is needed for sleep
- rhythmic, gentle rocking in a rocking chair can be soothing
- having a tight hug or play the 'steam roller' game (older children - roll an exercise ball firmly over your child's back while they lie on a carpeted floor or mat)
- take a warm bath/ shower. Try calming scents such as lavender in the bath or a diffuser
- meditate or do light yoga
- be conscious about fabric preferences of bed sheets and pyjamas
- try helping your child into bed when they are drowsy, so they begin to develop their own self soothing strategies

Environmental changes

- relax in a quiet space before bedtime, with dim lighting and decreased sensory inputs e.g. visual and auditory stimulation
- play soft, rhythmical music or white noise
- dim the lights and close the curtains/ blinds prior to the child entering the room. Use black out blinds to help filter out any additional light
- deep breathing with counting
- tightly tuck the bed sheets/ blanket in to provide firm, maintained deep touch pressure. Ensure your child is able to get out if they need to
- for independently mobile children, offer heavy body pillows, duvets or weighted soft toys. Again, ensure your child is able to get out if they need to
- always adhere to safe sleep advise, visit **lullaby trust** for more information

Suggested activities for quiet time

In the home

- having a cuddle on the sofa
- having a lie down in a quiet room, you may need to lie down with your child
- sitting to read a story
- sitting having a snack
- playing with their toys (their choice of toys)
- sitting in a quiet corner or play tent with a toy, puzzle or a book
- sitting and colouring
- doing a puzzle
- playing a non-competitive game

Try and avoid screens (TV, phone, tablet and computer games).

Activities outside

Nature and gentle activities are beneficial for all of us

- time in the garden: playing, digging, playing with water and or sand
- time in the park: walking, running, playing on play equipment
- walking in the woods: collect sticks, leaves, acorns etc.
- going to the beach: digging, collecting shells and making sandcastles
- walking back for nursery or school: through a park to enable your child to run off some steam

Feeding strategies

Many children struggle with feeding and developing eating skills.

Learning to eat is a complex movement and sensory skill. Children need to be given the right opportunities to develop their skills. Nearly all parents experience some pressure about their child's eating and drinking whether their child is eating the right food, eating and drinking enough, have the right nutrients and opinions from other people.

Food is sensory

Food is **visual**

Food has **smell**

Food has **sound**

Food has **flavour**

Food has **taste**

Food has **texture**

Food has **temperature**

Reference: Anxious Eaters, Anxious Mealtimes - Marsha Dunn Klein - Archway Publishing

It is very important that we help the child find enjoyment in the sensory aspect of eating, is confident with their own oral motor skills and is internally motivated to want to eat.

Reference: Anxious Eaters, Anxious Mealtimes - Marsha Dunn Klein - Archway Publishing

Food is sensory

As adults we have had many years of experience of eating a variety of foods, this has been through a range of different opportunities. This has enabled us to build a library of experiences, when we see a new / unfamiliar food we will use all these experiences to enable us to assess whether we want to try the new food and will only try if it is acceptable to us.

Children start with very limited experiences, a baby only knows milk and when we introduce our baby to foods through weaning we are giving them new experiences - new tastes, flavours and textures. We need to give them opportunities to enable them to develop their skills to eat and drink such as learn to feed themselves, develop chewing skills as well as offer a variety of experiences for your baby to build up their own library of sensory experiences. We want these to be positive so that they are curious about exploring different foods, enabling them to develop and refine their skills and to be able to eat a variety of foods to support their growth and have energy.

Sensory steps to eating

Children need many experiences to be able to understand and accept different foods and everyone goes through many sensory steps before they accept a new food to eat. We start with food far away and get closer to it.

- It starts with being in the same room as a food (think of a food that you have never seen before if it smells disgusting to you would you be able to be in the same room?).
- Being on the table in front of you or on your plate.
- Before you would think of placing the food in your mouth and tasting it, you will want to look at it, smell it.
- Then touch it with your finger to give you an idea of what it feels like and smell like.
- If the food looks and feels acceptable then you may want to taste it. This may be a very small taste to start with such as licking your finger that touched the food or a bigger taste by licking or taking a small nibble.

Learning to eat food

Puree and solid food

Some children accept puree well but are more hesitant with solid pieces of food or lumps in their puree. Other babies/ children prefer to touch, hold and taste solid pieces of food. Offer positive opportunities for your child to learn to eat and be led by them.

Some children develop chewing skills easily others need more practice.

It is vital to give your child a variety of positive opportunities and enable them to explore food and utensils themselves to develop and learn the skills. Offer textures of food that your child is able to manage.

Positioning

It is important for your child to be supported well so that they feel safe and are stable to promote them to being able to physically carry out and learn skills for eating. We would always recommend that children sit whilst eating as this is the safest position and promotes your child's ability to use their hands effectively.

Prepare for your child to get messy. This is a vital stage in their development to enable them to develop their skills and to be able to explore the sensory aspects of food, to learn about the food and learning to feed themselves.

Be positive, encouraging and model what you want them to do rather than place pressure on how much they should eat.

Children are very good at picking up when a parent is uncomfortable and stressed and eating is one of the skills that causes parents to feel pressure and worry as they want their child to eat and drink adequate amounts to enable their child to grow and have energy.

The long term aim is for your child to learn to eat, chew, feed themselves, to use cutlery, understand the feelings of when they are hungry, thirsty and full. Everyone has a slightly different journey just like everyone has different likes and dislikes.

Learning to chew

Chewing is a complex skill it involves the child being able to move the food within their mouth using their tongue to position it on their teeth to chew and break the food down ready to swallow. Food needs to be broken down small enough to be swallowed safely.

Start with offering foods that are easy to chew.

The easiest foods to start with are foods that are:

- bite and melt consistency (these are foods that are solid to touch and hold with your hand but when mixed with saliva will melt naturally) foods such as puff type crisps/ meltable baby foods
- soft easy to chew foods in small bite sized pieces, typically these squash easily between your thumb and finger such as small bite sized pieces of soft cooked potato / mash potato / sweet potato / raspberries.

When your child starts to learn to chew they need to practice this skill to refine their skills to enable them to fully develop their chewing skills to enable them to eat more difficult textures such as meat. Offer your child foods that match their ability. Your child will not want to eat much if the food is too difficult for them to chew and this places them at more risk of having difficulties such as gagging, holding it in their mouth and choking this may then lead to them not wanting to eat the food or try new foods.

Learning to self feed

Learning to feed yourself and use cutlery takes much time and practice.

Babies typically will learn to explore toys/objects and food with their hands and will often bring them to their mouths to explore. We need to give children opportunities to touch and explore toys and objects of different textures to build up their skills to touch, grasp and manipulate different shapes and sizes as well as learn about different sensations.

When introducing foods we want them to enjoy exploring it with their hands to build up their knowledge of what it feels and smells like. They may then want to taste it or put their hand in their mouth to taste it. We need to give them daily opportunities to enjoy and build up their skills and abilities.

It is easiest to use our hands to feed ourselves – to use our finger to dip it in yoghurt and lick our finger or to pick up a biscuit and take a bite.

Developing cutlery skills

It is far more difficult to hold a tool (spoon/fork) to load it and then take it to our mouth to feed ourselves, and we need much experience and time to practise.

Offering activities that encourage your child to explore, grasp and hold different tools, will promote their ability to start to use cutlery.

We can also do this with food e.g. a bread stick or chip dipped in a sauce/puree or spread. This is the same action we use to hold a spoon and dip into a bowl of sauce/puree.

To assist learning to use a spoon, we may start by offering a dipped spoon to allow the child to grasp the spoon and take it to their mouth. This can be a messy process but unless your child is offered time to practise and explore, they are not going to learn.

All motor skills take much practice to learn and refine.

Hesitant eaters

Refusing to eat is a normal phase of development that all children go through. They will show this to you by becoming fussier, refusing previously eaten foods and not willing to try new/ unfamiliar foods. Children are generally very good at knowing how much they need to eat in order to grow. It can be frustrating for parents if their child does not eat similar amounts at each meal or their intake varies from day to day.

Children generally spread their calorie intake over a 7–10 day period. Often, they will eat well some days and less on other days. This is typical but may cause parents to worry. If a parent becomes worried or anxious your child can easily pick this up and this may cause more difficulties / stress at mealtimes.

Many children are hesitant to try new or unfamiliar foods and may eat a restricted range of foods. By offering opportunities through meals/snack times and play your child can build up their confidence with a wider range of foods which may then lead them to try it.

Where possible eat with your child, you are modelling eating a wider range of foods and that the food is safe to eat. Give your child the opportunity to explore foods but don't ask them to eat it (this can place pressure on your child).

When offering new food always offer 1-3 choices of food that you know your child will eat alongside the unfamiliar food. This reduces the pressure on your child from feeling that they are having to try new foods and gives them choice to choose what they want to eat as a result this can reduce some of the refusal to eat. We all are more willing to try new foods when it is our choice and when we see others eating it. Even if they don't try the food they have had the opportunity to become more familiar with the food.

Food based activities to support eating

Allow your child to touch and explore food in play as well as when eating.

- helping with making food – breaking foods up (snap a crisp/biscuit), stirring mixtures, placing pieces of fruit/biscuits on a plate, fruit kebabs, spreading jam on toast, decorating cakes / biscuits, add toppings to pizza, making a sandwich
- making and pouring drinks- try different flavours and colours, try a finger dip taste. You can use water play to assist this, try adding some squash to water to give a different smell/colour and encouraging your child to fill and pour from pots/cups/jug/container
- play activities using food – encourage your child to touch and interact with food through play. Use a variety of different foods such as biscuit sand, rice, pasta, whipped cream, jelly, custard, icing sugar, ketchup. Model activities and allow your child to copy or make new games. For example use a spoon to scoop, fill small pots and pour, pushing car or ball through yoghurt to make a line, using a fork to draw patterns, build a biscuit tower, thread hoops on a string to make a necklace
- if your child is hesitant to touch, do not place their hand in the material but make the activity fun so your child wants to copy you / do the activity. Dry materials are much easier than wet and sticky. To make dry materials wet offer your child some water alongside and allow them to add it to the dry. When doing messy activities have a damp cloth or small bowl of water nearby to allow your child to wash/wipe their hands; this often reassures them that they can clean their hands if they are hesitant
- to develop cutlery skills- carry out activities that use tools – sand play and scooping the sand using a pot/ spoon; drawing activities: making patterns in sand / shaving foam / squirty cream with a fork; learning to cut with a knife – start with play dough – roll a sausage and use a knife to cut it, stab the sausage with a fork and use a knife to cut it; roll play dough or pastry flat and cut different shapes out using a knife

Mealtime suggestions

- sit with your child when eating and eat with them
- ensure your child is sitting comfortably and is supported well
- offer choice at mealtimes, always offer some foods that you know your child is happy to eat alongside other less familiar foods (this may be what you are eating). Understand your child's eating and choices
- offer small portions (they can ask for more)
- offer textures of food that your child is able to manage
- allow your child to explore the food and feed themselves
- allow your child to explore the food but not eat it if they don't want to
- allow you child to pick food from your plate if they show interest – give positive comments about the food eg. 'this food is crunchy', 'this is nice and spicy'
- offer buffet style meals (choice) and if they are able allow them to choose how much they put on their plate.
- offer regular meals and snacks through the day and don't offer them snacks/milk/juice in between. Aim for every 11/2 – 2 hours. If they don't choose to eat at one offer, don't stress, you know that you will be offering them an opportunity very soon.
- don't trick your child by hiding unfamiliar food or telling them that this is the food they like but offering them something different such as a different brand of the food. Your child needs to be able to trust that you haven't changed or altered the food. Imagine biting into a cheese sandwich which had a hidden spider in it!
- don't offer too much milk or fruit juice – these give lots of calories and reduce your child's need to eat food. From 1 year old they only need 500ml of milk a day (not including yoghurt/custard/dairy puddings)
- be aware of your own responses to food and mess. You are the most important model for your child to show them what to do and what is safe

Buffet or picnic style meals

Why?

- We love a picnic style meal or a buffet as it offers us choice. Choice of food and how much we put on our plate when we serve ourselves. This gives the child control and will optimise how much they eat. This also offers opportunities to see a wider range of food, without eating it.

Some tips

- offer choices of food your child is happy to eat alongside other food. For example if your child wants a biscuit offer them a choice of biscuit
- always allow your child to choose the food from the choice, but don't insist they eat it
- allow and encourage your child to interact with the food e.g. placing a plate on the table, passing a plate to someone at the table and touching the food with cutlery or their hands to serve
- talk about food – it is hot/cold, colour, flavour -spicy, sweet, sour, creamy
- allow your child to spit the food out if they have tasted it but don't want to swallow it, this allows them to build their confidence with tasting
- please don't ask you child to taste/eat, model eating the food yourself

Toileting strategies

What skills do children need to be independent with toileting?

Independent toileting

Understanding and sequencing tasks

Does your child understand the concept of using the toilet, the language used for instructions and prompts and are they able to follow the steps required for independent toileting?

Body awareness and posture

Can your child sit on the potty or toilet without loosing their balance? Are they aware of their body parts and their functions?

Motor co-ordination and control

Can your child get on and off the potty or toilet, can they pull off sheets of toilet paper and wipe, can they turn on the taps to wash their hands?

Sensory processing factors

Can your child manage the different and changing sensory stimulus within a toilet or bathroom e.g. noise, temperature, smell?

Noticing and responding to internal body signals

Does your child recognise and communicate body cues regarding their need to open their bowels or empty their bladder?

Learning to use the toilet

Learning to use the toilet requires lots of opportunities to become familiar with expectations and build understanding. Time and practice is required!

Three stages;

1. Preparing to use the potty

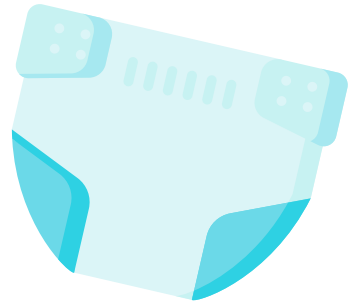
- remove nappies as soon as wet or dirty to reinforce sensation of feeling clean and dry
- allow short periods of nappy free time after your child has done a wee or poo to get used to not wearing a nappy
- talk about using the toilet within the family, let young children see siblings or parents use the toilet
- talk positively about the experience

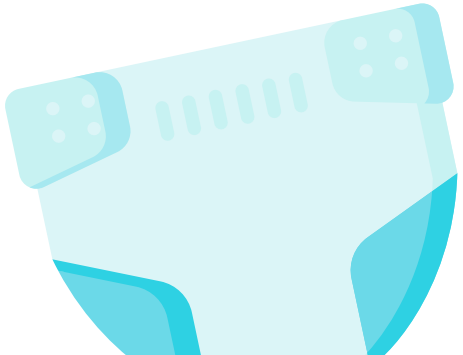
2. Practicing using the potty

- incorporate into daily routine e.g. after waking up, before going into the bath
- a short while after mealtimes
- any time you recognise your child's cues e.g. straining
- keep the potty visually available rather than getting it out just when practicing using it

3. Stopping using nappies

- consider best time for you and your family, don't attempt when other big life events are happening e.g. illness or moving house
- ensure your child is drinking plenty of fluids
- pay close attention to your child's body signals, fidgeting, holding or touching their pants, hiding and going quiet, crouching down and direct them to the potty to help make the association between how their body feels and what they need to do next





Sensory Challenges

Possible sensory challenges associated with toileting;

- poor body awareness meaning child struggles to recognise internal body signals that they need to open bowels/empty bladder
- withholding can affect both wee and poo
- seeking tactile input through playing with poo or smearing
- avoiding participation through not wanting hands to get dirty or not wanting to wash hands
- sensitive to sensation of wet wipes or body temperature changes when clothing removed
- sensitive to smells experienced during nappy changes
- not able to tolerate sounds of hand dryers within public toilets
- seeking lots of movement and fidgeting, meaning child does not sit long enough to successfully use potty

Strategies to try to overcome sensory challenges

Follow three steps to potty training process as described on page 50.

Focus on addressing any constipation related issues first before working to reduce worries, consider the bathroom environment and how it can be as comfortable as possible.

1. Prewarning and preparation

- give preparation before entering public toilets, talk about hand dryers being used by other people
- provide ear defenders or headphones before going into toilets where hand dryers are used

2. Environment

- encourage a standing change as soon as child can stand up to encourage their participation and to keep hands busy and involved
- provide a step if the sink is too high to reach comfortably
- check the temperature of the room, is it too cold/too warm
- use a flannel with warm water rather than cold wet wipes for cleaning
- air fresheners can be helpful to mask toilet smells but equally can be overpowering for those with sensitivities to smell
- provide a step under a child's feet if sitting on the toilet so they feel stable

3. Adult approach

- take turns in blowing a windmill or bubbles can help the body to physically relax and release tension
- model handwashing, encourage your child to turn the tap on, pump or rub the soap, grab their own towel
- grade participation by encouraging your child to do the last step of a task e.g. pull up waistband from hips only, give lots of praise and celebration before expecting a little more when this has become part of the routine
- use count downs, singing, telling a story to help as positive distractions

4. Sensory supports

- give your child an object to hold in their hands if trying to explore contents of their nappy
- provide your child with lots of tactile messy play throughout their routine both at home and at nursery/ preschool
- you child may prefer to hold a scented fidget object to smell to mask the toileting smell

Resources and signposting

essexfamilywellbeing.co.uk/services/pregnancy-and-first-five-years/toilet-training

eric.org.uk/potty-training

eric.org.uk/sensory-needs-and-toileting/

www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/toileting

Dressing strategies

Dressing can be broken down in small steps.

To help a child learning to dress themselves try the following steps:

1. ask your child to help you when you dress them. For example; holding out a foot for you to put on a sock, or help pushing their arms through their sleeves
2. encourage them to learn to take off easy clothing that does not have fastenings (i.e. socks, pyjamas, a large t-shirt)
3. support them to put on clothing that does not have fastenings (i.e. elasticated shorts)
4. encourage them to take off or put on clothes with some help with the fastenings
5. encourage them to do up and undo fastenings themselves

Different steps can be tried alongside each other. Some can take longer to achieve as the skills needed are harder to learn.

Dressing

Dressing is a complex task. Your child needs a variety of skills to be successful.

When you child is learning to get dressed you need to think of the following:

Body awareness

- do they have a good understanding of where their body parts are in relation to each other and to their clothing?

Balance

- can they maintain their balance when standing, moving, reaching and bending?

Fine motor skills

- are they able to do up buttons and zips/fastenings?

Visual motor skills

- can they use their eyes and movements together to find where the clothing needs to go?
- do they understand spatial concepts such as front, back, top?

Motor planning

- can they understand the order of the steps needed to get dressed?

Bilateral coordination:

- are they able to use both sides of the body together in a coordinated way?

Cognitive skills:

- can they plan, organise and maintain their attention to the task of dressing?
- do they understand what they need to do?
- are they motivated to dress and undress themselves?

Sensory skills:

- are they able to handle different textures?
- can they feel the difference between different textures?

Possible sensory challenges

Possible sensory challenges the child may experience:

- texture preferences - some textures may feel uncomfortable, irritating or distracting
- seams may be uncomfortable, irritating or distracting
- layering clothing items on top of each other such as wearing a coat or cardigan may be uncomfortable, irritating or distracting
- some children can find tight/loose fitting clothing uncomfortable
- dislike of tags/motifs on clothing- this can easily become a distraction
- unaware of temperature and when they might need to wear more clothes or less clothes
- they might be sensitive to clothes that don't feel and smell like they are used to. It can be difficult for them to wear clothes when they have been washed in different fabric softeners and smell different than normal. Sometimes brand-new clothes can feel and smell different
- visually some clothes might not look right to the child
- a reluctance to change out of 'trusted' clothes that are predictable and safe. Unfamiliarity of new clothing
- the environment within which they are getting dressed may be too noisy, visually distracting or smell unpleasant. They may find the pace or speed of dressing challenging and need more time to adjust to clothing

Strategies to consider

Environmental considerations

- offer a relaxed atmosphere and minimise distractions. For example, turn off the TV
- you could use calming music if this is helpful for your child
- consider sitting for some parts of the activity. Putting on socks or completing fastenings may be easier when not trying to balance at the same time
- encourage your child to look in a mirror to increase visual awareness of their body
- allow plenty of time and avoid practicing when you are in a rush to leave home. Incorporate dressing within your everyday routine, for example removing their own clothes at bedtime.
- draw attention to the weather or season to help inform choices about appropriate clothing

Dressing/task considerations

- cut out labels and tags
- turn socks inside out to minimise the feel of the seam, or use seamless socks/seamless underwear
- focus on fabrics that are tolerated
- wash new clothing to soften fabrics, stick to familiar fabric softeners to avoid unnecessary change. Try unscented fabric softeners if sensitive to smell
- tumble dry clothes so they are softer rather than when air-dried
- avoid or adapt fastenings to minimise frustration. For example; snip the buttonhole to make it bigger, swap buttons for Velcro or attach a key ring to a zip for additional pull support
- try to have a few trusted items in different sizes

Person considerations

- involve children in choosing clothing. Stick to preferred fabrics, colours etc. Avoid unnecessary motifs if needed or use clothes that motivate. Try using soft fabrics under clothing with motifs
- hang new clothing up in their room to help them get used to it visually
- complete heavy work before dressing
- you can also try; deep pressure to feet before putting on shoes, firm rub with towel after bathing to prepare for getting dressed
- give deep pressure touch after getting dressed through the fabric of clothing. This will help with tolerating the feel of fabric on the skin
- use layers for warmth if your child does not like wearing a coat. Vests or sport skins can also act as a barrier to fabric that is difficult to tolerate
- your child might have a preference for hats or hoods to cover their ears in response to sensory stimuli
- they may prefer clothing that can be zipped up rather than going over their head
- avoid fabrics that rustle as the child moves if they have a sensitivity to noise. Example: fancy dress outfits

General tips

- involve your child in undressing and dressing by talking about what you are doing. You can start this as young as when they are a baby
- name the body parts
- sing songs about dressing
- follow the same routine to make the activity predictable
- be playful: use dressing up play, let them try on your clothes and you pretend to put theirs on
- let them make choices about what to wear
- all children learn differently. You may need to vary your approach depending on what works for your child. They may need varying levels of assistance to get dressed, showing what to do and verbal prompts to help them understand the process
- praise them throughout the process
- give them time to work it out and don't step in to help too quickly
- be consistent, learning a new skill takes time. Offer support until you feel that your child is making progress.
- start with the easier components so practise removing clothes first
- use loose fitting clothes to begin with that are easier to adjust and remove/put on.
- practice unfolding washing and making them inside out. This will help them practise manipulating clothing.
- you can try using visual supports to help with understanding dressing sequence, for example; put pictures with the order which clothes are put on or taken off
- avoid lots of language and instructions that may confuse the child
- utilise backwards chaining principles (see next page)
- practice, practice, practice!

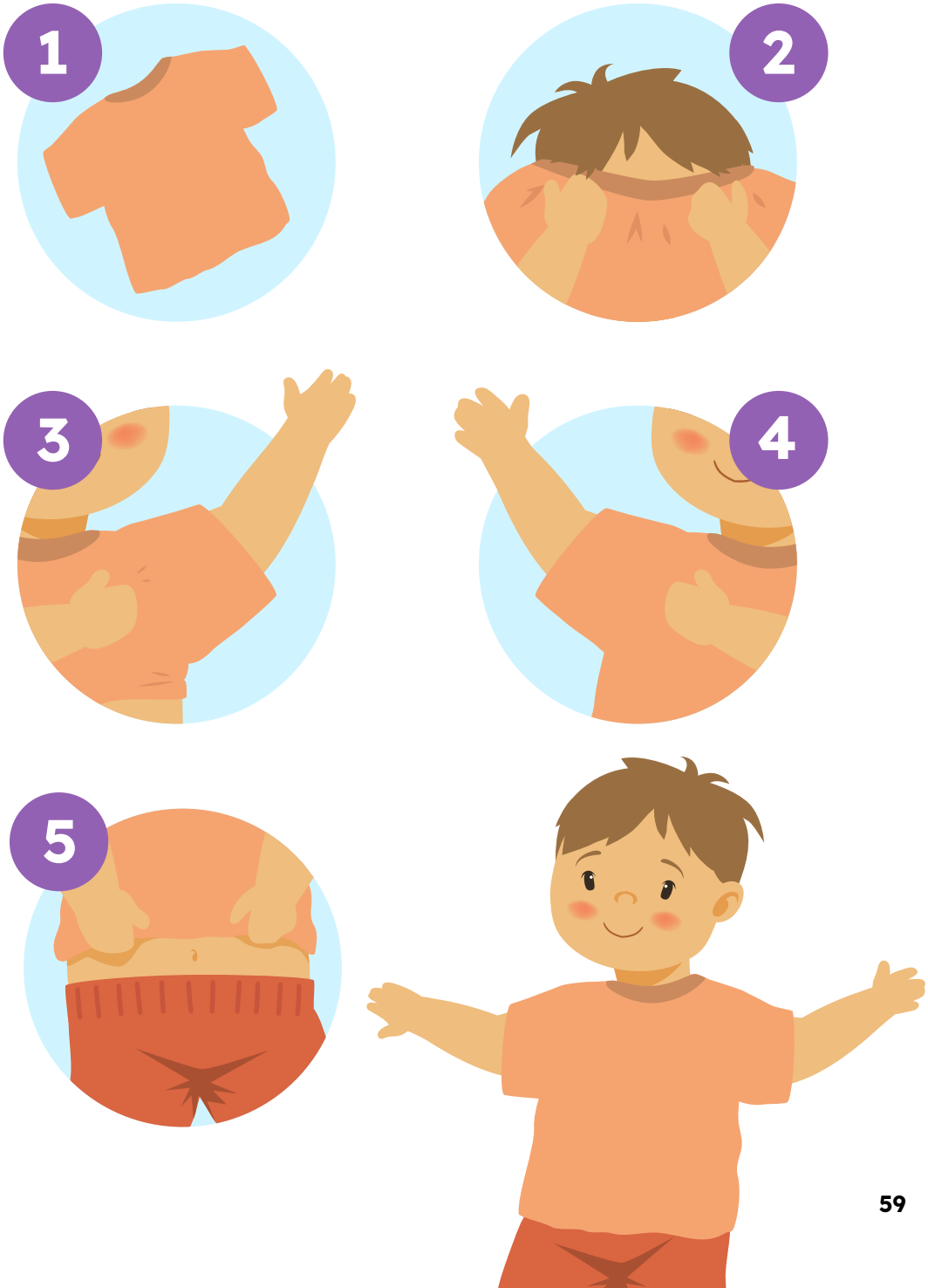
Backwards chaining

Break the task down into smaller steps. Teach your child the last step first, working backwards from the goal. Practise the final step and once they can achieve this then let them work on the second to last step. Continue working back until they can complete the task in full.

Scenario: Putting on a t-shirt

1. Lay the t-shirt front side down on the bed/ floor/ table with the lower edge nearest to your child
2. Pick the back of the t-shirt up and place it over your head
3. Push one arm through the sleeve
4. Push the other arm through the sleeve
5. Pull the t-shirt down

With this example start with step 5- (pulling the t-shirt down), Once they can do this you would work back through the steps. This will support their independence.



Grooming

Sensory sensitivities can make it hard for children to cope with grooming tasks such as hair and nail care.

Children may perceive nail or hair cutting as painful. The taste and smell of toothpaste or shampoo may be overwhelming. The feel of shampoo and water may be distressing during hair washing. The environment of the hairdresser can be overwhelming.

Sensory Challenges

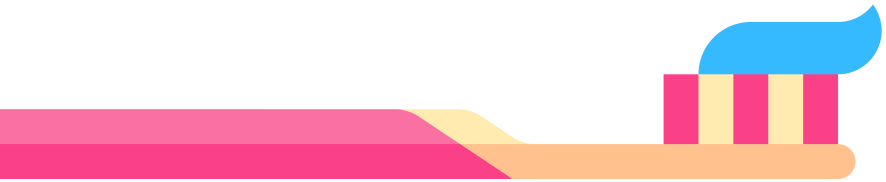
Creating a grooming routine that is structured yet flexible is key to helping children develop good hygiene habits. The following are some tips that can help individuals in overcoming grooming challenges:

1. Introduce sensory-friendly products

Try grooming products for sensory sensitivities. Try and find toothpaste, soap, and shampoo that are fragrance-free, gentle, and non-irritating. Toothbrushes with soft bristles or electric toothbrushes with gentle vibrations may also help.

2. Use Visual schedules

If your child is familiar with them use visual schedules and objects of reference. Use pictures or videos to help your child understand about teeth cleaning. Use online videos of motivating characters such as Peppa Pig, Bluey and Baby Shark. This will support understanding of the grooming process and makes grooming less overwhelming.



3. Gradual Exposure to Sensory Experiences

If certain grooming tasks are overwhelming due to sensory issues, gradually introduce the sensation. Start with using the equipment in play and talking about its use. Model brushing a dolls hair or cleaning her teeth. Even if your child does not seem interested include it in play. Then gradually use short exposures.

Toothbrushing: start with gently rubbing the toothbrush on your child's hands or arms. This will help them learn it is safe before moving onto the mouth and lips. The mouth and lips are a very sensitive area. If you are trying to approach the lips too quickly your child might get frightened.

Hair brushing: Start with brushing hair gently, talk about it and do not try and remove knots or tangles initially. Use conditioner and run your fingers through the hair if possible, during bathtime to try and manage tangies and knots. Give your child control to lead what they are comfortable with. It may take considerable time to be able to incorporate a task into daily routine. You may begin with play with the hairbrush. When you are brushing your child's hair slowly increase the duration until they comfortable with the task. A negative experience such as pulling on hair to remove a knot may result in your child becoming afraid of the activity. If your child does not respond to pain they may not react to you brushing too hard so always be gentle.

4. Positive Reinforcement

Offer praise and encouragement for any element of the task your child is able to complete. Recognise that they are feeling anxious and name those feelings.

Example: “I know you are worried about cleaning your teeth, but it is ok. Look mummy does it and it keeps them nice and clean. Well done for playing with the toothbrush”

5. Provide sensory tools

For children with sensory sensitivities: offer grooming tools that meet their needs. Choosing a soft toothbrush or a comfortable hairbrush, can make the process more tolerable and less overwhelming.

6. Allow for choice

Offer choices where possible, such as choosing the type of toothpaste or hairbrush. Find tools that may be motivating to the child and talk this through. Think of tools such as a Peppa Pig toothbrush or a toothbrush that may be of a preferred colour.

Give the child control over the process and talk through their feelings with them.

Encourage by praising any element of the task where they show engagement.

Don’t push against resistance. Resistance may be caused by difficulties with communication, fear about the demands of the task, sensory difficulties or just not understanding what is happening.

Effective strategies for promoting self-care

1. Give choice and control

This is the most important element of the task. Show your child the tools (for example hairbrush or toothbrush) and let them choose if possible. You can also make choices around any known preferences or motivating interests. Talk through the choices. If possible, buy two one to use and one for play. Leave the play tool in an accessible place where your child likes to play. Learning that the toothbrush is safe before putting near the mouth will help make your child less scared of the tool.

2. Modelling and "narration"

Modelling means demonstrating an activity or behaviour. Narration means talking about what you or your child are doing using simple language when your child is calm. Even if your child does not appear to be taking on board what is happening still use this technique within daily routine.

Example:

> "I am going to brush my hair now. I do it very gently but if I have a tangle, I might need to pull a little more. Would you like to play with your hairbrush."

With repetition you will be reinforcing your child's learning. It also helps reduce anxiety and stress they may have about the task. A preverbal child will still have some understanding of what they are seeing and hearing and this gives them opportunity to gradually increase that understanding.

3. Use social stories

Ideally with some visuals that can be shared at a time when your child is calm, relaxed and happy. Use photographs of the items and space you will be using. If your child struggles with being in the bathroom, cleaning teeth can be done in a safe space where they are happier and more relaxed.

4. Incorporate your desired activity into play and model play

Repeat even if your child does not appear interested always with narration and modelling. Do this activity when you are in a quiet space with time even if just for a few minutes. Do not work on developing these skills at times of the day when you are pressed for time.

Play

Play is the most important occupation of childhood.

It gives children opportunities to develop the following skills:

- communication
- attention
- coordination
- problem-solving
- understanding of the world
- independence

Through play children learn to understand the impact they can have on the world. Children need a variety of different play to help them develop their sensory systems.

Outdoor play

Examples of useful outdoor activities:

- running, jumping and climbing
- exploring the outdoor environment
- building sandcastles at the beach
- hanging from play equipment at the park
- playing on seesaws, trampolines, and swings

These activities help your child experience a variety of touch, smell and sound sensations. The activities support learning problem solving skills and help them develop proprioceptive and vestibular awareness through a variety of movements.

Pay attention to feelings such as hot and cold and how a physical activity makes your body feel. It helps to describe these sensations to your child. This will help your child develop internal awareness.

Outdoor play can continue indoors. You can collect leaves, mud or sticks, during a woodland walk. Bring these objects home for a messy play or craft activity such as building a fairy garden.

Water play

Water play is a great way to help a child develop the following:

- a sense of touch
- proprioceptive sense when scooping and pouring with cups
- independence skills with drinking and pouring drinks
- interoceptive awareness by exploring different water temperatures
- you can add colouring to the water to add a visual element

Messy play

Allow your child to play with a variety of textures, both wet and dry, to develop their sense of touch and proprioception.

Examples of materials: sand, play dough, rice, glitter, shaving foam and fake snow

Because your child will need to use different amounts of force to manipulate the materials it helps with their development of co-ordination.

You can stimulate other senses by including different colours or smells and even taste if using edible materials.

Examples:

- using different foods to make a picture such as broccoli or celery for trees
- use spaghetti, crushed biscuits or chocolate for the earth
- use different fruits and vegetables to make different animals or people

Try to resist the temptation to clean up around your child as they play.

Avoid wiping down their face, hands or the surface they are playing on, until the activity is finished.

If your child appears uncertain of different messy textures, have a wipe available for them to wipe themselves if needed. Don't keep initiating this yourself.

Obstacle courses and building dens

Building obstacle courses or dens is another great opportunity to develop proprioceptive and vestibular skills, touch, body awareness and problem solving.

Encourage your child to try different objects to make a den. Place cushions on the floor and encourage them to climb over and under things.

As your child explores the activity you can talk about concepts such as 'up', 'next to', 'under', to help them develop spatial awareness.

Interaction games

Play games that involve you interacting with your child.

Examples:

- peek-a-boo
- pulling faces in a mirror for them to mimic. You could do sticking out your tongue, blowing raspberries, scrunching up your nose
- placing pegs and stickers on different parts of your child's body to find and reach to remove

These games provide lots of visual opportunities but also proprioception as they feel how their muscles work to perform the action and develop movement patterns.

You can add an interoceptive element to this play by helping your child label their emotions, such as when they seem excited, surprised or happy during a song.

Ball and balloon games

Playing with balls or balloons helps to develop co-ordination using the developing proprioceptive system.

You can use different sizes, colours and textures in this play to explore different visual and touch sensations.

Balloons or scarves are slower moving and therefore easier for children to learn to track and be able to catch or hit.

Adding small beads or sequins inside balloons will give additional visual and sound experiences.

Creative activities

Examples:

- drawing on different surfaces such as textured card
- chalk on pavement or blackboard
- glitter glue sticks
- using scented pens
- gluing and sticking different materials together
- making models out of objects such as bottles, toilet rolls, cardboard boxes

These activities offer many multisensory opportunities to help your child develop their awareness of themselves and the world around them.

Use different sensory materials to copy prewriting shapes such as lines, circles, crosses and squares. This can help your child in the longer term with their handwriting skills.

Nursery rhymes

Nursery rhymes are a lovely way to have some connection time with your child as you learn which rhymes they favour.

Nursery rhymes stimulate our children's sense of sound. They also feed into their visual, touch, proprioceptive and vestibular senses depending on any materials used and the actions performed.

As your child becomes more familiar with the rhymes, you can pause at points for them to finish particular words.

To add in some additional sensory activities, you can make your own instruments with your child

Examples:

- fill containers with a variety of rice, pasta, lentils, sand or sequins
- explore how they all feel, sound and look different

Further proprioceptive input can be added by exploring soft, hard, fast, slow movements with the instruments. You can add different actions such as clapping and hand actions. Jumping, spinning and swaying movements will stimulate the vestibular system.

Play with everyday objects

There are so many day-to-day items around our homes that children love to play with. Exploring what you can do with them helps to develop their understanding of the world.

Examples of everyday objects:

- saucepans
- wooden and plastic utensils
- storage jars and containers
- cutlery
- sponges

Examples of activities:

- make everyday objects into instruments
- pouring things like water, lentils or pasta in and out of a container or saucepan
- container play can be used to help your child understand concepts of filling and emptying. They can also play sorting objects into different categories e.g. by size, shape, colour
- children can copy what they see adults doing, such as making a meal in the kitchen
- you can also create a ‘treasure basket’ with different objects inside

Examples of things you can put in the basket:

- sponges,
- spikey balls
- pieces of material
- foil blanket
- feathers
- wooden rattles or objects

Incorporate exploration into everyday activities

Children learn a lot from doing day-to-day activities with adults.

Examples:

- get your child involved with food preparation in the kitchen. This gets them to experience different sounds, smells, tastes and textures
- decorate biscuits with different coloured icing and sweets – they can help to add food colouring to icing to explore the changes in colour
- you can try making different flavours of smoothies, taste test different sauces or spread different condiments on crackers
- when introducing new foods, always include some more familiar, 'safe' foods so your child does not feel intimidated
- try using different scents in the bath for your child to explore. Let them smell the different products you use in your morning routine
- have dress up costumes with different materials for your child to practise putting on and taking off
- naming different body parts while washing or dressing helps to develop body awareness

Tips for supporting your toddler in play

- make sure your child is in a 'just right' state for play. It's ok for them to be a little excited at playtime, but if they are over-energised, they will struggle to concentrate. Equally, if they are under-aroused (e.g. tired, bored) they will find it difficult to engage. Choosing the right time to engage them, or providing some appropriate sensory input such as proprioceptive and vestibular activities will ensure they get the best from the play opportunities provided. Please see p82, Strategies to try within the learning and home environment for pre-schoolers, for ideas of appropriate activities to help regulate your child's energy levels
- start with activities your child is interested in and model different ways to use the materials or toys available
- don't expect your child to be able to sustain long periods of attention for an activity. Aim for little and often rather than one long play session
- present one or maybe two (to encourage choice) toys or activities at a time. This will help your child to fully focus on the play activity at hand and support their attention skills
- a toy rotation can be a useful way to ensure your child is not overwhelmed with lots of toys at once. It also keeps the toys novel as once they have been hidden away for a little while- it is like having a whole new toy again! When seeing the toys again, they might find new ways to play with them and include them in their games
- try to avoid toys with lots of flashing lights and music that just goes on and on. Toys with lights and sounds that only play for a short while are better for your child's learning. They will need to interact again (e.g. by pressing a button) to get the toy to perform again
- many children go through phases of repetitive actions with toys such as throwing them or hiding them. These are known as schemas - patterns of behaviour which help our children to understand the world and develop their coordination skills. Although these can be irritating (and sometimes entertaining!) for us parents, these are all important stages in our children's learning. Try not to discourage the schemas but rather support them. Find different ways to explore if the particular play is undesirable

  Example 1: your child may like to try throwing hard objects to see the course the object takes, where it lands, how hard. Instead of telling your child to stop, you can give them a clear boundary. Tell them that they cannot throw hard toys and objects which might break but they can throw balls, soft toys and cuddly animals. You can extend the game by trying to encourage them to throw soft toys into a target such as a washing basket to help develop their coordination skills.

  Example 2: your child likes to line up toys or walk around the edge of things. You can extend this play by offering objects of different colours, shapes and sizes for them to line up and sort. You can also offer different sizes and shapes of objects to navigate around. Talk about the shape of the object, how tall it is, etc. as they walk around.

Bathing

Bath time can be a time for play and interaction with your child. Your child needs to be in a just right state to enjoy this.

You will need to organise the bathing environment, and you need to have the right expectations. You will need to prepare your child, so they know what is going to happen. This will make them less worried and make the process smoother.

Over time you will learn your child's bathing preferences and improve the process. The most important thing you can do throughout this process is to communicate with your child. Children may prefer a bath or a shower. A well-planned shower routine may work well. For other children a bath will work better. It is also possible that this varies depending on the time pressures for the family and time of day.

Try different things until you find a combination that works best for you and your child. Experimenting is key. It may be better to allow your child to take control of washing during bathing or showering. This can be enough to stop distress from building into a meltdown.

When bathing, showering or grooming be a sensory detective: be mindful of the different sensory demands of the process

Possible sensory challenges:

- the sounds of water running and splashing
- distress over the water temperature being too or cold. If your child does not respond to painful stimuli they may not recognise if the water is too hot. Always check carefully before putting the child into the water
- if your child is very keen on bathing, always run the cold water first then add the hot to avoid any risk of scolding
- dislike of air temperatures after getting out
- disorientation from being in a small, confined space
- bath and shower surfaces are more slippery when wet. Balance in standing or sitting may be more difficult especially for children who have poor balance
- instability getting in and out of the bath
- the feeling of water on their skin, hair, or face
- interpretation of the noises in the bathroom can be distressing. This can include extractor fans, the water running, the water going out of the plughole. The acoustics in the bathroom are often different in a room with a hard floor
- **texture preferences:** some children do not like being in water or become over excited by being in water and are difficult to transition in and out. Showering can be difficult for children that are sensitive to touch. Children have described the feeling of shower water as like needles on the skin. Drying with a towel can be uncomfortable especially if the towel is not soft. Some children struggle with soft rubbing
- **smells:** the smell of soaps, shampoos, bubble bath and odours around the toilet can be triggering. I can make your child more excitable or over aroused and distressed
- **visually:** bathrooms are often brightly lit with mirrors and white bathroom fittings. This can be visually over stimulating increase arousal

1. Identify stressors of showering or bathing

Duration

How long does bathing or showering take? Keep track of how long bathing is taking then use a timer to help the child know the end of bath time is coming.

Water temperature

Keep a thermometer nearby to test water temperature at every stage of bathing, during meltdowns, and when things are calm. Use a bath thermometer to set the bath at the right level.

Water level

Keep a plastic ruler nearby to test water height. Once you find the ideal temperature and height you can prepare a bath with the best chance of success.

Temperature in the bathroom

Is it too cold to get out of the bath when your child is soaking wet. Keep towels ready for wrapping up in at the end of the bath.

If your child **hates the feeling of being wet when showering** lay out a change of clothes to speed up the process of getting dressed.

Textures

For many children with autism, there are definite texture preferences. A facecloth feels different from a sponge. The texture of towels can vary from one to another. Their texture can become an even bigger issue, depending on whether you gently towel dry your child or use a more vigorous rub. Try to identify preferred towels. Using a towel with a motivating image (favourite tv/film character) can also support transition out of the water.

2. Help your child feel secure in the bath

The first step in making your child feel secure is feeling secure yourself. Finding the right bath or shower routine can be a process. It involves trial and error, patience, and going slowly to find what works best for you and your child. So make sure you're in the right state of mind going in. One way to make this easier is to try and ensure ample time for bathing. One of the quickest ways to get stressed is to feel rushed in what you're doing. The next step is finding ways to make them feel in control, secure, and protected.

Here are a few examples:

Issue: Your child negatively reacts to getting water or shampoo in their eyes

Response: Offer swim goggles or a foam or plastic visor to keep water and shampoo out

Issue: Your child can't stand rinsing off

Response: Try letting them rinse themselves off using a hand-held shower hose

Issue: Your child does not like water on their skin.

Response: Try using much less water in the bath maybe only two inches to start.

Issue: Your child has trouble with balance standing, getting in, and getting out of the tub

Response: Attach a bath grab bar, traction mat, or safety railing to help with stability

Issue: Your child has trouble balancing to sit in the bath

Response: If your child is small enough use a baby bath support. Keep the bath low, more water increases difficulty with bathing balance. Sit your child on a piece of sponge.

3. Calm your child before bath time

The calmer your child is going into bath time, the better chance of them remaining calm throughout. If you find your child is overstimulated by bathing, consider having them do a little “heavy work” before the bath to help calm them down. This can mean going up and down the stairs or jumping on a mini trampoline. Hugging your child, carrying boxes, walking pets, and yoga stretches are all good examples of proprioceptive input, commonly called “heavy work.” Another way to offset the overstimulation of bath time is by moving it to earlier in the afternoon or evening, rather than bathing just before bedtime.

4. Make the bathing environment all about your child

If noises bother your child

Make sure there are plenty of towels, robes, rugs, and other fabrics in the room. If necessary, spread extra towels or rugs on the floor. Bathrooms can act like echo chambers. Fabrics help absorb the sounds that may bounce off multiple hard surfaces. Prepare the bath ahead of time. Close the door while filling the bath, then turn the water off. Wait until the room is calm and quiet before bringing your child in to bathe.

If bright lights are troublesome to your child

Consider installing a dimmer switch or turning off the bathroom light and only use a lamp or hallway light for illumination.

If certain smells overstimulate your child

Try to make the room odour-free or use air fresheners. Essential oils in an aromatherapy diffuser may help create a more soothing, relaxing bath time experience as well. If possible, include your child in the process by allowing them to choose their favourite scents. Let them choose a bubble bath or shower gel. For some children who are oversensitive to smell any fragrance may increase arousal and it may be better to air the bathroom and open the window first.

5. Make bath time fun

If you want your child to enjoy taking baths, make them fun. You can use waterproof dolls and action figures, wind-up toys designed for moving through sudsy water, special bath time crayons, or even just plain plastic cups and containers. This is an ideal opportunity to engage in communication with your child if bathing is a happy place. Use squirting toys or bubbles to play games such as ready, steady, go and waiting games.

Helpful strategies

to support children in nursery and pre-school environments

It is essential to understand the impact of the environment on a child's ability to participate in play and learning. At home it is easier to create an environment which caters specifically for your child's needs.

At nursery there may be several children with different needs all within the same environment. Working within one space, with limited space and resources can be challenging. This is particularly difficult where a nursery or preschool has no physical space outside the classroom as this makes meeting a range of needs more challenging.

It is essential to have an understanding of the sensory needs of the children using the space. If a child appears to have obvious sensitivities it is useful to complete a simple checklist such as those available through "Building Bridges" (Building Bridges Forms and Exercises - Sensory World).

Examples of obvious sensitivities:

- distress at noise within the room (sensory over responsiveness with potential for fight or flight)
- poor balance on uneven surfaces
- spinning self or toys (sensory seeking)
- not engaging with family or nursery team

Completing a checklist will enable a more targeted approach to creating a space to meet the child's needs. For both nurseries and families on a low income, utilising what is available may be necessary to adapt the environment.

Incorporate Soft, Calming Colours

The colours in the room can have a significant impact on children's sensory experiences. A nursery environment is often unavoidably noisy with more sensation everywhere. It is therefore a "high arousal environment.

Use calming colours on walls, furniture, and decorations to create a soothing environment. Calming colours: soft, muted colours like pastels or earth tones.

Use Comfortable, Flexible Seating

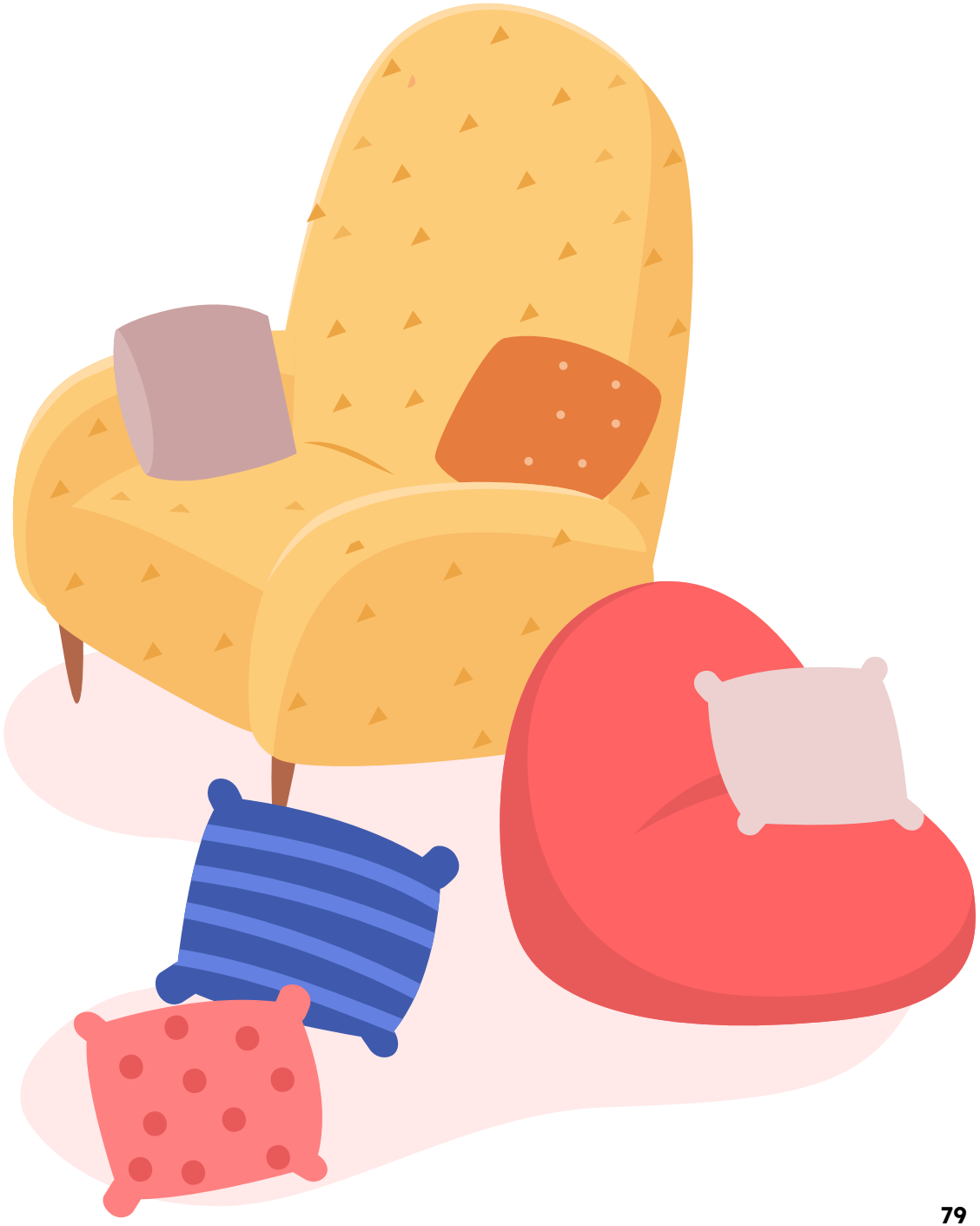
Comfortable seating is crucial for a sensory-friendly classroom. Seating options can include floor cushions, bean bags or small sofas or chairs.

Children with poor balance and coordination benefit from additional support such as arms on the chairs. Having their feet flat on the floor also helps with sitting balance. Good supportive seating helps with activities such as feeding and more focused play. This way they do not have to worry about their balance at the same time.

For children that struggle to sit still, a peanut ball or rocker chair may help them to focus on the tasks they are completing. The task could be a play activity or a functional task such as feeding or a learning task.

Making sure the child has access to the right seating is essential to enable learning. Flexible seating allows children to choose what works best for them, whether they need a quiet corner or a more active seating option. A variety of seating helps accommodate different sensory needs and preferences. Some children may need additional adult help to choose the right seat for the activity.

At home, if possible, have a small table and chair or a seat that is accessible to a table for focused play and feeding. A beanbag or large cushion can provide a place to rest, play or look at books with a carer.



Create a quiet zone/calm corner

A quiet zone is essential for children who may become overwhelmed by noise or activity. A cosy corner includes soft seating, dim lighting, and calming materials such as noise-cancelling headphones, weighted blankets, and sensory toys. This area should be easily accessible and clearly marked, providing a retreat where children can go to relax and regain their focus. The child may need adult support to regulate and to have access to a space where they are away from other children in order to reregulate. Dark tents, draping curtains to reduce light or locating the space under an adult sized table can create a safe space.

Incorporate sensory-friendly materials

Choose materials that are soothing and engaging for young children.

Examples: textured fabrics, soft rugs, and sensory boards with different textures and sensory elements.

Incorporate sensory bins filled with materials like rice, beans, or sand for tactile exploration. These materials help children engage their senses in a positive and controlled manner.

Manage noise levels

Managing noise levels is crucial in creating a sensory-friendly environment. Use soft, absorbent materials like acoustic panels or curtains to reduce echoes and background noise. Incorporate calming background music or white noise machines if appropriate. Additionally, establish clear routines and gentle transitions to help minimise sudden changes in noise levels that can be disruptive.

Provide visual aids

Visual aids can support sensory-friendly learning by offering clear, organised, visually appealing information.

Use visual schedules, labels, and charts to help children understand daily routines and classroom rules. Ensure that these visual aids are easy to read and placed at an appropriate height for pre-schoolers to see.

Ensure visual aids are at the correct learning level for the child. For very young children or those with additional learning difficulties presentation of an object of reference can be useful.

Examples: use boots to show going outside, use a spoon for mealtime and pyjamas for bedtime.

It is essential that the same aids are used at home and nursery.

Some children may cope with a full timetable of pictures or symbols for the day. They may be able to pick off the pictures as they progress.

Visual timetables or objects of reference are a handy tool to support transition between activities, both at home and at nursery, particularly if they are consistent between the different environments.

At home the fridge can be a perfect place for a visual timetable with photographs of the transitions required. These can be laminated with magnetic strips or dots on the back. These are available from Amazon and other retailers.

Objects of reference can be kept in a box so they are handy for the day and easy to locate as required. Talking through the objects at the start of the day can help the child understand the order of the day.

Designate sensory exploration areas

Designate specific areas in the classroom for sensory exploration. These areas can include a sensory table, a touch-and-feel wall, or a space for activities like painting or sand play. Providing designated spaces allows children to engage in sensory activities at their own pace and helps manage sensory overload by containing activities in specific areas.

Create a Calm and Organised Environment

An organised and clutter-free classroom or play space at home helps reduce sensory overload and create a calming atmosphere.

If possible, keep areas for sleep separate from areas for play so the child understands the expectation of the area.

Keep materials and toys stored and accessible.

Use clear bins or labels to organise items

Ensure that the room layout allows for easy movement and access to different areas. It is essential to keep toys organised and have them stored away when not in use.

At home present children with just a few toys at any one time. Avoid having lots of different activities out all at the same time as this can result in overload.

In the classroom, if possible, create spaces for different sensory play.

Examples: the messy play space with wet sand away from the quieter activities which require more focus such as the puzzle table.

Engage in regular sensory breaks

Incorporate regular sensory breaks into the daily routine to help children manage sensory needs throughout the day. Schedule short breaks where children can engage in sensory activities, such as stretching, deep breathing, or using sensory tools or going outside. These breaks provide opportunities for children to self-regulate and return to their tasks with improved focus.

For those children that cannot self-regulate use co-regulation. Co-regulation means helping a child to manage their feelings and behaviours. You can help a child manage by using routine. Activities such as squishing with a peanut ball, deep pressure with a cushion, supporting them to bounce on a trampette or run to the end of the room and back can help regulate. A sensory break before and after any transition supports the child in the transition process. It should not disrupt the flow of the day. Ideally parents and nursery can work together to identify ways of calming and regulating the over aroused-child or increasing participation in the under-aroused child.

A low arousal space

A high arousal space

For children who are particularly sensitive it may be necessary to create a quiet time and place away from peers for more structured play.

For children who need more sensory input it may be useful to create a space and time where the activities provide high levels of sensory stimulation. Thinks of activities such as messy play and playing with noisy multisensory musical toys.

Working in a small group in a quiet space support focus for all children with sensory differences. If possible begin with “heavy work” in the play space which is child led but adult directed. This will help create levels of regulation for learning and engagement.

Strategies to try within the learning and home environment for pre-schoolers

- prone rolling on a peanut ball (rolling on the tummy). The use of a peanut ball at home and at nursery can support regulation. The child may also like having a peanut ball rolled over them whilst lying on a beanbag on their front or back, always tell the child what you are doing regardless of apparent level of language use and understanding
- oral calming strategies appear to be very effective for this age group. Examples: drinking through a straw, eating cold, chewy or crunchy snacks, chewies
- safe areas for crashing (e.g. giant bean bag pad)
- deep pressure, examples: sensory canoe, hugs, 'squeezes', roller ball massager, massage, 'nests' made from cushions, creating a space between furniture where the child can squeeze in
- rocking when combined with deep pressure, examples: row, row, row your boat seated on an adults lap or opposite an adult who is holding hands and pulling
- vibration can be used for coming back from a point of dysregulation
- quiet/ cosy corner
- pushing toys like a mini trolley or a pram. This can have wooden bricks, toys or books in it to make it heavier to push which can support regulation
- encouraging more movement, examples: walk to preschool or a nearby park. This provides a sensory movement break and assists with transition
- tipping/ pouring type play. This is useful for regulation, co-ordination, tactile exploration. It is also a useful activity for parents who struggle to find 'play' that their child will engage in

Sensory considerations when choosing a nursery - advice for parents

When you visit a nursery to see if it is suitable for your child, you should really look at the nursery environment.

- think about how the environment is impacting on you. If you find the nursery busy and noisy when visiting your child may feel the same
- look at how play spaces are organised: Is there a lot of play material out, is there a quiet space with access to books and relaxing seating
- ask about quiet spaces, numbers of children in the room and how the day is organised
- ask about how the adults work with the children within play.
- ask about the ratios of children per adult
- look for toys and play equipment that your child is likely to enjoy. If your child's learning needs are at a different level to their peers, ask how nursery can accommodate this
- if possible, take your child for a visit. Observe how they are during the visit and after the visit. All new environments are a challenge for an immature, developing brain and sensory system, and settling will take time. It is however helpful to be able to prepare ahead if the child is very over aroused or shut down after the visit

Activities to encourage your child through play and interaction

Screen time

Give careful consideration to the use of screen time - The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends no screen time for under 2's and no more than an hour of screen time for children aged 2 to 4.

In reality this can be challenging for busy parents to maintain, but there are things you can consider:

- can you sit alongside your child during screen time and talk about what is happening on the screen?
- setting clear boundaries from a young age about what and when screen time happens is helpful
- can you limit screen time in the lead up to bed and instead incorporate calming proprioceptive and vestibular activities such as rocking movements, pulling and pushing activities, and deep pressure through cuddling and wrapping in blankets to help them settle towards sleep
- consider the type of programmes your child accesses and ask yourself how it is supporting their development for example: is it age/ developmentally appropriate; does it encourage interaction from the child; and allow time for them to do this; does it model play and exploration; does it highlight sound, letters and numbers as they are spoken; is there too much going on in the programme such as too much stimulation with colours, quick changes of scene and lots of loud interactions?
- there are a variety of online resources to help you consider how best to manage screen time for your young toddler; please see the references list at the end of this toolkit

Eismart – screen time leaflet
PowerPoint Presentation

References

Unicef: The early years healthy development review report
A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days - Baby Friendly Initiative

Baby Sense, Meg Faure and Ann Richardson, 2019

Toddler Sense, Ann Richardson, 2012

Sensory beginnings

Pathways.org: Sensory integration basics
Learn about sensory integration tools

Sensory Recommendations for Neonatal Unit
Resources for nurturing sensory environment

Lullaby Trust
Learn about baby safety

Your views on the Sensory Awareness Toolkit

We are pleased to be able to offer the Sensory Awareness Toolkit for practitioners and families in Essex to support children with their sensory needs and preferences.

Practitioners

We hope this has been helpful for you. Please help us to evaluate and improve the Toolkit by sharing your thoughts with us about how the Toolkit helps you and the children you work with. This is part one of a two-part evaluation. You will be sent a follow up evaluation in approximately six weeks, to help you evaluate the impact of the changes you have implemented.

Scan the QR code with a mobile phone or give us your opinion at **balsys.uk/716**

Parents and carers

Your child's setting has used this toolkit in supporting your child. Please help us to evaluate and improve the programme by sharing your thoughts with us about how the Toolkit helps your child, both at home and in their education setting. This is part one of a two-part evaluation. You will be sent a follow up evaluation in approximately six weeks, to check what things have changed and helped, since accessing the toolkit.

Scan the QR code with a mobile phone or give us your opinion at **balsys.uk/717**

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