

SMELL

Recommendations

Our sense of smell plays a powerful role in how we experience the world and remember our past. The olfactory system, which processes smells, is unique because it connects directly to areas of the brain that handle emotions and memory. When we smell something, it activates the amygdala, the part of the brain that deals with emotions, and the hippocampus, which helps us form and recall memories. This close connection means that certain smells can trigger strong emotional responses based on our past experiences.

For children who have faced trauma, this connection can be even more intense. Their olfactory system may become over-responsive, making them more sensitive to specific scents. This heightened sensitivity can lead to strong emotional reactions like anxiety, fear, or anger when they encounter certain odours linked to their traumatic experiences. In these moments, a familiar smell can evoke vivid memories that bring back distressing feelings. The child may not even be able to consciously recall these memories but become distressed by the internal sensation linked to this smell.

What might you notice?

Children who are sensitive to smells due to trauma may exhibit a range of behaviours that reflect their discomfort or distress. Here are some potential behaviours you might observe:

- **Avoidance:** Children may avoid specific areas or activities that they associate with certain smells. For instance, they might refuse to enter a classroom or dining hall if they smell something they find distressing.
- **Anxiety or Panic:** A sudden exposure to a triggering smell can lead to heightened anxiety or panic attacks. Children might display signs of agitation, such as fidgeting, pacing, or expressing fear.
- **Emotional Outbursts:** Some children may react with anger, frustration, or crying when exposed to certain odours. This can be a way to express their discomfort or fear.
- **Physical Reactions:** Children may show physical signs of distress, such as covering their nose, turning away, or even experiencing nausea or headaches in response to triggering smells.
- **Hyper-vigilance:** Increased sensitivity to odours can lead to hyper-vigilance, where a child may become overly focused on their environment, constantly checking for potential triggers.
- **Disassociation:** In some cases, a child may seem to "check out" or become detached when they encounter distressing smells, indicating an attempt to cope with overwhelming emotions.
- **Seeking Comfort:** Children may seek out comforting smells or objects that provide a sense of safety, such as a favourite scented item, to help regulate their emotions.



Triggering Smells

It's hard to specifically say which smells are triggering for which child, as our emotional & sensory processing is completely personal to our lived experience. The child might not even be aware that the smell is causing the emotional distress so it's always helpful to be curious in situations where the child appears distressed for 'no apparent reason'.

Some common triggers may be:

- Cigarette smoke
- Alcohol
- Perfume or aftershave that is the same as a family member or adult associated with feeling unsafe
- Masculine smells
- Coffee breath
- Mould/damp
- Body odour
- Food or meals that were common in early experiences prior to coming in to care
- Certain washing powder or cleaning products associated with previous homes lived in
- Pet smells - urine/faeces
- Tcp/ antiseptic or medical related smells following injuries or illnesses.



SMELL HACKS & SNACKS



Strategies for children who are sensitive smell



Individual Supports



- Provide a Familiar 'Safe' Smell – A scented handkerchief, essential oil on a keyring, or a familiar-smelling lip balm can act as a "safe smell" to help block overwhelming scents. Ask the child what their preferred scent is that helps them to feel calm.
- Offer a Discreet Fidget or Chewable Necklace – Engaging another sense (e.g., chewing gum, a chew necklace, or sipping from a bottle with a straw) can help reduce focus on smells.
- Use a Mask or Scarf – If appropriate and comfortable, wearing a lightweight mask or scarf infused with a preferred scent can help filter out overwhelming smells.
- Scented Lip Balm: Provide scented lip balm that the pupil can apply and smell when they need a calming scent. This portable and easy-to-use option can help them manage unpleasant odours in the environment



Voice of the child Questions to ask

- Are there any smells at school that you really like? What do they remind you of?
- Are there any smells at school that you don't like or that make you feel uncomfortable?
- Do certain smells help you feel calm or happy? Can you think of a time when a smell made you feel good?
- Are there any places in school where the smells are too strong or make it hard to concentrate?
- If you could choose a smell to have in the classroom that makes you feel safe and happy, what would it be?



Children who seek scents



- Provide a "Smell Kit" – Offer a small selection of safe, strong-smelling items (e.g., scented putty, essential oil on a cotton pad, or a scented sticker) to explore at appropriate times.
- Use Scented Fidgets – Introduce scented playdough, scratch-and-sniff stickers, or chewable items infused with safe flavours to help regulate sensory-seeking behaviour.
- Incorporate Smell into Learning – Allow the child to engage with scent-related activities, such as using scented markers, herbs in sensory play, or smell-based science experiments.
- Teach Boundaries Around Smelling Objects & People – Use social stories or visual reminders to reinforce appropriate ways to explore scents (e.g., "We smell with permission" rule).



Environmental Hacks



- Reduce Strong Scents in the Classroom – Avoid air fresheners, scented candles, or strong cleaning products. Opt for neutral or unscented versions where possible.
- Ensure Good Ventilation – Keep windows open where possible and use air purifiers or fans to help disperse lingering smells.
- Create a 'Smell-Free' Zone – Designate an area where the child can go if they feel overwhelmed, ensuring it's free from strong food, cleaning, or perfume scents.
- Manage Food-Related Smells – Encourage children to eat strong-smelling snacks (e.g., crisps, cheese, or eggs) in designated areas rather than at desks.
- Communicate with Staff and Peers – Raise awareness among staff and peers about smell sensitivities to encourage small changes, such as using fragrance-free soaps or avoiding heavy perfumes.



Sensory chaining



- Sensory chaining helps children build positive associations with sensory input to support regulation. By linking a specific sense—such as smell—to feelings of comfort, children can use this sensory cue to help manage stress or overwhelm.
- For example, if a child associates a familiar scent (like a caregiver's body lotion) with safety, a small pot of the lotion can be kept in their sensory toolbox at school. Rubbing it into their hands during transitions or busy environments can support calming.
- To be effective, the calming sensory input should be introduced regularly during low-stress moments. However, be mindful that sensory associations can also develop in response to past feelings of unsafety.