

Back to School **SENSORY SURVIVAL KIT**



BACK TO SCHOOL SENSORY SURVIVAL KIT

Back to school can be an exciting time for many children, but for children with additional needs and sensory processing differences, it can be a stressful time. After a summer of being free of a school uniform, it is time to go back to wearing a uniform and school shoes which can be very uncomfortable for children with sensory processing differences. There are new challenges at the start of a new school year, which can be harder for children with sensory processing differences to navigate, including settling into a new school environment or class.

We've packed this kit with practical tips and suggestions to help those experiencing sensory integration or sensory processing differences better manage the sensory challenges of going back to school.

Unique to You

We all have individual sensory needs and preferences. All the suggestions in this Kit should be tailored to you or your child's specific sensory needs, abilities and preferences. Children starting reception or their first year of school will also have different needs from children who have already started school, and so will children in primary school in comparison to secondary or high school. Therefore we have included suggestions appropriate for a range of age groups and circumstances in this Back to School Sensory Survival Kit.

What Do We Mean by Sensory Integration?

Sensory integration is the way our brains take in, process, and respond to sensory information from the environment and also from within our own bodies. Everyone's way of processing sensory information is different. But sometimes, sensory processing differences can make it hard for a person to handle sensory information, understand it, and react appropriately. Sensory integration differences can affect how we spend our time and what we feel able to do on a day-to-day basis.

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CHOOSING A SCHOOL UNIFORM

An uncomfortable school uniform with scratchy seams and irritating labels is something that makes school an unpleasant experience for every child with sensory processing differences.

More high-street school uniform providers, such as [Marks & Spencer](#), are now considering design details like flat seams and no labels for a smooth feel against the skin, which are ideal for children with sensory

processing differences. [ASDA](#) is another retailer that stocks sensory-friendly school uniforms. If your school requires a particular uniform that you are unable to purchase on the high street, [undercover tape](#), which is a hypoallergenic, latex-free self-adhesive tape that acts as a barrier between an individual and irritating seams/tags on clothing, is worth considering.

[The Sensory Smart Store](#) also has a good offering of seamless clothing and socks that are ideal for school.

For children and young people with coordination difficulties that impact their ability to tie shoelaces, there are a good variety of velcro and slip-on shoes available as an alternative. In the UK, Start Rite shoes have also put together an [Autism Friendly Shoe Shopping guide](#) together for school shoes.

When choosing a school uniform for a child with sensory processing differences, consider the following:

- The **type of fabric** used. Natural materials are more comfortable and cooler than synthetic fabrics.
- Clothes fasteners. For example, school dresses with zips are easier to manage than those with lots of buttons for children with coordination problems.
- Comfortable shoes that are easy to get on and off. Children with sensory processing differences may not be as able to articulate abnormal pain and discomfort. Therefore it is essential to have children's feet measured to ensure that their shoes fit correctly.
- A comfortable, waterproof coat with fasteners that is easy for your child to do up independently

Finally, buy your child's new uniform in good time as you may need to wash it before they wear it.

Many schools have a hair policy that requires long hair (below shoulder length) to be tied back and ask that hair should be kept out of children's eyes using headbands, clips and slides. Schools also prefer hair accessories that are minimal, plain and in school colours.

Getting hair ready for school in the morning can be challenging where children present with sensory processing differences that make them sensitive to having their hair brushed. Sensitivity to tactile sensory input is one of the

most common reasons why children object to having their hair brushed. Some children with vestibular sensory processing differences are sensitive to having their head tilted backwards, so be mindful of that when brushing your child's hair and tying it in a ponytail. Children with olfactory sensitivities can also be sensitive to the smell of hair products, for example, detangling spray. We recommend using products with a natural scent.

Other useful tips include:

- Consider a brush like Tangle Teezer, a pain-free way to brush and get knots out of hair. The Sensory Smart Store also has a good selection of brushes and combs that are ideal for detangling hair.
- Use gentle hair elastics and accessories. For example, scrunchies are more sensory-friendly than

tight hair elastics. Hair elastics that are too tight can be uncomfortable for individuals with sensory processing differences and be painful when the wearer suddenly turns their head or stretches their neck.

- Soft-tipped hair clips and claw clips also tug less on the head.
- If allowed, a top knot half-down hairstyle is ideal for keeping hair out of an individual's face but without the tugging of a ponytail.
- Head lice is something that many parents of children at school are familiar with. It is uncomfortable to address and even more so for children with sensory processing differences. Head lice prevention spray or shampoo is something to consider if you think that treating head lice will be a sensory challenge for your child.

HAIR CARE TIPS FOR SCHOOL





When buying a backpack, consider:



Comfortable shoulder straps



Separate compartments to separate belongings



Space for laptops and other electronic devices



Designated holes for earphone cables

SCHOOL BAGS

A school bag that is comfortable to carry but also holds the essentials is a must. Backpacks are generally easier to manage than tote bags and more comfortable as the weight of the bag is equally distributed across a child's shoulders. Trolley or rolling backpacks can be useful for older children who have more to carry and help to prevent shoulder and back strain. However, they are bulky and take up more space when walking through busy hallways and using stairs.

This [sensory backpack](#) is an excellent backpack for children with sensory processing differences and has some valuable features, including padded, adjustable shoulder straps and a hip belt to provide calming, deep pressure; designated holes for earphone cables; a sensory toy to chew on; and oversized ring zippers promote independence in opening and closing the zippers.



STATIONERY

Stationery shopping can be a fun activity to help get children excited and prepared for the new school year. A good range of stationery available can also double up as a sensory kit or fidget for children. Examples include [pop-it pencil cases](#), [pencils with fidget toppers](#), and [glitter gel pens](#). [Scented pens](#) or highlighters can also be alerting for children with low arousal. [Sensory chew pencil covers](#) are also helpful for children who like to chew their stationery for sensory input.

Alongside sensory-friendly stationery, also consider the following:

- Young children with coordination difficulties often have difficulty with using regular scissors. [Spring Loaded scissors](#) are easier for children with coordination difficulties or poor grip strength.
- [Jumbo triangular pencils](#) are ideal for children who are just learning how to use a pencil for activities in school.
- Glue sticks with [different coloured glue](#) can be a helpful visual guide to show children where they have pasted glue and therefore be less messy.
- A [ruler with a handle](#) is helpful for children with bilateral coordination challenges who have difficulty keeping their ruler in a straight line when using it.
- [Ergonomic pens](#) with a suitable grip are ideal for children who struggle with their pen grip and tire easily from writing.
- Felt tips are easier for colouring in if you have low muscle tone as less pressure is required on the paper. Consider [erasable felt tips](#) that are easy to clean.



OTHER USEFUL SUPPLIES OR AIDS

If your child has sensory processing differences, it is likely that their occupational therapist has made some recommendations for specific equipment in the classroom. This section will, therefore, not cover specific chairs or equipment but more general items that parents can purchase that might be useful for the new school year. These include:

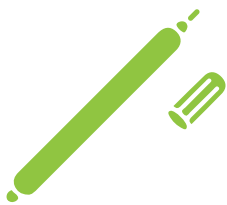
- Headphones for laptop or ICT work – some schools request that children bring in their own headphones for many reasons, including infection control. For a child with sensory processing differences, having their own pair of headphones can be helpful so they are confident they are comfortable and correctly adjusted. We recommend headphones with volume control for younger children, while noise-cancelling headphones are an excellent option for teenagers.
- Noise reduction ear plugs are useful for children who find busy, noisy environments, including school assemblies, overwhelming.
- Visual timetables are useful for helping children understand what their day will look like and can also be used to help children to remember what they need to pack for school. These coloured tags can be clipped onto children's backpacks or school bags so that they quickly have this information to hand.
- Discreet fidgets and chewies are loved by children with sensory processing differences of all ages. There is a good variety of fidgets available online, with some companies offering back-to-school bundles.



George

REMEMBER TO LABEL

Most schools require personal items, including clothes, stationery, lunch boxes etc to be labelled. Children with sensory processing differences often have difficulty organising themselves and their personal belongings, meaning keeping on top of labelling is even more important. When labelling, consider the following:



Laundry markers are useful as they are easy and quick to use.



Some labelling companies offer you the option for designing a label with your choice of colour, font and an image. These labels are helpful for children with visual discrimination difficulties as they will quickly be able to identify their own personal label. Children might also enjoy choosing and designing their own back-to-school label.



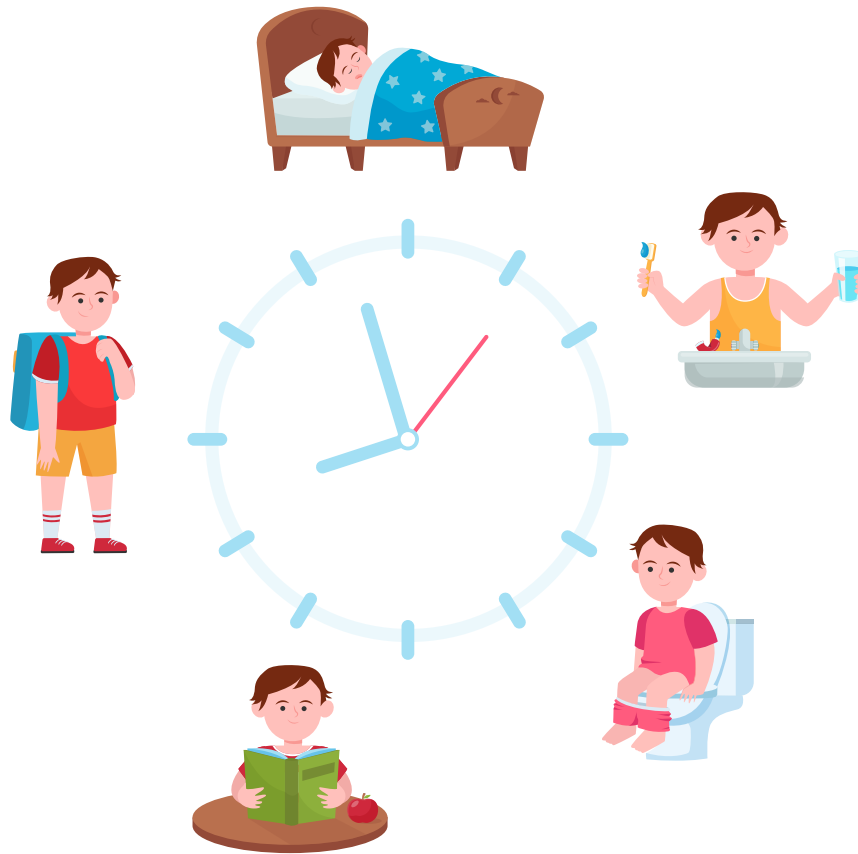
SCHOOL DINNERS AND LUNCH BOXES

In the UK, younger children may be eligible for free school meals. It is vital to ensure that your school is aware of your child's dietary requirements and allergies. For younger children, you can consider using a [food allergy ID wristband](#).

Many school districts or councils also share menus in advance through a handout or online. For children with sensory processing differences, consider talking through the menu with your child so that they know what to expect.

Older children often preferred packed lunches. The following are worth considering:

- **Pack familiar snacks:** For a packed lunch, pack some of your child's favourite snacks that they are used to eating at home. This will give them a sense of familiarity and comfort regarding food. However, do consider the school's policy of snacks that are allowed at school. Most schools do not allow any snacks or treats that contain peanuts.
- **Sensory snacks:** Crunchy snacks are great for helping children to regulate themselves
- **The right lunch box:** Some of the features you should consider is that the lunchbox should be leakproof to prevent spills and, depending on where you live, a [lunch bag with a cooler compartment](#) might be useful too. There is also a good selection of [bento style lunch boxes](#) available that separate food for children and young people who are picky eaters. Many children also find that a lunch box with separate compartments helps them to separate out food for first and second breaks.
- **For fruit:** [Banana protector cases](#) are ideal for children who enjoy bananas but will not eat bruised or smashed bananas for sensory reasons.
- **Stay hydrated:** Pick a refillable water bottle that is easy for your child to open and refill and comfortable to drink from.



BEFORE SCHOOL ROUTINES

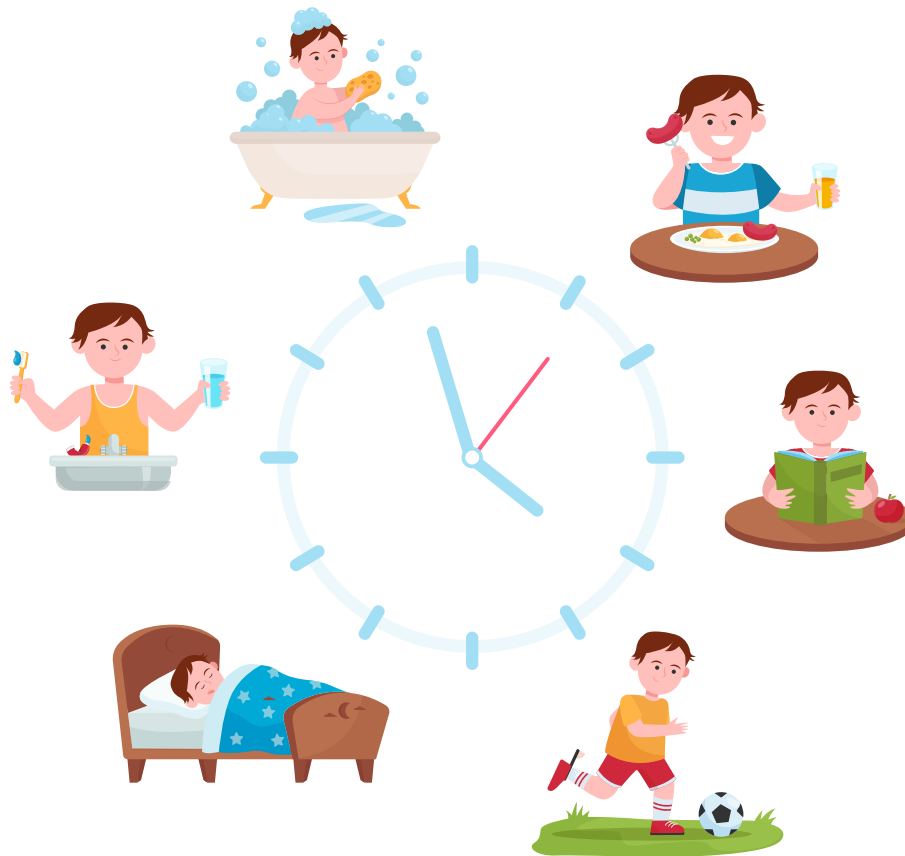
Children with sensory processing differences can experience the world quite differently. School can be unsettling and overwhelming for children with sensory processing differences, and establishing consistent routines can play a crucial role in providing stability and reducing anxiety for children.

When children clearly understand what to expect from their day, it becomes easier for them to mentally prepare and deal with sensory challenges. In turn, this can lead to reduced anxiety and fewer meltdowns at school and home. Some of the benefits of sticking to a routine in the morning before school include:

1. Providing a sense of predictability and reducing uncertainty.
2. Improved productivity as everyone knows what is expected of them. This also reduces the stress of decision-making for everyone concerned.
3. Sticking to a routine allows children to develop their independence skills, as it is easier to set goals for this when the routine stays consistent.
4. Having a consistent routine allows for better time management as everyone becomes familiar with how long a task takes to complete.

Some ideas for helping children with sensory processing differences get into a morning routine include:

1. Set a consistent bedtime and morning wake-up time. For younger children, [sleep trainer clocks](#) are useful, whilst older children will love this [alarm clock](#).
2. Set clear expectations. Give children instructions the night before, set out clothes and pack school bags.
3. Visual aids or a [visual schedule](#) can help remind young children of all the tasks they need to complete. For teens and young adults, a chalkboard wall can be a fun way to encourage list writing and planning.
4. Allow for flexibility in your schedule so that if anyone is running a few minutes late it won't affect the rest of the day. We recommend leaving at least half an hour extra at the start of the school year until everyone is familiar with the new schedule.



AFTER SCHOOL ROUTINES

The after-school meltdown is a common experience for children with sensory processing differences. This is because they have 'kept themselves together' for 7 hours or more to conform with the expectations of the school day and will be exhausted after a day of sensory overload by the time they get home.

Some ideas for an after-school routine include:

1. Plan an activity that meets your child's sensory needs after school, whether it's a physical activity like jumping on a trampoline or a calming activity such as relaxing and listening to music. Many children with sensory processing differences find a physical activity that provides proprioceptive sensory input, like climbing or even yoga, helpful after a day at school.
2. A cosy space for your child to relax in can be helpful after a busy day at school. This can be a corner or a quiet space. Some younger children enjoy having an [indoor tent](#) that they can customise the way they prefer. Beanbags, soft pillows and fairy lights can help to create a relaxing atmosphere. If you have the space, a cocoon swing or a [hanging hammock chair](#) is also a great resource for a cosy, calming space.
3. Have an afterschool snack ready: Often, children and young people are hungry and/or dehydrated at the end of the school day, which also affects their ability to regulate themselves. Crunchy snacks are great for helping children regulate themselves so stock up on crunchy snacks that your child enjoys.
4. Make time for listening: If your child is tired at the end of the school day and does not feel like talking about their day, make it clear that you are around to listen to them later. Empathy and validation of their feelings are important to make them feel that their feelings are relevant.



TRAVEL TIPS FOR THE COMMUTE TO SCHOOL

Being late for school or taking an unfamiliar route to school can be a stressful experience for children with sensory processing differences. Carefully consider your method and route of travelling and allow an extra few minutes. It is helpful to try the route during the school holidays if your child is starting a new school so that they are familiar with the route. This can help to make them feel more settled when the new school year starts.

If you are lucky enough to live within walking distance from school, exercise is a great way to help children and young people to start the day feeling regulated. Similarly, going to school on a bicycle or a scooter can also be a good source of exercise and vestibular sensory input if your child is able to do so.

For children who will be using school transport, get in touch with the transport company in advance to let them know if your child has any specific sensory needs or communication preferences that they are aware of those preferences well in advance.

If your child will be using public transport to school consider the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard: [The Sunflower Lanyard scheme](#) is a simple tool that you can use to voluntarily share that you have a disability or condition that may not be immediately apparent. This can help you receive extra assistance or more time in public spaces.



EVENTS AT SCHOOL

Throughout the school year, your child will be expected to, or have the opportunity to attend events and activities at school which could present your child with different sensory challenges. Some of these include sports days, school trips or events such as a school fair. The excitement, noise and general busyness of a day like that can be overwhelming for children with sensory sensitivities.

See the links below on how sports days and other big events at school can be challenging for your child. These links also contain suggestions on how to address these challenges.



[Sports days](#)



[School trips](#)

For schools that are interested in hosting a sensory-friendly school fair or event, the [National Autistic Society](#) has provided a helpful guide.



ADVOCATING FOR YOUR CHILD WITH SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

If your child is starting school for the first time, it is natural that you (and your child) will have some concerns about how their needs will be met in the school environment. If your child has had an occupational therapy, physiotherapy, or speech and language therapy assessment with specific recommendations it is important to make your child's school aware of those recommendations to ensure that your child gets the support they need in school.

We recommend contacting the special education needs coordinator (SENCO) of your child's school who will be best placed to discuss your child's needs and ensure that recommendations are followed in the school environment. If your child has yet to have an assessment or you feel that they would benefit from a referral to a particular service, SENCOs are also usually able to make referrals to relevant professionals in the school health system.

In some situations, parents and children might feel that their child's current school is not meeting the child's needs, even after discussions about adaptations or extra support. These families might choose to go down the educational tribunal route in order to secure the educational placement that they feel best suits the child's needs. For parents of autistic students who are unfamiliar with the process, charities like the [National Autistic Society](#)

provide guidance and support on the topic for families based in the UK.

The following is also important to consider:

- Remember, it takes a while for recommendations to work and for your child to get settled. Usually, therapists will check in with the teacher to see how recommendations are working out and make ongoing recommendations or small tweaks.
- You do not need to do this alone. A number of charities offer support in the process of supporting a child with additional needs in school. Some of these include:
 - [Mencap](#) (a charity for children and young people with learning disabilities)
 - The [Dyspraxia Foundation](#)
 - [Sossen](#)

If you'd like to learn more about how sensory integration and sensory processing needs affect your child, take our free course [Understanding Sensory Processing and Integration in Children For Parents and Carers](#). It's a 1-hour course explaining what sensory issues can look like in a child's behaviour and engagement, and how to support them.



Sensory
Integration
Education

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Established in 1994, Sensory Integration Education is a not-for-profit organisation working with allied health professionals, education and health experts, academic researchers and families to improve awareness, understanding and the treatment of sensory integration and sensory processing difficulties.

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