



## SENSORY STRATEGIES

## TEENAGER INFORMATION PACK

Information and tips for teenagers and parents on dealing with sensory processing difficulties



# What is sensory processing?

Sensory processing refers to the way we interpret information received from the environment and from within our bodies. This information gives us a sense of who we are, where we are and what is happening around us.

Our senses are **sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, proprioception** (body awareness), **vestibular** (balance and movement) and **interoception** (our internal body sense).

When our senses are integrating correctly we are able to respond appropriately to any sensation, for example, we are able to take off an itchy jumper or take a deep breath to smell the flowers.



# What happens when a young person or teenager experiences sensory processing differently?

A young person may have difficulty working out what is happening inside and outside of their bodies. The sensory information may not be accurate, for example, the noise of the school bell is like someone screaming in their ear, or a piece of artwork on the wall keeps grabbing their attention because their brain hasn't registered they have seen it before. Standing in queues makes them on "high alert" in case someone brushes past them, which can be painful.

Getting changed for PE or sports events can be very difficult because of poor balance and not knowing where their hands are to put their jumper on when they can't see their hands.

A young person may move constantly to get extra feedback if their body is not providing enough information as to where their arms and legs are.

Most people get used to their own sensory preferences and make choices about their daily activities appropriate for them. Some people don't like the feel of polystyrene, some prefer quieter pubs and restaurants, some crave theme parks.

However, young people may struggle to communicate how they feel. They may be disorganised in a world they cannot make sense of.

These people need support from those around them to learn strategies to make life a little easier.



# Preparing for adult life: moving from children's routines to teenage routines



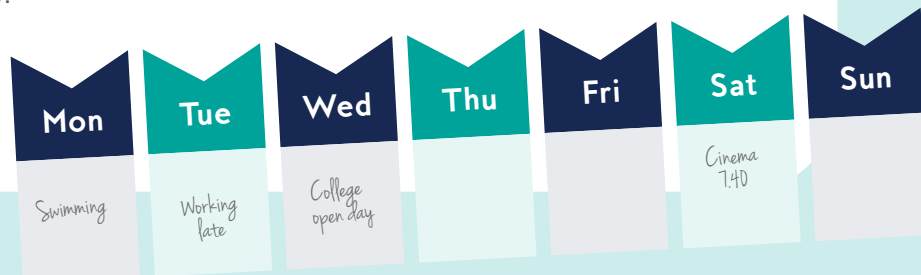
Our teenage years bring new experiences that help to develop the skills we will need in the future. Teenage years can be a challenge for any parent to cope with as it involves an element of letting go, taking risks and allowing our young people to make mistakes. For parents of teenagers with sensory processing difficulties it can be even harder to adapt to this increasing level of independence.

Here you will find a range of tips and ideas to encourage teenagers to think about the experiences and skills they may need to help them prepare for adulthood, and to help parents to think creatively about supporting their teenager.

## Establishing routines for the whole family

A clear routine – what is happening next, how long an activity will last – can help teenagers feel they are in control. This is particularly important if they are nearing the end of school and the loss of the Monday to Friday routine. Not all of the ideas below will be possible, but see where you can introduce some of them into your household.

- Use a family planner with only one week in view and a picture calendar for events. Let the family help you plan the week.
- Ensure morning or evening routines are clear visually, making it easy to see what is happening both now and later on.
- Set family meal times for each day.
- Mark in appointments and set reminders.
- Use mobile phone calendars, daily alarms, and reminders.
- Set times for family activities e.g. to feed/walk pets.
- Set times for specifically enjoyable activities which should not be interrupted (e.g. family walk, time to watch something together or play a game).
- Get rid of clutter which can reduce visual overload and help keep everyone calm.
- Give everyone in the house somewhere to keep their own belongings, and label this with pictures or names.
- Use objects to remind everyone of something unusual happening, e.g. a suitcase before summer holidays.
- Have a music slot at significant times such as start of weekend.
- Have a designated chill out place and/or time at home.
- Use visual timers or five minute count downs to begin or end particularly difficult activities.
- Get other family or friends involved in helping to plan your routine to give you the benefit of an onlooker's perspective.



## Personal care

You may have supported your child in personal care tasks from their childhood to teenage years, but as your teenager matures they may be able to develop more independence in general personal care activities.

Developmentally, the physical change during the teenage years can be difficult for those who are sensory sensitive. Everything feels different as the body is changing. Be mindful that the physical differences may lead to particular sensory likes and dislikes.

- New sensitivities can develop as we get older or old ones can re-emerge when we feel anxious.
- New care routines will involve new sensory experiences, for example, shaving or having sore skin as a result of acne.
- Make a special trip to buy items used in the bathroom routine and allow your teenager to choose their own care products to make them feel more in control.
- Explore products on the market such as teenage skincare, but remember they might find it stressful when familiar products change and do not have the same smell or packaging.
- Do you need a new routine? You may have helped your teenager to shower every day but perhaps they could manage it themselves every other day.
- Sensory deep pressure activities might still be useful.
- Try using a countdown, timer or the length of a piece of music to mark the end of a task such as having a shower.

Remember that teenagers often become more self-conscious and may be embarrassed by their need for help with personal care.



## Hair care

Being able to care for their own hair may give your teenager a greater sense of control and promote positive body image.

- Easy, yet up to date shorter hair styles may be a solution to let the teenager feel they are growing up. A discussion with the hairdresser might be a good idea and your teenager could be involved in this.
- Use suitable shampoos, conditioners and anti-tangle products to help with brushing difficulties.
- Involve them in choosing their own hair care products to help develop a positive attitude.
- Experiment with different brushes, thinking about such things as handle length, soft or hard bristles, etc.
- A dressing table style mirror may give a few different perspectives to allow your teenager to see their hair from all angles.
- Think about how often hair washing is necessary and the best time to do it. Teenagers can be sleepy in the morning. Is night time better? They could use dry shampoo on days that hair washing is a challenge.
- Before washing hair, try massaging the scalp or applying deep pressure to the head for a count of ten. The teenager can build in a routine of doing this for themselves.

## Brushing teeth

- Reassess the type/style of toothbrush and the flavour of toothpaste to make sure they are comfortable with it.
- Try using an electric toothbrush. Novelty toothbrushes can also be motivating for some people. Others may like a visual timer so they know how long is left of brushing.
- Try getting your teenager to eat something very chewy or chew hard on the toothbrush before they brush.
- Rubbing hands together to build up the sensation before brushing could also help.



## Food and eating out

Teenagers usually develop new food likes and dislikes as they are exposed to new experiences and influences. This can be a source of stress for teenagers with sensory difficulties.

- Find out if changing eating habits are making it harder for your teenager to eat meals at school or with friends.
- Revisit styles, colours and shapes of cutlery as it has probably been a long time since you did this.
- It may be useful to add positive sensory experiences specific to eating out and environmental cues. Try using a variety of environments with different smells, music, colours, etc.
- Try buying clothes that are only worn when eating out which the teenager can pick out for themselves.
- Devise strategies to use while waiting for the food to be served, for example, smart phone games or small fidget toys. This may help the teenager to feel they are growing up but still keeps them occupied.
- Having headphones with favourite music to listen to may be helpful for some.
- When eating out, create a structure setting out the time, number of people coming, how you will get there, how long you will be there for, etc. Try using a smart phone with all the details to allow the young person to go over this themselves in picture or words.

## Sleeping

Teenagers may need more sleep whilst also often developing a pattern of staying up later. Watching TV, playing with gaming consoles, social networking and using mobile phones may encourage habits to develop which disrupt sleep routines.

- Let your teenager help design a bedtime routine which is teen friendly.
- Keep an eye on the bedroom environment, turning the television off, dark/blackout curtains where appropriate.
- Minimise clutter/distraction in the bedroom and decorate with not too much colour to reduce distractions. Prepare a calm quiet area where the young person can relax, possibly using a rocking chair or hammock chair to provide gentle movement.
- Keep the environment and routine exactly the same, to help the teenager clearly link it to time for sleep.
- Before bedtime, allow time for calming activities such as listening to music or an audio book, drawing, reading. A hot bath with a calming fragrance, rubbing on body creams, etc, may help.
- Avoid stimulating activities such as watching television or playing with games consoles at this time.
- Include an element of choice of activity in the bedtime routine. Your teenager will cope better with the routine if involved in creating it.
- Help the teenager to choose suitable nightwear in terms of texture, colour, etc.
- Use heavy blankets to provide positive deep pressure, where appropriate.
- Encourage a habit of switching off mobile phones, or putting them on silent, screen down, away from the bed at night, to prevent sleep getting disrupted.
- Make sure they exercise during the day, even for a short time, rather than later at night which might increase alertness.

- Prepare a mini routine the young person can follow if or when they wake in the night. This is something we all do but we don't often teach this to young people
- Use timers, alarm clocks etc to clearly signify when it is time to get up.

## Travel

Enabling teenagers to travel independently, means giving them experience, the opportunity to develop the appropriate skills, using as many forms of transport as possible. For some teenagers technology, such as GPS in phones, can help build skills.

- Practice using road crossings at various places, at various times of the day and night.
- Plan routes and try using smart phones with a route planner or putting instructions into notes/pictures.
- Think ahead about the routes they might need to use when they leave school and go on to college, work, university, etc.
- Use buses and trains as regularly as you can to familiarise your teenager with the routines.
- Make sure that each step of the journey is taught clearly to them, buying ticket, knowing where to get off, etc.
- Think about using a smart phone locator for safety as they travel so you know where they are.
- Build social stories about what might happen on the journey perhaps using pictures.
- The ability to get up and walk on a train and the regular movement may make this a positive experience.
- Information about times, destinations, etc can be interesting and motivating to a teenager.
- Have an emergency plan in place (e.g. if frightened, talk to conductor or have emergency contacts on phone.)
- Fidget toys may still be useful, or an object that reminds them where they are going, e.g. a swim bag for swimming.
- Sat Nav/map can be helpful for teenagers who need to know where they are and when they will arrive.
- When planning a long journey, provide information on what is happening, when it is happening, and who is travelling.
- Using visual supports, such as a calendar, to show how many days there are until the holiday or until they come home.
- Pre-planning for the journey with pictures of bus/train/planes.
- Try to organise travel at the less busy times of day or year, to limit sensory overload and avoid too much waiting time.
- Prepare for delays, using social stories or waiting time activities.

## Socialising

Leisure and social activities are a great way of learning life skills, increasing independence and building self-esteem.

Some teenagers may find social experiences stressful, so structuring events in advance, using visual supports, and perhaps practising



what to do at an event beforehand, can be useful preparation.

- If your teenager is leaving school, think about whether they could use the local sports centre or swimming pool instead of the school gym. Help to familiarise them with these facilities.
- Try establishing a regular social outing such as a trip to a cafe, which could become an independent activity.
- Start to give them more choice and independence with regard to going to local shops to buy such things as food, clothes, care products, or to get their hair cut. You may need to plan a specific trip for each individual item but it is gradually building up independent skills.
- Introduce chores such as setting or clearing the table, helping with the shopping, that build responsibility and independence.

## Additional resources

### ***The Out of Sync Child Grows up.* Carol Kranowitz**

Useful information and lots of advice and activities for teens and young adults with sensory processing difficulties

### **National Autistic Society**

**Sensory Integration Network UK** – great advice and resources for families

### **The Spiral Foundation**

### **The Dyspraxia Foundation**

**For further enquiries or support contact**  
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This document uses information from *Life skills for teenagers – A practical approach at home for parents and carers* (Falkirk Council and Falkirk Child Protection Committee)