



SEND Supported  
Embracing difference

## Exploring and managing sensory processing differences for children with an ASC during lunchtimes

### Sensory Processing:

Sensory processing varies greatly for children with an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC); however, most experience the sensory world quite differently from those who do not have an ASC. Children with an ASC frequently have difficulty in all areas of registering, integrating and processing sensory experiences. For some, these sensory experiences dominate everything they do. When the outside world is constantly assaulting their nervous system, they are on high alert and frequently anxious.

Adults need to be aware that sensory processing issues can be one of the biggest challenges children with an ASC experience. The more we understand how the child experiences their sensations, the better we can accommodate and compensate for these vulnerabilities.

Sensory overload occurs when the nervous system is bombarded by too much or too intense stimulation for it to process effectively. It is an inability of the brain to filter, or tone down, the stimulation coming into the brain. For many of us who do not have sensory processing problems, our brain filters out much of the stimulation bombarding the nervous system. It filters out, for example, background noise, the hum of the lights, the smells of the pen markers; all unnecessary for us to be aware of, so we can then concentrate on the task at hand. This allows our brain to comfortably integrate the important information so that we can process it smoothly and effectively. We can attend to what we need to because we block out what is irrelevant at the moment. However, for those with sensory processing difficulties, this filter does not function effectively and allows too much stimulation into the brain, taxing and overloading it.

Sensory processing differences may cause a child to experience stress and anxiety across a range of environments. One of the most challenging environments is the **school lunch hall** where there is increased likelihood of the child becoming overloaded due to the elevated exposure to sensory information (noise, visual, smell/taste, touch). This all compounded by social demands and expectations alongside reduced structure and routine.

Sensitivities can vary day-to-day and be affected by any stress on the nervous system, such as fatigue, lack of sleep, illness, hunger. Adults supporting such children need to understand that these are legitimate and often complex issues that impact on learning and behaviour. Adults do not need high level technical knowledge in relation to sensory processing but do need a willingness to be creative and adapt their approach and support based on assessed or identified issues that may have a sensory basis. Considering the sensory environment in school is the first stage in addressing sensory difficulties within school.

## How can we support children with sensory processing differences during lunchtimes?

- Gather a baseline of the child's sensory processing profile. Engage parents in this process.
- It is important to capture the child's views and this is most successfully achieved through use of visual and concrete tools – see the Stress Scale format as cited in the book, *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* by Kari Dunn Baron.
- Complete the Sensory Environmental Audit designed to support Warwickshire's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Education Provision Matrix. It provides a framework to consider the sensory aspects of the school environment which can impact the child's ability to engage and participate successfully.
- Key members of staff (including lunch time supervisors and kitchen staff) should be informed about the child's sensory processing profile. Autism Awareness training for lunchtime supervisors would be beneficial.
- Adults to establish and maintain a positive and trusting relationship with the child. Knowledge, understanding and a secure relationship with the child, helps to avoid an increase in emotional distress in what is already a challenging situation and busy environment. If adults demonstrate a flexible approach, the child can relax and feel more able to eat and engage with peers.
- The child may benefit from a calming and organising sensory activity prior to the beginning of lunchtime. This can help to calm and prepare the nervous system.
- Allow the child to go ahead of the crowd rather than enter an already busy noisy environment. The noise can then build up around them.
- Wearing ear defenders may be beneficial for some children as this will reduce the volume. Perhaps introduce earplugs or an iPod so they can listen to calming music or white noise.
- If the child is uncomfortable with touch, encourage them to sit at the end of the table as touch is minimised without neighbours. Also avoid lining up or encourage the child to go to the front or back of the queue.
- A nose peg may block out offending smells.
- Maintain routines and seat the child in the same place each day, preferably around the edge of the hall.
- Make the child aware of any changes to the expected routine.
- Short simple Social Stories can be helpful in describing a social situation with relevant social cues, other's perspectives and a suggested appropriate response.
- If the child finds that sitting with their peers in the hall is simply overwhelming, set up a small table and encourage the child to invite one other child to eat with them. The small table may be placed in a low level distraction area of the hall or possible in an alternative space where there is adult supervision.
- Be mindful that sensory overload impacts a child's ability to communicate and interact. It may be the trigger for a meltdown (best understood as a panic attack). As far as possible reduce any stimuli and keep communication to a minimum. Instructions should be short and simple. Remember, this is not a battle to be lost or won, but a crisis to manage.
- Maximise use of visual and verbal cues. Some children have difficulty knowing where to start and when to finish and can be sat in the hall for an unnecessarily long

time. A visual schedule with positive verbal prompts may be helpful in providing structure and minimising anxiety.

- For some children their sensory differences mean that they are exceptionally slow eaters. Encourage rather than pressurise. Perhaps provide a short break and return to lunch.
- Some children may benefit from planned snack breaks during the day. This in itself may help keep the nervous system in check and help avoid sensory overload during lunchtime.
- If the child is having school dinners, support them in making choices about what they eat – perhaps present the choices visually earlier in the day / via parents. Be aware that children with an ASC can get locked into routines, e.g. always choose the ‘green’ option even if their food preference is the ‘red’ option.
- Liaise with parents and work as a team around the child.

*Ideas taken from: Building Bridges through Sensory Integration. E. Yack, S. Sutton & P. Aquilla*