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Sensory Defensiveness: Strategies to Create Positive Experiences

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Some children show signs of sensory defensiveness—a negative reaction to one or more types of sensations such as touch, movement, sound, taste/texture, or smell. If this describes your child, you likely spend a lot of time and energy helping your child avoid many everyday activities. Here are some strategies to create positive sensory experiences for your child.

For more information on the different types of sensory defensiveness, please see Handy Handout #174: What is Sensory Defensiveness? <https://www.handyhandouts.com/search.aspx?searchstr=174>



Strategies for Positive Tactile (Touch) Experiences

- Prepare the child by telling him/her what you are going to do.
- Deep pressure touch is a strategy that helps decrease a child's sensitivity to light touch.
 - Giving firm, consistent touch input to the area of body that the child is going to use.
 - The "Deep Pressure Protocol"—Contact an occupational therapist for training on this protocol before using it with your child.
- Move at the child's pace and respect the child when he/she is "all done" with the activity. A child may be more willing to accept tactile (touch) experiences if he/she is in control rather than having someone else control the experience for them.
- Include play such as silly voices, songs, or movements during tactile play to minimize anxiety and discomfort for the child.



Strategies for Positive Vestibular (Movement) Experiences

- Start out with simple movement activities on stable surfaces that allow the head to move in different positions (e.g., "warm-up" stretches, exercises while standing on the ground) and progress to having the feet move off the ground (e.g., climbing a slide, jumping into a ball pit).
- Once the child is comfortable with movement, introduce more unstable surfaces, such as sitting on a swing or large ball. Always support and/or sit with the child when introducing any new equipment/movements.
- Allow the child to control how long he/she continues the activity. Never force off-balance situations on a child.

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Strategies for Positive Auditory (Sound) Experiences

- Provide your child with deep pressure activities before exposing him/her to noisy/loud environments (e.g. lunch room, music class, birthday party).
- Bear hugs
- Jumping on the trampoline
- Rocking over therapy ball
- Deep pressure massage to arms, legs, and body
- Provide the child with headphones and calming music before and/or during anxiety-producing situations. (**Caution: It is important to monitor the volume of the music when using this strategy.**)
- Schedule an evaluation with an occupational therapist to learn about other intervention strategies that would be appropriate for your child's sound sensitivity.



Strategies to Increase Positive Mealtime Experiences

- Tell the child what you are going to do (e.g., "I am going to rub your lips with my finger.")
- Use playful songs and puppets to decrease anxiety during activities involving the mouth like eating, applying lip balm or making funny faces.
- Always use deep pressure when massaging the child's cheeks, lips, or jaw before trying a new food item/texture or performing hygiene tasks (washing face, brushing teeth).
- Interventions to reduce oral sensitivities may work better once you address other sensory issues.

More Information

Positive sensory experiences are important for your child's social, emotional, and motor development. If you are concerned that your child may be demonstrating signs of sensory defensiveness, contact a pediatric occupational therapist trained in addressing sensory integration issues.



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