



Brookfields School

Sensory Perception Policy

Leadership Team

November 2017

Introduction

This policy outlines our approaches to sensory perceptual issues for children and young people with autism.

○ Rationale

“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 Brookfields we have a child centred approach to learning and this is reflected in our understanding of sensory issues for children with autism. The behaviour presented by an individual with autism will often be a direct reaction to their sensory experiences as they seek to regain control and feel safe in their own world. At Brookfields we aim to create and maintain a learning environment that is more comfortable and minimises sensory overload.

○ Sensory Integration

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 can action a response: these may be thoughts, feelings, motor responses (behaviour) or a combination of these. Throughout our bodies we have receptors, which pick up on sensory stimuli. Our hands and feet contain the most receptors. Most of the time, for most people, the processing of sensory information is an automatic response.

The sensory systems can be broken down into six areas. These can be divided into two main areas: hyper (high) and hypo (low) sensitivity. However, it is important to remember that the difficulties/differences may for some individuals fall into both areas.

Balance (vestibular) system

Situated in the inner ear, this provides information on where our body is in space and its speed, direction and movement, all in relation to the pull of gravity. It is fundamental in helping us to keep our balance and posture. For an individual on the spectrum, difficulties/differences may be:

Hypo

- the need for rocking, swinging, spinning.

Hyper

- 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.

Body awareness (proprioception) system

Situated in the muscles and joints, our body awareness system tells us where our bodies are. It also informs us where our body parts are and how they are moving. For an individual on the spectrum difficulties/differences may be:

Hypo

- proximity - standing too close to others/not understanding personal body space
- navigating rooms - avoiding obstructions
- bumping into people.

Hyper

- difficulties with fine motor skills, manipulating small objects (e.g. buttons, tying shoe laces)
- moves whole body to look at something.

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. It is, however, the first sense we rely upon. For an individual on the spectrum difficulties/differences may be:

Hypo

- some individuals have no sense of smell and fail to notice extreme odours
- some people may lick things.

Hyper

- smells can be intensified and overpowering
- toileting problems
- dislike of individuals with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.

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. For an individual on the spectrum difficulties/differences may be:

Hypo

- 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 become blurred
- poor depth perception - problems with throwing and catching, clumsiness.

Hyper

- distorted vision occurs, and objects and bright lights can jump around
- fragmentation of images, because of too many sources
- focusing on particular detail (sand grains) more pleasurable than looking at something as a whole.

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. For an individual on the spectrum, difficulties/differences may be:

Hypo

- 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.

Hyper

- volume of noise can be magnified, and surrounding sounds distorted and muddled
- inability to cut 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.

Touch (tactile) system

Situated on the skin, the largest organ of the body, it relates to touch, type 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. For an individual on the spectrum difficulties/differences may be:

Hypo

- holds others tightly
- has high pain threshold - temperature/pain
- self-harming
- enjoys heavy objects on top of them.

Hyper

- 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
- only likes certain types of clothing or textures.

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 because of their taste buds being extra sensitive. For an individual on the spectrum difficulties/differences may be:

Hypo

- likes very spicy foods
- eats everything - soil, grass, materials.

Hyper

- some flavours and foods are too strong and overpowering for them
- certain textures also cause discomfort; some children will only eat smooth foods such as mashed potatoes or ice-cream.

Synaesthesia

This is a rare condition, separate from autism, which some individuals on the spectrum say they experience. This is when confusion in the sensory channels occurs. A sensory experience goes in through one system and out through a different system. For example, an individual hears a sound (auditory system) but sees colours (visual system).

○ **Strategies**

A greater understanding of the sensory world of individuals on the spectrum allows us to help them develop in a more comfortable environment. Therefore, underpinning the approaches, we use are these general points: -

Awareness: Knowing that sensory dysfunction may be the reason for the problem; always examine the environment, observe the person in different contexts, speak to the person about their experiences, speak to others who know that person; in short build a picture of their sensory behaviour.

Be creative: Use your knowledge of sensory difficulties and associated strategies / resources plus your imagination and knowledge of the individual to come up with positive sensory experiences and/or strategies for the individual.

Prepare: Always warn the individual of possible sensory stimuli they may experience, e.g. loud crowded places. Plan school based and LOfC experiences carefully to ensure you have all the appropriate strategies and resources ready.

At Brookfields our child-centred approach helps us to understand these sensitivities and we adopt strategies within school to create a learning environment where senses are not overloaded. We also feel it is important to prepare our children the best we can for the future and give them the ability to cope with their difficulties within the wider world.

ASD pupils have individual sensory profiles and where necessary further plans will be drawn up to outline a personalised sensory plan. This will be undertaken by our Specialist Occupational Therapist; Breanne Black in conjunction with class staff and parents.

Low Arousal

During times when sensory overload can be heightened we take steps to ensure that this is minimised; e.g. at lunchtime pupils eat in smaller 'family' groups in different areas around school where there is less visual and auditory overload.

Classroom and corridor displays show minimal visual stimulus and classroom / whole school resources are organised and clutter free to reduce visual overload. In all classes some pupils work at workstations which have minimal visual stimulation, enabling an environment conducive to learning. Where necessary high impact areas, such as the computer bays are screened off, again to reduce visual overload. Classrooms have distinct areas for group work and individual workstations. Seating is planned for each individual within the class to provide the optimum learning environment. Each classroom environment is planned according to the needs of the pupils within it as each group of children will be different.

Sensory Integration

At Brookfields this involves exposure to various sensory stimuli within a gentle and caring approach. We work on desensitising pupils to stimuli through a planned

programme. Small steps are taken to increase a pupil's tolerance. Staff at Brookfields work closely with parents and multi agency professionals such as Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapist to develop individualised programmes e.g. sensory diets. Included in this is the teaching of strategies to pupils using different resources or techniques to cope with sensory experiences that distress them.

Music Therapy

Music therapy uses instruments and sounds to encourage and develop the sensory systems, predominantly the auditory system. It also provides individuals with an opportunity to communicate, interact and express how they are feeling. At Brookfields we have a qualified music therapist who works with individual pupils with ASD. We also have a specialist music teacher who works with all classes across the school to provide a range of musical experiences for all pupils.

Sensory Areas

At Brookfields we have a sensory light room which is used by individual pupils and by small groups and a multisensory soft play room with interactive floor. These rooms serve a range of purposes pertinent for individual pupils. In addition, our hall offers a multisensory learning environment as does our swimming pool. We also have a mobile 'Magic Carpet' which allows us to create sensory learning environments anywhere we choose.

"Sensory environments are aimed at providing individuals with the opportunity to stimulate, develop or balance sensory systems" (The Sensory World of the Autistic Spectrum; NAS 2003)

Calm-alert Activities

Pupils take part in calm-alert activities throughout the day which help them to be calm and alert enough to learn. These activities will be outlined in the child's sensory diet. Activities include bouncing on a small trampoline, using a ball chair, going for a walk within the school grounds, using fidget toys and taking part in pulling and pushing activities such as using the outdoor play and gym equipment.

Rebound Therapy

Pupils have the opportunity to take part in Rebound Therapy. Physically, it helps to increase strength, balance and co-ordination and emotionally, rebound therapy aids confidence-building, communication and social skills.

Training

Good practice is shared and encouraged throughout school and new staff receive information regarding sensory issues as part of their induction. Training within school is provided by Occupational Therapy and Speech and Language Therapists. Staff also attend external training which is then disseminated across the body of staff. Annually staff have access to sensory training as part of the Merseyside INSET and there are

regular staff meetings / INSET at Brookfields for all staff to maintain skills and knowledge.

Resources

Resources for sensory development will be needs- led and identified by teaching area team in conjunction with parents and other professionals.

Equal Opportunities

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

Dissemination of Policy

The policy will be disseminated widely. The school and Governors should ensure that they have knowledge of the policy and its implications for the school. It is the responsibility of the Headteacher to inform the Governors of any amendments.

Review Date

This policy will be reviewed in November 2020.

Some useful websites:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/sensory>

<https://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk/>

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/alternative-therapies/sensory-integration-therapy-what-you-need-to-know>

https://www.autism.com/symptoms_sensory_overview

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/understanding-sensory-processing-issues>

http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/upload/pdf_files/1403677461_11_Sensory.pdf

There are many very useful websites that stock sensory toys and equipment. If you would like any advice please contact school staff or Breanne Black our Sensory OT.