Sensory Vs Behaviour and Sensory Strategies

This resource pack has been developed by the Occupational Therapist, Kritika Godiyal from Words First, who provides support at Mandeville, Greenford. It includes a selection of activities and games designed to assist in differentiating sensory behaviours from those related to task avoidance or social communication. The pack also offers evidence-based strategies and practical guidance to effectively support sensory needs within the school environment.

Occupational Therapy is a healthcare profession dedicated to enabling individuals of all ages to engage in the activities that are meaningful to them — known as “occupations.” By addressing sensory and physical challenges, Occupational Therapy promotes independence, participation, and overall well-being. This may involve developing skills, adapting tasks, or modifying the

Sensory vs. Behaviour: Understanding the Difference

What Is Sensory?

- Sensory relates to how our body takes in information through the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, balance, and body awareness).
- A sensory response happens because of how the brain reacts to sensory input, not because someone is trying to get attention or avoid something.

- **Example:**
  A child covers their ears when the vacuum cleaner is on because the noise feels too loud or painful (sensory response).

What is Behaviour?

- Behaviour is an action or reaction that a person chooses or learns, often to communicate a need or get a response.
- A behavioural response usually happens for a reason like attention, avoiding a task, or getting something they want.

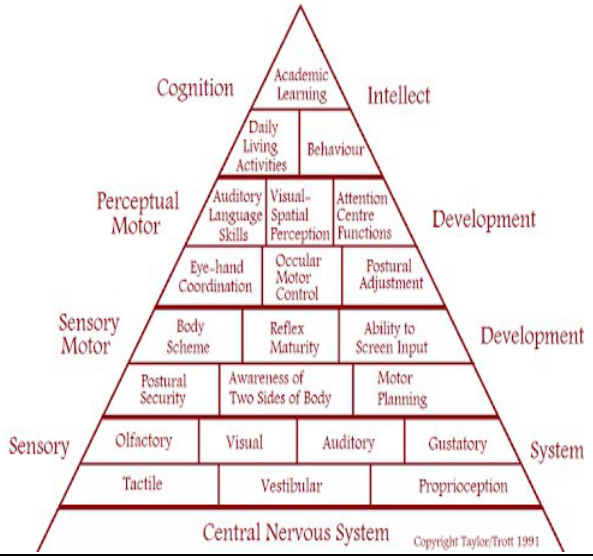
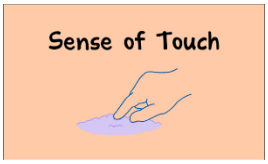
- **Example:**
  A child covers their ears and screams when the vacuum is on because they know it will make someone turn it off (behavioural response).

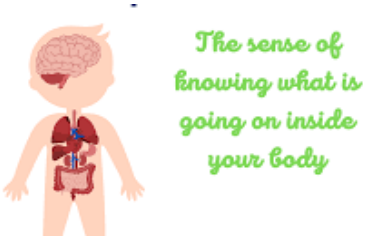
Sensory (Touch (Tactile), Taste, Smell, Vision, Body Awareness (Proprioception), Movement (Vestibular) and Interoception (Internal Body signals)	Behaviour (avoiding task, obtaining attention/communication)
Definition: Sensory responses are automatic reactions to information from the senses — touch, taste, smell, vision, body awareness (proprioception), movement and balance (vestibular), and internal body signals (interoception).	Definition: Behavioural responses are learned or intentional actions used to communicate a need or achieve a goal (e.g., avoiding a task, gaining attention, or expressing frustration).
Example 1: A learner covers their ears when a hand dryer is on because the noise feels painfully loud (sound sensitivity).	Example 1: A learner covers their ears and screams because they know this will make someone turn off the dryer (task avoidance).

Example 2: A learner avoids messy play, such as finger painting, because the texture feels uncomfortable (touch sensitivity).	Example 2: A learner refuses messy play because they want to avoid cleaning up (behavioural avoidance).
Example 3: A learner smells or licks objects to gain more sensory feedback (exploring through smell/taste).	Example 3: A learner throws a toy to get a reaction from others or to communicate frustration (attention-seeking behaviour).
Example 4: A learner spins or seeks movement to feel calm or stay focused (needs vestibular input).	Example 4: A learner runs around the classroom to get attention from an adult (attention-seeking behaviour).

What are The Sensory Systems and How do They Work?

Sensory integration and processing are the way the brain receives information from all of the sensory systems, organises it, and uses it to respond appropriately. This process forms the foundation for many skills, from balance and coordination to communication and academic learning. The diagram below (if included) shows how sensory integration and processing underpins higher-level skills.

	Sensory processing is a complex interaction of all sensory system's taking in information, processing it and making sense of it, so that they can respond to it appropriately. This pyramid shows how our ability to process sensory information is connected to the development of the systems above, all the way to academic learning and achievement. 
Tactile (Touch) System 	**Tactile (Touch) System** Our sense of touch helps us understand how things feel through our skin and mouth. When sensory integration and processing in this system is not working efficiently, Students may be over- or under-responsive to touch. For example, they might avoid certain textures (like paint or sand) or seek extra touch through fidgeting and messy play.
Auditory (Hearing)System 	**Auditory (Hearing) System** The auditory system helps us hear, filter, and interpret sounds. Efficient sensory integration and processing allow us to focus on important sounds and tune out background noise. For example, in a classroom, a learner needs to listen to the teacher's voice while ignoring traffic noise outside or quiet conversations around them.

Oral (Mouth)System 	**Oral (Mouth) System** Sensory receptors in the mouth help us process taste (sweet, salty, sour, bitter), temperature, and texture (smooth yogurt, crunchy crisps, soft bread). Differences in sensory processing here may affect eating habits — for example, a learner may prefer only crunchy foods or avoid certain textures.
Visual(sight) System 	**Visual (Sight) System** The visual system allows us to take in and interpret what we see, notice details, and make sense of our environment. Efficient sensory integration supports reading, writing, and navigating spaces safely.
Vestibular (Movement) Processing 	**Vestibular (Movement and Balance) System** Located in the inner ear, this system helps us stay balanced, maintain posture, and adjust when we start to fall. It plays a key role in coordination, spatial awareness, and attention.
Proprioception (Body Positioning/Awareness) 	**Proprioception (Body Awareness) System** Proprioceptive receptors in muscles and joints tell the brain where body parts are and how they are moving. This sense supports smooth, coordinated movement and helps Students use the right amount of force (e.g., pushing open a door gently vs. too hard).
Interoception 	**Interoception (Internal Body Signals)** Interoception allows us to notice signals from inside our body, such as hunger, thirst, pain, or the need to use the toilet. This system helps Students understand and respond to their body's needs appropriately.

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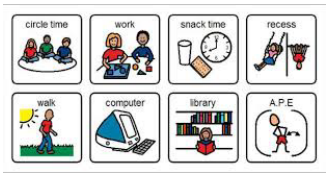
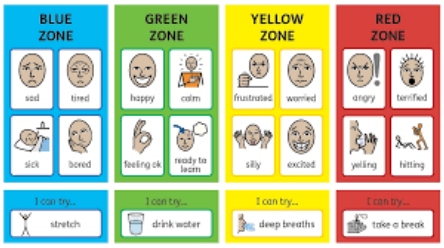
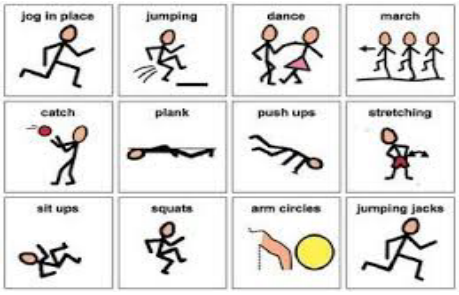
How Can You Help?

Strategy	How to Implement
Sensory Plan 	Integrate planned sensory activities throughout the day to support regulation. Choose activities based on the learner's needs: • Alerting activities – use when a learner appears tired, slow to respond, or has difficulty paying attention (e.g., jumping, brisk walking, upbeat music). • Organising activities – use when a learner seems disorganised or has trouble coordinating movements (e.g., animal walks, obstacle courses). • Calming activities – use when a learner is fidgety, restless, or overexcited (e.g., deep pressure, slow swinging, heavy work activities).
Teach Self-Regulation 	Provide opportunities for Students to recognise their feelings and choose strategies to manage them. Use simple language and model how to respond in different situations
Visual Supports 	• Use picture cards or emotion charts to label feelings. • Provide visual schedules for predictability and routine. • Show step-by-step task visuals to support independence.

Zones Of Regulation 	• Teach Students to identify their “zone” (Blue = low energy, Green = calm/ready to learn, Yellow = heightened, Red = very upset). • Offer zone-appropriate strategies (e.g., deep breathing for Yellow, break time or safe space for Red).
Calming Techniques  	Practise deep breathing (e.g., “smell the flower, blow out the candle”). • Use fidget tools, stress balls, or putty. • Provide noise-cancelling headphones or calming music.
Movement Breaks 	Schedule short breaks for movement between tasks (jumping, stretching, walking). Provide access to sensory tools such as weighted blankets, wobble cushions, or resistance bands.
Modelling and Role Play 	Model calm behaviours during moments of stress. Practise problem-solving and coping strategies through role-play.

Safe Space 	Create a quiet, low-stimulation area with soft furnishings and calming items (books, soft toys) where Students can go to reset.
Clear and Consistent Routines 	Maintain predictable daily routines and use timers or countdowns to signal transitions.
Positive Reinforcement 	Acknowledge and praise the use of regulation strategies. Use simple reward systems (stickers, tokens) to encourage consistent use.

Sensory Circuits

A sensory circuit is a form of sensory integration intervention. It involves a sequence of physical activities that are designed to **alert**, **organise** and **calm** the child. The sensory circuit aims to facilitate sensory processing to help Students regulate and organise their senses in order to achieve the 'just right' or optimum level of alertness required for effective learning. The circuit should be an active, physical and fun activity that Students enjoy doing.

Sensory circuits are designed to start with **alerting** activities, move to an **organising** phase and then finally to a **calming** phase. Doing the activities in the recommended order is vital. The right order results in a well-regulated, happy child. The wrong order may well result in a dysregulated, upset or irritable child and have the opposite effect.

How Often sensory circuits should be done?

Sensory circuits should ideally be completed at school, first thing in the morning (and after lunch too,

where possible).

For most effective outcomes, sensory circuits should be completed on a regular basis. Ideally, the circuit will take no more than 15-20 minutes. The Students should spend up to 5 minutes in each section performing the different activities.

It is important to consider that each child's needs and tolerance levels are different. Some Students may need more time in the alerting or calming sections to enable them to be more organized and prepared for the day's learning. Students should be encouraged but not forced to participate in the circuit and must be supervised at all times.

Note-

- Sensory circuit should be completed x2 a day. once in the morning and once in the afternoon preferably.
- The entire sensory circuit should last for about 15-20 minutes

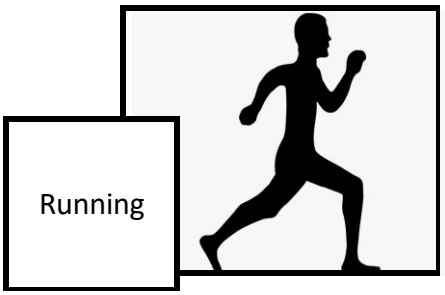
1. Alerting activity- 5minutes
2. Organising activity- 5 minutes
3. Calming activity- 5 minutes.

Alerting activities

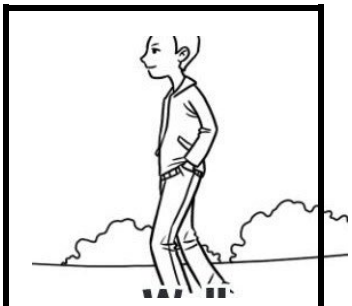
Alerting activities can be used when Students don't have much energy, are struggling to sit up (lying on chairs and tables), look bored, tired and sad and are in a low state of alertness. To prevent Students from becoming too overstimulated, alerting activities should be followed by an organising and calming activity.

Activities you can do at home can include:

Bounce on a ball or jump around



Running



Go for a walk to get extra movement

Walking up and down the stairs.

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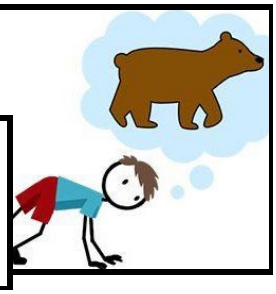
Organising Activities

Organising activities are nice activities to follow alerting activities. They help to organise the body and the mind to promote regulation.

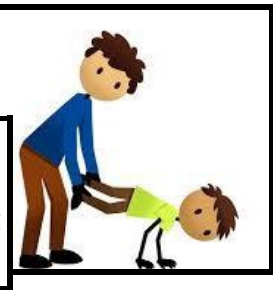
Activities you can do at home can include:

Animal walks

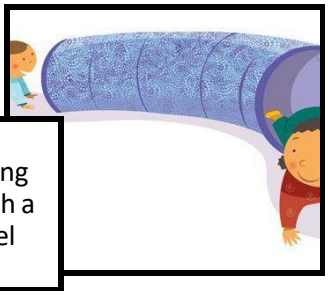


Obstacle Courses

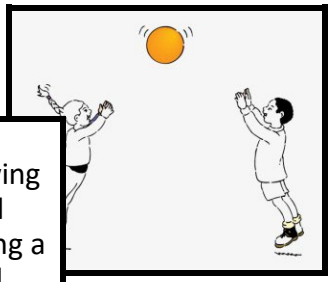
Wheelbarrow Walking



Crawling through a tunnel



Throwing and catching a ball



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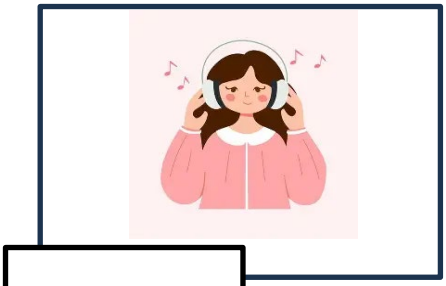
Calming Activities

Calming activities can be used when Students have too much energy, are struggling to sit still, are experiencing large emotions (such as anger and frustration) and are in a heightened state of alertness.

Activities you can do at home can include:

Blowing Bubbles

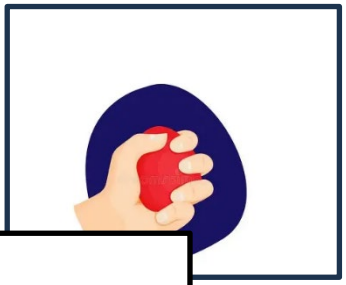
Deep Breathing Exercises.



Listening to calming music.

Accessing a Quiet Space.

Calming sensory lights.



Squeezing a ball.

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Alerting, Organising, and Calming Activities

Every learner's sensory needs are unique. Some may need activities to wake up and get ready for learning, while others may need activities to feel more grounded and focused. These activities are grouped into three main types:

Alerting Activities	Organising Activities	Calming Activities
These activities help to increase energy and attention levels, making it easier to focus and engage. Examples: • Jumping on a trampoline or hopping on two feet • Playing upbeat music and dancing • Spinning in a safe, controlled way • Fast-paced animal walks (e.g., bear crawl, crab walk)	Organising activities help the brain and body work together, improving coordination, sequencing, and body awareness. Examples: • Throwing and catching a ball • Obstacle courses with crawling, climbing, and jumping • Pushing or pulling heavy objects (laundry basket, weighted bag) • Wheelbarrow walking or tug-of-war	Calming activities support relaxation, self-regulation, and emotional control. Examples: • Deep pressure hugs or wrapping in a blanket ("burrito wrap") • Slow rocking or swinging • Squeezing playdough, putty, or a stress ball • Listening to calming music or white noise • Deep breathing exercises ("smell the flower, blow the candle")