

Sensory Questionnaire

Sense of Smell/Taste

Greater Glasgow and Clyde



This series of Sensory Questionnaires are designed to enable you to check your child's progress at particular stages of development.

YOUR SENSES OF SMELL AND TASTE

Our senses of smell and taste are closely linked, as they follow the same neural pathway through the brain. Some people seem not to have a sense of smell, which can be useful in some circumstances (think teenagers bedrooms or school changing rooms!) Other people are so sensitive to certain tastes and smells that they can retch when they walk into a kitchen or classroom.

Whilst this is not an issue for most people, it can be for others. It is almost impossible to change how people process smell or taste but you can try different strategies to help reduce the impact.

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Question 1 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

Question 1

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Does your child gag easily with certain food textures or having utensils in mouth?

Does your child gag when eating certain food? If your child gags at the smell of some foods, this is not about food tastes and you should answer 'no' to this question and 'yes' to the next question.



Strategies and Suggestions

If your child gags easily at certain textures this is actually more likely to be about touch rather than taste. You have touch receptors inside your mouth and if your child is sensitive to touch anyway this can impact on their ability to eat certain consistencies. It can be hard to eat a yoghurt or a banana if your body is telling your brain 'this is slimy', or chew on crunchy textures if your body thinks 'this is like crunching glass'.

If your child prefers softer food then let the main part of their meal consist of this but introduce one firmer textured item at the side of their plate. Or if they only like 'dry' food have a small bowl at the side of the plate with some sauce covered food in it. Encourage them to take it to their mouth but don't get angry if they can't eat it. Try using a reward chart and grading the experience:

- On Monday it's enough that they tolerate the food on their plate.
- On Tuesday get them to put the food onto their fork and sniff it.
- On Wednesday ask them to touch the food to their lips/
- On Thursday ask them to touch the food with the tip of their tongue.
- On Friday get them to take a tiny bite and reward with an extra portion of something they like, a shot on the Xbox/PlayStation or an episode of a favourite programme (whatever will motivate them!).



If your child doesn't tolerate the sensation of a spoon or fork in their mouth try using plastic cutlery instead. It is possible to buy plastic coated metal cutlery but plastic picnic cutlery can be just as effective and is much cheaper.





Question 2 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

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Does your child show distress at smells that other people may not notice?

Often children who are sensitive to smell can react quite strongly to scents or aromas that barely register with others. If your child is sensitive to smell then they may struggle to cope with being in an enclosed space with someone who is wearing strong perfume, or sitting close to someone who smells of whatever food they have just eaten.



Strategies and Suggestions

If you are a teacher completing this questionnaire please be aware that some pupils in your class may be sensitive to certain smells, so consider not wearing perfume to work, or using any air fresheners in the classroom. Being 'stuck' in a room for 6 hours every day with a smell they find noxious can be very difficult for a child to cope with.

Avoid preparing strong smelling foods whilst your child is in the house. Try to keep the kitchen door closed and a window open when you are cooking.

Try to limit exposure to smells, help your child to be aware of strategies to help them avoid smells they find unpleasant.



If child has aversion to certain smells it may be helpful for them to carry around a pleasant smell (e.g. a few drops of essential oil) in a flannel or on a tissue to use when being exposed to smell they dislike.

Introduce smells in a fun and relaxed environment, possibly at the weekend or at bath-time. Try making 'smelly' playdough, massage with smelly lotions, or play with 'scratch and sniff' stickers. Work at your child's pace and allow them to leave if they find it too overpowering.

Try to limit exposure to smells, but work with your child to become aware of strategies that will help them avoid smells they find unpleasant.



Question 3 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

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Is your child a picky eater, especially regarding food textures e.g. doesn't like lumps in food?

All children can be fussy eaters but if your child is still refusing to try more textured food by the time they have reached primary school it does limit their opportunities to participate in school meals, birthday parties etc. Answer 'yes' to this question for some strategies and advice to try and expand the range of textures they will cope with.



Strategies and Suggestions

Introduce new foods by expanding one sensory characteristic at a time, e.g. if your child eats soft food such as yoghurt try introducing some texture through it such as finely chopped apples or grapes.

Try using a plate with compartments for food, or try to space foods out on a plate to ensure they don't touch.



Consider whether the noise in the school dinner hall may be preventing your child from finishing their lunch; some children can struggle to eat in a noisy environment. Allow your child to wear ear defenders if necessary.

Try introducing a new taste at a meal time when everything on the plate is something your child likes. Put a small piece of the 'new food' at the edge of the plate making sure it is not touching their other food. Using a graded approach try the following steps:

- On Monday it's enough that they tolerate the food on their plate.
- On Tuesday get them to put the food onto their fork and sniff it.
- On Wednesday ask them to touch the food to their lips.
- On Thursday ask them to touch the food with the tip of their tongue.
- On Friday get them to take a tiny bite and reward with an extra portion of something they like, a shot on the Xbox/PlayStation or an episode of a favourite programme (whatever will motivate them!).



Question 4 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

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Does your child avoid certain tastes that are typically part of a child's diet?

Most children start to develop strong preferences and dislikes when it comes to food, choosing not to eat vegetables or only liking certain flavours of crisps. These are perfectly normal and do not impact on your child's ability to consume a reasonable varied diet, however some children are so fussy and so restricted in the choices that they make that they are unable to consume what would normally be considered 'child friendly' food e.g. they can't eat pizza because they don't like the texture of the melted cheese or the tomato sauce.



Strategies and Suggestions

Having a child who is a fussy eater can be extremely difficult to cope with; as parents we nurture our children by feeding them, and when they reject what we give them it can be easy to take it personally. Try not to make meal times a battle ground, and if your child is growing and has energy then they are probably getting enough nutrition from their diet, no matter how restricted it appears.

If you are worried about whether your child is getting enough nutrition from their diet speak to your GP regarding the use of vitamin supplements.

Try to work out if your child is fussy because of a taste sensitivity, a touch sensitivity or a visual sensitivity.



- If it is due to taste your child will probably only like bland, sweet or spicy food.
- If it is due to a touch sensitivity they will only be able to stick to certain textures or temperatures e.g. smooth or crunchy foods, hot or cold foods. Try massaging around your child's mouth.
- If it is due to a visual sensitivity your child will only eat food that is a certain colour. Try changing the colour of the plate you serve the food on, adding a few drops of food colouring to food you know they like and will eat, or even getting your child to wear sun glasses whilst they are eating.



Question 5 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

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Does your child like to taste, chew or lick non-food items e.g. paint, glue etc?

Younger children explore their environment using their mouths, and babies usually take everything to their mouths to see how it feels as well as how it tastes. By the time a child starts school however they have normally outgrown this behaviour. Often children suck their thumbs, chew on pencils, or even their collars or cuffs, as a calming strategy; this tends to be done sub-consciously in that your child is doing it without thinking or being aware they are doing so. We are not referring to this behaviour here. This question purely relates to your child deliberately eating potentially damaging or dangerous items such as glue, earth, stones, wood etc.



Strategies and Suggestions

Children may well sniff items or rub them round their mouths, but not actually eat them. Whilst unusual this is not dangerous and is usually a stage that a child will outgrow.

Children who regularly eat non-food items are described as having pica. There can be different reasons why children do this:

- Sometimes children can eat non-food items because they are deficient in certain minerals such as iron and zinc. It is worth checking with your GP to see if your child does require mineral supplements.
- Some children eat non-food items because they enjoy the sensation of certain textures. Whilst you and I might struggle to understand why anybody can like the feeling of grains of sand or earth in our mouths, some children enjoy the intensity of the sensation.
- It is important to let others know what items your child tends to put to their mouths in order that adults working with your child can keep the preferred items out of reach.



Using a social story to reinforce the importance of NOT eating non-food items, can help explain to a child why not to do this. Close monitoring and consistent reinforcement can help break the pattern of behaviour.



Question 6 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

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Does your child like to mouth objects e.g. pencils or toys etc?

This question refers more to a child's desire to calm and self soothe by having something in their mouth. As mentioned in Question 5 some children like to chew of a pencil, or the collar of their school sweatshirt. Other children may constantly be chewing on their fingertips or on a small toy. Adults often do this too, chewing on the end of a pen or always having a finger at their mouth. If your child is a perpetual chewer of 'stuff' then answer 'yes' to this question.



Strategies and Suggestions

Children who chew are not usually driven to do so by taste or smell; this is actually a calming strategy to help them self soothe using their 'body awareness' or proprioceptive system.

It is most commonly used and probably the most effective strategy that we all apply to keep us calm and focused. Whilst children may suck their thumbs or bite their nails, as adults we are more likely to chew gum or the top of a pen to achieve the same effect.

We do not want children to chew their pencils down to little stumps as the paint, wood chippings and lead are not particularly healthy food options. It is possible to purchase special pencil toppers that are designed to be chewed that provide a safer option.

Many companies nowadays supply chewable 'jewellery', specifically designed to be worn by children and teenagers and discretely chewed upon when necessary.





Question 7 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

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Does your child show a strong preference for certain tastes or smells?

This is normally not an issue unless your child oversteps social boundaries and perhaps spends time sniffing people or items in public places, in which case it is important to find strategies to prevent them accidentally offending others. Sniffing an adult can seem cute when a child is 3, but is much less socially acceptable when they are 13. If your child is a 'sniffer' of people or things please respond 'yes' to this question.



Strategies and Suggestions

Use social stories to explain to your child what your rules are around acceptable smelling of others e.g. that sniffing is ok in the house when it's mum and dad but not ok in public or with other people.

Find a 'smell' your child likes and keep a tissue in their pocket when you are out and about. Guide them to sniff the tissue rather than the person if you see them about to smell someone.





Question 8 - Smell/Taste (5 - 12 Years)

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Does your child not notice strong or unusual smells e.g. glue, paint or marker pens etc.?

This tends to be less of an issue for a child themselves but more of an issue for others around them, although only if your child has an issue with personal hygiene!



Strategies and Suggestions

If your child is oblivious to certain strong smells this can actually be a benefit in a lot of situations. An issue can occur however when they reach puberty and are oblivious to their own body odour. They may require additional support to keep on top of personal hygiene, but you will find additional strategies in the life skills section of the website. Have a look at the 'Looking After my Body' section (www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/life-skills/self-care/looking-after-my-body) for some advice and downloadable resources that may help:



Looking After My Body

- Bathing my Child
- Bathing Independently
- Hand Washing
- Managing Periods
- Teeth Brushing
- Nail Cutting
- Hair Care
- Teenage Resources

If your child is not very thorough at cleaning themselves after they have been to the toilet this can cause an issue with other children in their class, and it is worth practicing bottom wiping at home to help improve that. There are strategies and suggestions to improve this skill in the 'Going to the Toilet' section (www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/life-skills/self-care/going-to-the-toilet).

