



Supporting sensory processing for neurodivergent children

Neurodiversity means that everyone has a unique way of thinking, feeling and functioning. Neurodivergent people think, feel and function in ways that are considered less common than people who are neurotypical. Neurodivergent brains are different, not better or worse.

One common area of difference for neurodivergent people is the way they filter, process and perceive sensory information – sometimes called sensory processing. Sensory processing differences can include:

- high sensitivity of certain senses, including sight, smell, touch, sound and taste
- low sensitivity to certain stimuli, which might present as children seeking out certain sensations, needing movement or having difficulty knowing where their body is in space.

Neurodivergent people process sensory information in a way that is neurologically different. It is not a choice or being 'too sensitive'.

The world has been designed for and by neurotypical people. This means that for some neurodivergent people, processing certain everyday environments is effortful and may lead to:

- over-stimulation, panic or being overwhelmed
- drowsiness or inattentiveness
- difficulty focusing or feeling calm.

Neurodivergent children and sensory processing

Understanding sensory processing differences is particularly important when supporting neurodivergent children. Children are less able to manage their environment than adults. A child who is neurodivergent may not know or be able to communicate that they are processing their environment differently to others. If an adult is unaware of a child's sensory needs, the child's repeated exposure to sensory input beyond their level of tolerance might lead to distress.

As an analogy for sensory processing differences, think about everything that goes into your perfect cup of tea. For a neurodivergent child, your perfect cup of tea may be too hot or too weak. Rather than expecting a child to enjoy your perfect cup of tea, if you work with the child to make their perfect cup of tea, then you can both enjoy tea together.





When we support neurodivergent children, we are giving them a safe and productive space to learn how they can flourish in a world that is not designed for them. Emphasis should be placed on understanding and accommodating the child, not changing them or their behaviour.

Strategies to understand and accommodate sensory needs

Children's words, body language and behaviours can be interpreted as ways of communicating need. Keep in mind that sensory needs can change in different scenarios and time periods. The world has been designed for and by neurotypical people, so neurodivergent children may need accommodations to meet their sensory needs.

Adults can help children identify and understand their sensory differences by listening to and working alongside children to connect these responses to certain stimuli. This may include limiting children's exposure to certain environments, modifying external environments, the use of sensory toys and tools as well as advocating for their needs. Screening tools* are available to aid adults in this process.

Strategies to support self-regulation

While neurodivergent children cannot control the way they process sensory information, they can be supported to develop self-regulation skills to manage their inner sensations and behavioural and emotional responses.

If a neurodivergent child appears to be over-stimulated, panicked or overwhelmed, try calming activities such as:

- repetitive, rhythmic movements
- heavy work (e.g. squishing play dough or a stress ball)
- regular breaks from the environment
- breathing regulation
- progressive muscle relaxation
- deep pressure input (if appropriate for the child and your relationship).

If a neurodivergent child appears to be drowsy or inattentive while working on important tasks, try activities such as:

- sensory input that increases their alertness (e.g. fidget spinners or slime)
- play that uses fine motor skills (e.g. finger drumming or doodling)
- frequent, consistent movement breaks and opportunities to change body position.

Tip

Find ways to incorporate a child's interests into these support strategies.

This content was developed for use by community mental health practitioners. It is based on an AIFS publication and webinar, and further consultation with community mental health practitioners who support neurodivergent children. For more information and to learn about supporting neurodivergent children, including screening tools*, visit our website: aifs.gov.au/research_programs/child-family-community-australia/supporting-neurodivergent-children-young-people or follow the QR code.

