REINTEGREAT
EDUCATION SOLUTIONS

SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFICULTIES (SPD)

Reintegreat School Toolkit

Supporting Children with Sensory Processing Difficulties (SPD)

What is Sensory Processing?

Sensory Processing is the body's ability to receive information from the senses, send it to the nervous system, process it, and respond appropriately.

When sensory processing functions well, children can focus, learn, and build relationships. When it is dysfunctional – often referred to as **Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)** – everyday experiences can feel overwhelming or under-stimulating, leading to difficulties in learning, behaviour, regulation, and social interactions.

SPD may exist as a **stand-alone disorder** or be linked to:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- ADHD
- Dyspraxia / Developmental Coordination Disorder
- Fragile X syndrome
- Speech and language disorders
- Early trauma, ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), or attachment difficulties

The Senses Affected

While most people are familiar with the **five external senses** – touch, taste, hearing, vision, and smell – there are **additional internal senses** crucial to regulation:

- **Vestibular (balance & movement):** Helps us know where we are in space and supports posture, regulation, and coordination.
- **Proprioception (body awareness):** Helps us know where our limbs are, how much force we are using, and regulates movement.
- **Interoception (internal state):** Helps us recognise signals from inside our body (e.g. hunger, thirst, needing the toilet, pain).
- **Tactile system (touch):** Supports fine motor skills and awareness of self in relation to others.

Types of Sensory Processing Differences

- **Oversensitive (Hypersensitive – sensory avoiders):**
  Children may find ordinary sensations unbearable.
  → Examples: covering ears at loud noises, refusing certain textures of food or clothing, avoiding busy spaces.
- **Undersensitive (Hyposensitive – sensory seekers):**
  Children may crave intense sensory input to feel regulated.

→ Examples: constant movement, rough play, chewing objects, seeking spicy/strong flavours.

- **Mixed profile:**
  Children may fluctuate between over- and under-sensitivity depending on the environment or time of day.

When overloaded, children may experience **meltdowns**, not as a choice but because they feel out of control.

Challenges Children May Face

- Poor attention and concentration
- Sensory overload → meltdowns, withdrawal, or shutdown
- Constant seeking of stimulation (movement, noise, touch)
- Avoidance of certain sensations (clothing textures, sounds, smells)
- Distractibility and over-excitability
- Poor postural control and coordination
- Difficulty with spatial awareness or hand–eye coordination
- Developmental delays in motor or social skills
- Low self-esteem linked to daily struggles

Supporting Strategies

1. Professional Support

- Referral to an **Occupational Therapist** is recommended for assessment and creation of an individualised **Sensory Diet**.
- Always ensure therapists are trained in **Sensory Integration (SI)** or **Sensory Attachment Integration (SAI)**.

2. Classroom Approaches

- **Movement and seating aids**:
  - Hokki stools / wobble cushions (allow safe movement while seated).
  - Mov ‘n’ Sit cushions for fidgeting.
  - Weighted blankets/lap pads for grounding and calming.
- **Reduce sensory overload**:
  - Use ear defenders or headphones.
  - Remove clothing labels or provide soft-textured clothing.
  - Limit clutter and use low-stimulation displays.
  - Create a calm corner or low-stimulation area.
- **Provide sensory breaks**:
  - Stretching, yoga moves, wall presses.
  - “Heavy work” jobs (carrying books, pushing trolleys, sweeping).
  - Jumping jacks, obstacle courses, beanbag activities.
- **Tactile and proprioceptive support**:

    - Chewable jewellery, stress balls, fidget toys.
    - Sensory boxes with textured objects.
    - Peer or self-massage strategies (e.g. Relax Kids).
- **Support focus and communication**:
    - Use clear, direct instructions paired with visual cues.
    - Use the child's name first to cue attention.
    - Allow movement during learning where possible.

3. Sensory Circuits

A structured, short daily programme to prepare children for learning, usually 15–20 minutes. Activities fall into three stages:

1. **Alerting** – wake up the brain/body (jumping, skipping, bouncing, spinning).
2. **Organising** – motor challenges that require focus (throwing/catching, crawling, obstacle courses).
3. **Calming** – return to readiness for learning (deep pressure, wall press-ups, massage, yoga).

These activities can help regulate arousal levels and improve concentration.

4. General Principles

- Children's sensory needs can vary **hour to hour** – be flexible and responsive.
- Recognise that **sensory-seeking behaviour is a regulation strategy**, not "naughtiness."
- Plan **sensory-friendly transitions** between activities.
- Support children to **self-advocate** (e.g. by choosing calming tools, using visuals to express sensory needs).
- Involve parents/carers – they often know what works best at home.

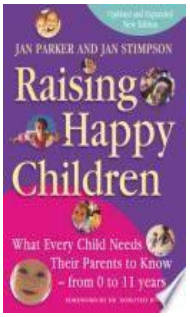
Useful Resources

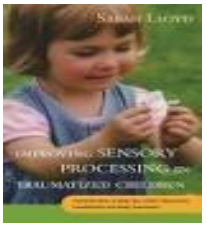
- **Beacon House** – Trauma and sensory resources: https://beaconhouse.org.uk
- **Sensory Integration Network**: www.sensoryintegration.org.uk
- **Relax Kids** – calming and regulation resources: https://www.relaxkids.com
- **Smart Kids with LD** – https://www.smartkidswithld.org

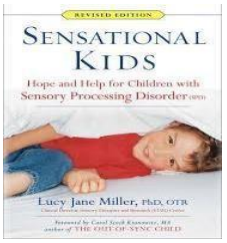
Key Takeaway

Sensory Processing Difficulties affect learning, regulation, and relationships.
Children may be **oversensitive, undersensitive, or both**.
The goal is not to remove all difficulties but to **support regulation** through structured sensory input, environmental adjustments, and compassionate understanding.

Suggested Reading







Raising Happy Children:	Improving Sensory Processing	Sensational Kids:
Lizanne du Plessis	in Traumatized children:	Lucy Jane Miller
	Sarah Lloyd	