



Sensory Strategies in the Classroom Video Script

Welcome to the GGC Occupational Therapy service video about sensory strategies for the classroom. This video will tell you about changes you can make to the environment to help pupils in your classroom. This could make it easier for them to join in with activities they want or need to do. You can watch our other videos which explain sensory processing and our 8 senses.

There can be lots of reasons children might have difficulty participating in activities in school. Reasons might include illness, stress, communication differences or because their sensory needs are not being met. It's important we consider what might be going on by talking to the people who know the child best. This might be the child themselves, parents or carers, support staff or teaching staff.

As adults, we tend to have more choice over what sensory regulation strategies we can use. We tend to have more control over when we can move around, where we sit or when we eat. If the workplace is too noisy we might use headphones or move seats. If you need to stretch your legs or need a coffee, you are more likely to be able to do this in the workplace as an adult without having to ask first. This can be difficult to manage in a classroom setting when there are specific times for moving like interval or if we see paying attention only as sitting still and not fidgeting.

Firstly, I'd like to talk about the reason thinking about the education environment is so important. It can be helpful to know a bit about how the brain works. There are lots of theories about how the brain works including one called neurosequential theory. This suggests that the brain develops and processes information in a certain order. From the lower levels of the brain that deal with things like heart rate, temperature and our survival mechanism or our fight/ flight/freeze response, right up to the 'thinking' part of the brain called the cortex. This is the area we need to access to be able to learn and reason. When a child is not regulated, in other words all the 'lower level' needs are not met like sensory needs or feeling safe, they cannot access the higher levels of the brain. This explains why children might be able to tell us what they should do when they are angry or stressed before or after the event but in the moment, when they are dysregulated they cannot access the higher level reasoning part of the brain which helps them use the strategies. We need to regulate then relate then reason. We need to think about this sequence when we are in the classroom. If you are not regulated it is difficult to relate or connect with another person. If you cannot connect with another person it is difficult to reason with them or take in what they are trying to teach us. There are lots of resources online explaining how the brain takes in information. You will find some on the KIDS educators' page.

Helping children to meet their sensory needs in the school environment can help them participate. Let's think about different sensory strategies we can consider trying in the classroom. We will start by thinking about vision.

Vision:

Sometimes people process visual information differently. If they have a low threshold they might not like bright lights. Sometimes the strip lighting in classrooms can make it difficult to concentrate. You can try special light diffusers for strip lighting or you can experiment with

different types of lighting like desk lamps to see what helps. You could try letting them wear sunglasses or a hat to help them filter out light.

If you have pupils who are distracted by lots going on around them, think about what changes you can make to the environment. Having an area of the classroom with no clutter or distractions can be useful. Children don't need to sit here all the time and can move between focus areas and tables where they can participate in group work during the day if they want to. If your pupil needs lots of visual input, you could try using bright light or have them use bright coloured paper to complete work.



Creating different zones or having study booths or tents within the classroom can not only help pupils who can become visually distracted, it can also be helpful to have areas pupils can go to if they feel overwhelmed by other sensory input and are dysregulated. They can then return to activities when they are ready.

Hearing:

If there are pupils in your class who become upset or distracted by noise, listening to music might help them filter out background noise. Would pupils find listening to white noise helpful during activities? Think about where they are sitting in class. Is it better for them to be positioned away from the door and any noise from the corridor outside? Can you turn off any equipment like computers or projectors which might make a background buzzing noise? Use sensory preferences. In the classroom this might be access to something to chew, a favourite toy or a fidget. This will hopefully make them feel safe, regulated, help them cope with the noise and help them participate. Going into a room first and letting noise build up around them or going in last once they know how noisy the room is can help some pupils.



It's always best to have a plan for situations you know they might find challenging. If there are loud noises like the school bell or fire alarm, give reassurance. Let them know you understand they are finding things difficult. It can be helpful to tell them before it goes off where possible. This gives them time to move away or cover their ears.

It can be good to have opportunities to explore different noises. This can help pupils to take part in different activities they might enjoy. It is important however to think about the purpose of the activity. Do they need or want to participate? You could try planning shorter outings where the goal is to experience different noises. You can then leave if you need to without the stress of trying to do an activity at the same time. Remember, having a plan of what you are going to do for tricky times is important. It can help make these times less stressful for you both. Start with things they are comfortable with and introduce them to different experiences gradually. The more successful these experiences, the more confident the child will be to try new things. If they don't want to participate or want to leave it is important we listen to them. We can try again another time if we have to. Some pupils might not want to use any of the strategies discussed but might benefit from just taking time out to self-regulate before returning to the activity.

Touch:

Some people process touch differently. We can help by giving lots of opportunities to play with different textures, for example in messy play activities. In school pupils might find it difficult to stand in line as they are worried about people bumping into them. It might feel like someone brushing past them has deliberately hurt them. It is important to check what happened and if it has been an accident, understand this might be because of how they process tactile information. We need to acknowledge their experience and give reassurance. Giving them the option of being at the beginning or end of the line may help reduce the chance of a peer bumping into them.

Some pupils (and adults!) use touch to self-regulate when they fidget. A fidget can be anything from a piece of blue tac to a key ring or a tangle toy. The purpose of this tool is to help the child to self-regulate and stay on task. If they are focussed on the fidget then this is not the right strategy for them and they can try something else.

Taste and smell:

If we process taste differently we can help support pupils by making sure we offer foods we know they will eat or 'safe foods'. We can then offer them the opportunity to try different foods at lunch and snack time. Eating meals together is also helpful so in school pupils can see peers eating and enjoying different foods. Involving them in meal preparation and serving food without pressure to eat the food is helpful too.



If smell is an issue, making sure the pupil has a hankie with a preferred smell can help. They could also have the preferred smell on an item of clothing. If eating in the lunch hall is overwhelming, they could have the choice of eating lunch somewhere quieter with a friend. Good communication with home is really helpful in supporting pupils in both environments. What have you tried at school which might help at home? What have home tried that you might be able to use at school?

Proprioception:

Some people process proprioception differently. Giving extra feedback to the muscles and joints through pushing and pulling can be good. This helps to activate or 'wake up' the muscles and joints. You could do this by tying a resistance band around the legs of a seat to push against, carrying books, moving chairs or getting them to do warm up exercises like pushing against a wall or push ups. Some pupils who process proprioceptive input differently might hold their pencil too tightly. They can try playing with play dough or theraputty before writing activities to give them extra feedback. If they are too rough when playing with a friend, it's important to show them when they get it right. Telling them they are 'too rough' is not helpful as they need to learn what the right amount of force feels like. This will take lots of practice and need support. Wearing a backpack with some weight (but not too heavy!) can give extra feedback or sitting with a heavier toy or weighted lap pad can also be useful. Make sure these are not uncomfortable and the pupil can easily move them if they need to.



Some people look for extra feedback around their mouth. They might chew things like the end of a pencil, their water bottle or clothes. They might be looking for more tactile feedback or from the proprioceptors in their mouths. It is important we don't tell them to stop unless we



give them a safe alternative. If they are doing it because they are trying to meet a sensory need then just telling them to stop will not help them meet this need. Drinking out of a water bottle or drinking a thick liquid like a milkshake or smoothie through a straw can help. Having crunchy or chewy foods at snack time can also help. Some people use a chew toy which you can buy online. This is made for people who need to chew and might be useful. Try giving extra time to complete a task. This gives them more time to process the information. Proprioceptive input helps to organise the sensory system. These strategies can help you either be more alert or to help calm and relax so are good to use any time.

Vestibular:

Some people process vestibular information differently. If they have a high threshold, they need lots of opportunities to move during the day. Some children need movement breaks. These can be done at the table for example moving position or getting up out of their seat, for example taking part in a sensory circuit or taking a message to the school office. You can get movement from walking running or jumping. You can also bounce on a trampoline or space hopper.



There are lots of options for active seating in class. Some children might find it useful to sit on a ball chair or sit on an air filled cushion. This gives them movement when sitting. It's really important for children who need lots of movement to get play time. Active seating can also be a change of position, for example standing at a desk or sitting on the floor. Giving a choice of seating can help.

Interoception:

There is lots of discussion about what strategies help with processing interoceptive information. We would suggest that taking time to notice how the body is feeling at different times can be helpful for example if you have been outside you might comment that you notice your skin feels hot or cold and talk about what you could do about it. You can take time to notice the body signal (for example tummy is rumbling or feel shaky), talk about what this might mean to help them connect it (e.g. this might mean they are hungry). If children have difficulty processing interoceptive information they might not make this connection and we need to check they understand. You can also try mindfulness activities like body scanning. These activities take practice and will be unlikely to work first time. In the classroom it can be useful to include toilet breaks or breaks to have a drink into a visual timetable as a reminder to do these things.

We also need to think about ourselves as part of the environment. What impact do we have in the environment? Think about the impact of the tone of your voice, whether the jewellery you are wearing or the pattern on your clothes may be distracting for a child who is visually distracted. The texture of clothes and makeup are all part of the environment. Certain perfume or aftershave might impact how a child interacts with you in the class environment. Do you notice a child having difficulty with eye contact or if you're too close or standing over them? Do these things have an impact? Also think about your own sensory preferences. Do you find a child's sensory preferences don't match yours? For example they need to move in their seat but you find it distracting.

Remember, the child or young person in your class is working hard to process sensory information. Making changes to the environment can be helpful. Have areas at school they can choose to go to if they need a break can be useful. They are more likely to be able to do what they need to do after this as their sensory systems will not be overwhelmed. Being



overwhelmed and stressed makes it difficult to learn or take part in activities.

Different strategies work for different people. It is important to work together with the child or young person to try out different strategies. Remember to ask them if there is anything that would help. Sometimes children and young people already know what they need! Please don't expect big changes overnight. It can take time to work out if sensory strategies are useful. You will need to support the children and young people to use the strategies to begin with. Remember they are tools to help them take part in activities not toys. It might take time to find the tools that work for them. Changing our environment can help us to self-regulate and be more ready to engage with learning. There are lots of simple things you can consider changing which might make a big difference to your children and young people.

You can watch our other videos on sensory processing and the 8 senses or have a look at the other information on the KIDS website. If you want to talk to an Occupational Therapist you can contact the Advice Line.