



Sensory Policy Statement

In conjunction with this policy The Heartlands School, London asks that you consider the impact of the difficulties our children and young people face with sensory issues in relation to their behaviour, responses to teaching and learning, transitions and general well-being.

Sensory Issues and those related to Occupational therapy are key factors in the learning and development of our pupils. Therefore, the school employs an Occupational Therapist from the Whittington Health NHS working every fortnight and an OT Assistant working 2.5 days every week and who are part of the MDT.

Definition and references *“To function and participate in the world that surrounds us, we need to use our senses. Senses provide individuals with unique experiences and allow us to interact and be involved with the rest of society. They help us to understand the environment around us and respond within it. They play a significant role in determining what actions we take in a particular situation. Imagine what happens when one, or all, of your senses are intensified or are not present at all, often referred to as sensory integration dysfunction. This is the case for many individuals on the autism spectrum”* (The Sensory World of the Autistic Spectrum; NAS 2003)

At The Heartlands School we have a trans-disciplinary approach to learning which includes an understanding of sensory issues in children with autism. The behaviour presented by an autistic individual may be a reaction to their sensory experiences as they seek to regain control and feel safe within their environment. At The Heartlands School we aim to create and maintain a sensory-rich environment that enables the pupil to learn and function more effectively.

What is a Sensory Processing Disorder?

Ayres (1979) described the process of turning sensation into perception as *“the organisation of sensation for use”*

The central nervous system (brain) processes all the sensory information sent from various sensory systems in the body and helps to organise, prioritise and understand the information. From this it is able to action a response: these may be thoughts, feelings, motor responses (behaviour) or a combination of these, most of the time the processing of sensory information is an automatic response.

The sensory systems can be broken down into seven areas. These can be divided into two main areas: hyper (high) and hypo (low) sensitivity (see appendix 1 for examples).

However, it is important to remember that the difficulties/differences may for some individuals fall into both areas.

How are the senses identified?

Balance and Movement (vestibular) system: Situated in the inner ear, this provides information on where our body is in space and its speed, direction and movement. It is fundamental in helping us to keep our balance and posture.

Body awareness (proprioceptive) system: The proprioceptive system receives input from the muscles and joints about body position, weight, pressure, stretch, movement and changes in position in space.

Smell (olfactory) system: Processed through chemical receptors in the nose, this tells us about smells in our immediate environment. Smell is a sense that is often neglected and forgotten about.

Sight (visual) system: Situated in the retina of the eye and activated by light, our sight helps us to define objects, people, colours, contrast and spatial boundaries.

Hearing (auditory) system: Situated in the inner ear, this informs us about sounds in the environment. It is the most commonly recognised aspect of sensory impairment.

Hearing impairment can have a direct effect on a person's ability to communicate and may also affect their balance.

Touch (tactile) system : Situated on the skin, the largest organ of the body, it relates to touch, types of pressure, level of pain and helps us distinguish temperature (hot and cold). Touch is a significant component in social development. It helps us to assess the environment we are in and enables us to react accordingly.

Taste (gustatory) system: Processed through chemical receptors in the tongue it tells us about different tastes - sweet, sour, bitter, salty and spicy. Individuals will often have restricted diets as a result of their taste buds being extra sensitive.

Identification and Provision

All pupils who are placed through the Local Authority have a statement of SEN. A large majority of pupils have sensory difficulties identified in their statement and the school aims to meet these objectives through its OT provision.

In addition to the difficulties identified on pupils' statements, there may be difficulties that are identified by staff that have contact with the pupils. In this case, this is discussed within the regular fortnightly MDT meetings.

The purpose of Occupational Therapy is to help the child achieve and/ or maintain their optimal level of function, engagement and participation in purposeful and meaningful occupations in the home and classroom environment. Occupational Therapy is delivered across the school at different levels. These are assessed on a needs basis and include;

1. Universal Approach:

- Whole school approach
- Whole school training
- Parent training

2. Targeted Approach:

- Classroom based intervention
- Targeted training for school staff and parents

3. Specialist Approach:

- Specialist assessment
- Individual treatment

Combinations of standardised and non-standardised OT assessments are used to evaluate and monitor pupil's needs. This is mostly an annual process and falls in line with the annual review of the individual child. For a child who joins the school and has undergone a recent OT assessment this usually forms the baseline for developing programs and therapy.

Strategies

At The Heartlands School our approach helps us to understand these sensitivities and we are mindful of the different environments that may cause sensory overload. Pupil's sensory needs may differ and these will be identified in their personal programmes.

Low Arousal

The school aims to create a low-arousal environment that is calm and orderly. By its nature, the school is small and this plays a significant part in reducing sensory overloads. Some of the examples that can be seen are small class sizes, consideration of classroom and other school environments and relaxation sessions after playtimes. The use of visual supports also reduces the anxiety felt by many pupils.

Posture

Stability on chairs for working at the table is crucial to assist the children in an awareness of body space and preparing them for using fine motor skills e.g. .writing, scissor work, handling tools.

Children's sitting positions may be atypical but it is crucial that children are working on the task on hand and not on their postural skills during these periods. Children will work on their postural skills during body shop activities by working on their core stability.

A number of wobble cushions and weighted lap pads are accessible for those children who have great difficulty with proprioceptive regulation.

Visual

For children on the autistic spectrum who are over responsive, the classroom environment uses calm colours, tidy surfaces and minimalist in its presentation.

Communication

The school adopts the SCERTS framework to aid communication and within this uses a variety of strategies. Communication boards, and symbols support communication. We use the PECS (picture exchange communication system) approach to aid learning, provide instructions / labels and support behaviour with certain children. Verbal prompting is used and the children respond to visual support more readily than lots of spoken language, especially when they are anxious or stressed.

Resistance exercises in classroom

A few children will include resistance work in their individual programmes e.g. squashing after playtime. A variety of weighted resources are available to use with children e.g. vests, blankets, lap pads, back packs. These may be used to help a child to calm, to focus on their work, or to realize where their body is located in space.

Auditory/noise sensitivity

A calm, quiet working atmosphere permeates the school day. All staff work very hard to minimise unnecessary noise. Ear defenders are available for children to make the choice to use them or staff will suggest a pupil may be more comfortable using them. Quiet music is played at transition times e.g. before lunch, at the end of the day.

Information in the PLP

Sensory: Families and staff are invited to complete a sensory profile for their child and these are updated as necessary. The profile has been developed by Winnie Dunn (PhD, OTR, FAOTA. Dunn's research is directed towards the study of how people understand and use the sensory input they receive, and how their sensory processing abilities affect that individual's performance in daily life.)

To identify sensory processing difficulties, staff prioritize the behaviours that occur most frequently and look at ways to change them through general classroom activities and specific targets incorporated into PLPS that lead to improving sensory processing skills.

Functional Skills: Occupational Therapy focuses on developing functional skills for living. Targets are built into every child's PLP and the OT gives advice on how to support the development and teaching of these skills within a sensory sensitive environment. These targets are reviewed each term and tracked annually.

Sensory-Based Activities

At The Heartlands School, sensory-based activities are frequently done in the Body Shop where it is equipped with basic equipment where a child can engage in a variety of heavy work activities. Focus is on desensitising pupils to stimuli through a slow and structured planned programme based on sensory-motor activities. The school OT supports staff across the school with sensory-based activities and proper use of sensory equipment both for individual pupils and groups.

Training

Good practice is shared and encouraged throughout school via sensory processing training and top tips. This is via informal discussions and meetings and formal training sessions at either staff training or Inset days. Training is delivered by our OT.

Resources

The school has a Body Shop and a Sensory Room that students can access as needed. Equipment and resources used across the school for sensory issues is recommended by the OT and is needs-led.

Support for Parents

The OT writes a report based on the results from assessments carried out and devises a home programme if needed. The reports and home programmes are sent to the parents after completion. The OT provides advice to parents via email, telephone and meetings at school and home.

If needed the OT offers a home visit to assist with home environment modification and adaptation to promote positive sensory experiences at home in order to facilitate development of age appropriate self-care and life skills, organisation and planning skills.

Equal Opportunities

In all areas of learning staff aim to promote equal opportunities in accordance with school policy.

Appendix 1

Some typical examples of Sensory Issues

| Type of Sense | <u>Hyper</u> -sensitivities may include | <u>Hypo</u> -sensitivities may include |
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| Balance (vestibular) system | difficulties in activities which include movement, such as sport difficulties in stopping quickly or during an activity car sickness difficulties with activities where the head is not in an upright position, or where feet are off the ground. | the need for rocking, swinging, spinning. |
| Body awareness (proprioception) system | difficulties with fine motor skills, manipulating small objects (e.g. buttons, tying shoe laces) moves whole body to look at something. | proximity - standing too close to others (not understanding personal body space) bumping into people or objects falling down. |
| Smell (olfactory) | smells can be intensified and | some individuals have no sense |

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| <p>system</p> | <p>overpowering toileting problems dislike of individuals with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, smells etc.</p> | <p>of smell and fail to notice extreme odours some people may lick things.</p> |
| <p>Sight (visual) system</p> | <p>distorted vision occurs and objects and bright lights can jump around fragmentation of images, as a consequence of too many sources focusing on particular detail (sand grains) more pleasurable than looking at something as a whole.</p> | <p>may see things darker, lose features, lines for some they may concentrate on peripheral vision because their central vision is blurred; others say that a main object is magnified and things on the periphery becomes blurred poor depth perception - problems with throwing and catching, clumsiness.</p> |
| <p>Hearing (auditory) system</p> | <p>volume of noise can be magnified and surrounding sounds distorted and muddled inability to tune out particular sounds - difficulties concentrating they may have a lower hearing threshold, which makes them particularly sensitive to auditory stimuli, for example hearing conversations in the distance. Their hearing impairment can have a direct effect on their ability to communicate and may also affect their balance.</p> | <p>sounds may only be heard with one ear, the other ear either only having partial hearing or none at all the person may not acknowledge particular sounds enjoys crowded noisy places, kitchens, bangs doors and objects.</p> |
| <p>Touch (tactile) system</p> | <p>touch can be painful and uncomfortable and they will often withdraw from aspects of touch, which can have a grave effect on their relationships with others dislike of having anything on hands or feet difficulties in brushing and washing hair</p> | <p>holds others tightly has high pain threshold - temperature/pain self-harming enjoys heavy objects on top of them.</p> |

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| | only likes certain types of clothing or textures. | |
| Taste (gustatory) system | <p>some flavours and foods are too strong and overpowering for them</p> <p>certain textures also cause discomfort; some children will only eat smooth foods such as mashed potatoes or ice-cream.</p> | <p>likes very spicy foods, strong flavours</p> <p>eats everything - soil, grass, materials.</p> |