



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 044 | Sensory processing concerns

Sensory over-responsivity

What it means

Sensory over-responsivity describes unusually strong or distressing responses to sensations such as sound, touch, light, movement, or textures. It is a descriptive pattern, not an automatic stand-alone diagnosis. A child's comfort and daily participation matter more than whether they tolerate every sensation. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Sensory responses can differ with autism, other developmental conditions, anxiety, medical discomfort, and individual variation. Sometimes several factors contribute. Pain, hearing or eye problems, and feeding conditions should not be mislabeled as sensory sensitivity without appropriate assessment. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

A child may cover ears, avoid clothing or grooming, become distressed by busy spaces, or struggle with particular food textures. The pattern may vary with fatigue or predictability. A strong preference is not necessarily a disorder; the impact on participation and distress guides concern. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

An occupational therapist or developmental team reviews patterns across routines, environmental demands, and functional goals. Caregiver questionnaires support observation but do not establish the cause alone. Medical, hearing, vision, feeding, and emotional factors are considered where relevant. There is no routine blood test that diagnoses this sensory pattern. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Support may include environmental adjustments, predictable routines, child-led graded participation, and occupational therapy focused on daily activities. Evidence for specific sensory-based interventions varies and is sometimes limited; goals, benefit, and adverse effects should be reviewed. Treatment should not force exposure through distress or promise to 'normalize' all sensory responses. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Offer quieter or less visually busy spaces, warn before transitions, and allow the child to communicate discomfort or stop. Adjust clothing, grooming, and routines collaboratively. Use only equipment and activities assessed as appropriate; do not assume weighted or restrictive products are safe or necessary.

When to seek help

Pain, feeding-related choking, sudden sensory changes, loss of skills, or severe distress preventing eating or sleep needs clinical assessment. Immediate safety problems require urgent help.

Questions for your care team

- Which sensations affect daily participation and in what contexts?
- Have pain and other medical explanations been considered?
- What specific goal and review date will test whether support is useful?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss sensory over-responsivity. Sensory over-responsivity describes unusually strong or distressing responses to sensations such as sound, touch, light, movement, or textures. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Distress from a sensation is not automatically deliberate misbehavior, and tolerance is not the only valid goal.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Over-responsivity: a heightened response to sensory input.
- Graded participation: adjusting demands in manageable steps.
- Functional goal: a meaningful everyday outcome.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Sensory Integration Therapy

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/developmental-disabilities/Pages/Sensory-Integration-Therapy.aspx>

[2] Sensory Integration Therapies for Children With Developmental and Behavioral Disorders

<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/129/6/1186/32067/Sensory-Integration-Therapies-for-Children-With>

[3] Assessing Developmental Delays in Children

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Assessing-Developmental-Delays.aspx>