

## Sensory

### About sensory functioning

Sensory functioning describes how the body responds to sounds, textures, lights, smells, pain, temperature and other stimuli or information in the environment. Some teenagers can have reduced sensory awareness, such as teens who are Deaf, deaf or hard of hearing, or teens who are blind or low vision. Other teenagers may find some sensory input distracting or distressing such as those with autism. By the teen years most young people will have a good idea of what sensory stimuli they find uncomfortable. Some teens may not like loud noises (e.g. they cover their ears or become upset in large crowds or when you raise your voice), while others may be sensitive to certain textures (e.g. specific fabrics, types of food) or smells (e.g. perfumes/deodorants). Particular types of lighting or another person maintaining eye contact can also be distressing for some teens. Some teens can also show an interest in sensory stimuli or find it comforting. For example they might sniff objects, or be fascinated by lights or movement. Some teens can show under-responsiveness to some types of sensory information, like pain or temperature. This can increase their risk of getting hurt or being ill. All teens will differ in the type and severity of sensory concerns they have. Many will already have strategies in place.

## Evidence-based strategies

### Have a consistent routine

- Predictability and a consistent routine can help some students who find sensory input challenging.

## Best practice tips

### Be aware of students' sensory needs

- You could find out what colours, textures, sounds, or movements the student prefers or dislikes. You can support a student by working out which activities seem to most upset or bother a student. A Health Professional such as an occupational therapist can help provide more support if needed.

### Provide choices

- Some students may find loud noises or specific textures distressing. If you know that a student may be distressed by an activity, tell them beforehand. Consider offering different materials to work with or a different activity.

### Consider uniform

- Don't be too strict about uniform if it is causing a student distress. Instead, consider working with parents to decide on another option – safe clothing that looks like the uniform but uses a different fabric or cut. Allow students to wear their hair in a way that is comfortable for them. The key thing is that they can participate, not their appearance!

### Provide a quiet area

- Classrooms, locker areas and toilets or changing rooms can be very noisy. Provide a quiet area that a student can go to if upset by noise or other sensory input. It may help if students can come to school in their sports clothes, or are given a quiet place to change in. Consider allocating end lockers or lockers in quieter areas to students who find loud noise distressing.



### **Allow time to calm down**

- Sometimes students might become angry and upset when overwhelmed. A break and a safe place and time to calm down may help them. It can be helpful to have a clear code of behavior that is known up front and put somewhere that all students can see.

### **Allow the use of noise-reducing headphones**

- Noise-reducing headphones may help if students find the classroom or other areas too loud.

## **Other considerations**

### **First Aid**

- Giving first aid to a student with sensory challenges may be difficult if a student is upset by particular smells or textures. Some students may be upset by blood or bandages, or refuse to have an ice pack or medication. Talk with their parents and support team about how to manage first aid.

### **Safety drills**

- Noise-reduction headphones during an emergency drill may help if a student finds the noise of alarms upsetting.

### **Behaviour**

- Some students might show challenging behaviours. It's important to remember children are most likely trying to communicate a need or want that is not being met.
- Sometimes when a student is being disruptive it is because they are feeling stressed by sensory information. Understanding the cause of a student's behaviour is key.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the young person and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a young person with managing their emotions.





### Other co-occurring conditions

- Students with sensory needs may also experience [autism](#), [ADHD](#), [blind or low vision](#) or [d/Deaf and hard of hearing](#).
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the student.

### Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for students with disabilities and developmental challenges. A particularly relevant resource for supporting students with sensory issues is:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist