

Sensory Challenges of the Changing Seasons



Many of us experience changes in mood as the sunlight hours and temperature changes with each season but for people with difficulties with sensory integration or processing (and co-existing diagnoses such as Autism Spectrum Disorder) the transition from one season to the next can present particular challenges. This article considers what those challenges are and how to manage them.

Changes in Daylight Hours

Some individuals appear to be particularly affected by the reduced exposure to sunlight during the shorter autumn and winter days. The Royal College of Psychiatrists says around 3% of people will experience significant winter depression and recommend ensuring adequate exposure to daylight by, for example, taking a daily walk outside.

For children, you could create a social story (a step-by-step pictorial explanation) to discuss the change in daylight hours and any associated change in routine.

Changes in Temperature

Sensory integration and processing difficulties relate to problems with organising and responding to information that comes in through the senses. Individuals may be over sensitive to sensory input, under sensitive, or both.

People with difficulties with interoception (the sense of the internal state of the body) can be slower to notice when they are getting too warm or too cold - until they are very hot or shivering cold.

Older children and adults may find it helpful to base their clothing choices on the actual temperature rather than their perception of it.

Apps on smart devices can keep you informed about the current and forecasted weather and temperature.

Changes in Clothing

Individuals with sensory sensitivities can struggle with moving on from the previous season's clothes that they have become habituated to. It can take a while to become accustomed to different clothes, even those ones worn the previous year. The shift from lighter layers in the warmer months to heavier, thicker, more restrictive winter clothing and additional items, such as hats and gloves, can be taxing.

For children with sensory sensitivities, introduce the new season's clothes early: let them feel and practice putting them on and off before they need to be worn. Introduce heavier, waterproof footwear in short bursts. If new items need to be purchased, involve your child in choosing the items and respect their views: what is soft to you may feel scratchy to them. Many people with sensory sensitivities prefer softer fabrics, such as fleeces, and find it easier to wear multiple thinner layers than a single thick layer but it all depends on the individual's preference - some individuals prefer the pressure of tight, snug-fitting clothing.

New clothes can be washed prior to wearing to remove unfamiliar scents and to soften them. Completely remove labels which can be distracting irritants. Changes in clothing type can also present challenges in dressing for children with difficulties with fine motor skills and praxis. Practice these skills and make accommodations where appropriate, for example, poppers instead of buttons, velcro instead of laces, loose clothing that can easily be slipped on and off, etc. Some shops have ranges specific to people with sensory needs with clothing that has easier fastenings and no seams or tags.

Be flexible and creative: if gloves or mittens cannot be tolerated, could your child pull down their sleeves enough to cover their hands? If a hat is out of the question, experiment with ear muffs or ear defenders. Can a large hoodie be worn if a thick coat is uncomfortable?

Changes in Routine

The unpredictability of weather in Autumn and Spring (or just the whole year if you live in the UK!) requires a lot more planning ahead when considering what clothes and shoes to wear, whether to carry additional layers etc. It adds to the cognitive load on your child. Daily routines can help.

For example, the night before check the weather forecast for the following day and pick out suitable clothing (with input from your child if choosing for a child). Ensure there is plenty of time built in to the morning routine for getting dressed to reduce the stress of time-pressures. Some children find a picture chart of what to wear and in what order to get dressed useful.

Likewise, a familiar bedtime routine can help shift your child into the right state for going to sleep. If bedtimes need to change with the seasons, introduce the change gradually: for example, 15 minutes earlier for a week at a time.

Recognise that your child may be tired from coping all day with all the changes that accompany seasonal transition.

Think about introducing sensory activities that can calm and soothe

Sourced from the Sensory Integration Network

Sensory Activities this Autumn

Proceed with this activity cautiously, if you have a child that is **tactile defensive**.

This is intense input, if your child is reluctant, gently encourage and offer a utensil to use instead of their hands. Hopefully, they will get more comfortable and dive right in as you proceed.



2. Give some proprioceptive (deep pressure) input with Pounding Golf Tees into Pumpkins.

Besides the sensory benefits, this is great for fine motor skills!



3. Home-made play dough, with lovely scents and colors.

You need:

- 2 cups plain flour (all purpose)
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil (baby oil and coconut oil work too)
- 1/2 cup salt
- 2 tablespoons cream of tartar
- 1 to 1.5 cups boiling water (adding in increments until it feels just right)
- gel food colouring (optional)
- few drops glycerine (improves stretch and shine)

- 4. Play dough gift idea

Inspired by Familymag.com

(it's the basic play dough recipe plus some other yummy spices)

- 1 cup of Flour
- 1/2 cup of salt
- 2 tsp cream of tartar
- 2 tsp pumpkin spice
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp nutmeg
- 1 tbl vegetable oil
- 1 cup warm water
- orange food coloring

1. Mix all of your dry ingredients in a medium sauce pan.

2. Add Oil, Water and food coloring to mix.

3. Cook over med heat.

4. Mix until it turns into a doughy substance.

5. After 5min it will be hard to mix.

6. Let it cool and place on lightly floured counter.



7. Knead

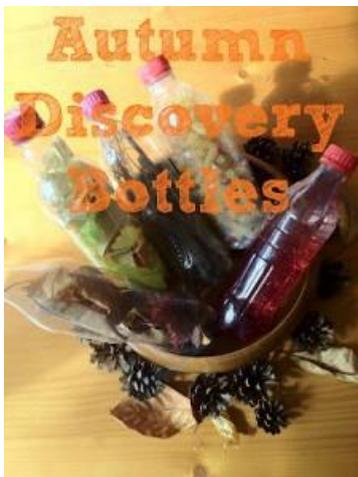
Store in fridge after using it. If it gets too sticky just add flour.

Place play dough in the pumpkin jars. Add face to jars with sharpie and cover the lid with green tissue paper

5. Go on a nature walk and try Collecting Chestnuts . You and the little ones will be taking in the powerful and unique scents, sights, and feel of Autumn. Use some fun kitchen utensils that work on fine-motor skills, too!



6. Put other finds from your walk in Autumn Discovery Bottles, a safe way for babies to explore the sensations of fall! Kids will love participating in and later decorating with these fun bottles.



7. Have the kids help you make Pumpkin Spice, Orange Colored Rice that looks good enough to eat, well if it were cooked! Besides the wonderful tactile feedback they get, the color and smell will be stimulating, as well.



9. Gather leaves into piles and let the kids run and jump through them for loads of proprioceptive, vestibular, tactile input, AND fun!

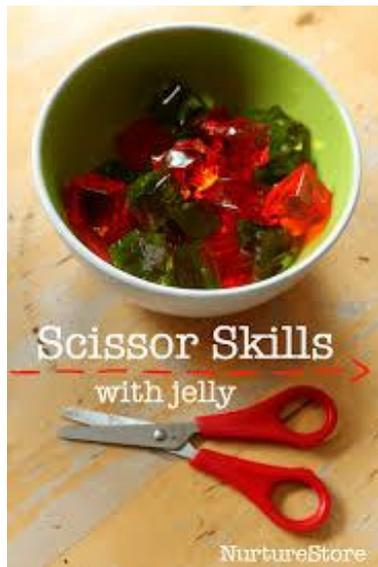
This is good old fashioned fun and kids couldn't love it more. It's simple and if not in your back yard, drive to a local park.



10. Blindfold the kiddies and have them reach them into Guess Bags filled with fall finds, like The Pleasantest Thing did. Wonderful for developing tactile discrimination. Love this one!



11. Get messy in Halloween Jelly, a fun and unique texture to expose the kids to this autumn. Water beads are great for tactile input and are not as messy!



12. Explore / sort Seeds and nuts found on your adventures, with tweezers, magnify glasses etc



13. Go splashing in Autumn puddles – great for sensory input and fun!!



14. Create an Autumn sensory bin that your children can dig through while playing outside. -
-Ask them to find things in the bin
- or pretend they are squirrels and need to hide their “food” in the bin
(activity idea from The Pleasantest Thing).



Sources from “Your Kids Table” and Sensory Integration Network