A Family Services Guide

What are Sensory Differences?

Understanding hypersensitivity, hyposensitivity, and sensory overload

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

What are Sensory Differences?

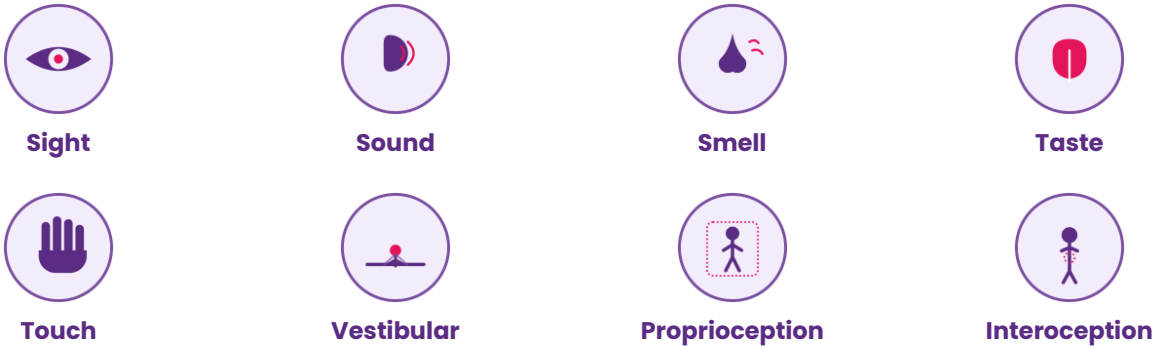
A diagnostic feature of autism

Sensory differences affect how the brain receives, filters, and makes sense of information coming in from the senses.

This is not a preference or a fussiness – it is a genuine difference in how sensory information is processed, and it can have a significant impact on comfort, communication, behaviour, and wellbeing.

More than five senses

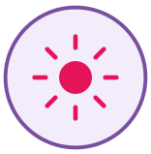
As well as the five senses most people learn about at school, there are three further internal senses that are commonly affected in autism:



- **Vestibular –** the sense of balance and movement
- **Proprioception –** awareness of where the body is in space, without needing to look
- **Interoception –** awareness of internal body signals, such as hunger, thirst, temperature, pain, or needing the toilet

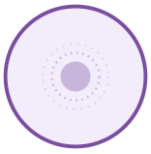
Hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity

Two directions of sensory difference



Hypersensitive (over-responsive)

Senses feel more intense than they actually are – an ordinary light can feel dazzling, a light touch can feel painful, background noise can feel unbearable.



Hyposensitive (under-responsive)

Senses register less than they actually are – a person may not notice pain, cold, hunger, or a full bladder, and may seek out extra sensory input to feel regulated.

Most people experience a mix

Most autistic people experience a mix of both, and it can vary across different senses, different days, or different environments – for example being more sensitive when tired, unwell, or anxious.

What this can look like

Hypersensitivity

Covering ears around noise, avoiding certain fabrics or food textures, distress in bright or fluorescent lighting, avoiding crowded or smelly places.

Hyposensitivity

Seeking movement, spinning, crashing, or deep pressure; a high pain threshold; not noticing being too hot, too cold, or hungry; enjoying loud noise or bright light.

Sensory seeking

Actively looking for more input – touching objects, chewing, rocking, jumping, or seeking strong tastes or smells.

Sensory avoiding

Actively trying to reduce or escape input – leaving a room, blocking ears or eyes, refusing certain clothing or food.

Sensory overload

More than the brain can process at once

When the brain receives more sensory information than it can process at once, this is called sensory overload.

It can build up gradually across a day or be triggered suddenly by a busy or unpredictable environment. Sensory overload can lead to a meltdown or a shutdown (see our separate fact sheets on these topics) and is one of the most common triggers for both.

How to support someone with sensory differences

Get to know the individual's own sensory profile

What they find difficult and what they find calming, as this varies a great deal between autistic people.

Reduce unnecessary sensory input where possible

Lighting, noise, smells, clutter.

Build in sensory breaks

And access to movement, quiet space, or sensory tools.

Offer, rather than insist on, sensory strategies

E.g. ear defenders, fidget tools, weighted items, or particular textures.

Watch for signs of building overload

So support can be offered before it reaches crisis point.

It is not "naughty" or attention-seeking

Remember that a behaviour linked to sensory input is the nervous system responding to the environment.

Remember

Sensory differences are not something an autistic person can simply choose to ignore or overcome. Understanding a person's individual sensory profile, and adapting environments and expectations accordingly, makes a significant difference to their comfort, regulation, and ability to engage.