

# DOES YOUR CHILD REQUIRE SENSORY INPUT?

## TOP TOOLS & STRATEGIES TO PROVIDE SENSORY INPUT

BY TERESA O'BRIEN, M.ED.



*Does your child engage in sensory seeking behaviors, such as rocking back and forth, or making repetitive movements or sounds? We can help you understand what your child is experiencing, why they engage in this behavior and help you provide the sensory input they are seeking.*

People with autism can experience hypersensitivity to stimuli, such as certain sounds, textures, smells and tastes, and feel overwhelmed by them. This shows up as attempting to avoid or get away from the stimuli that most affects them. A child might cover their ears to avoid loud sounds, or they might avoid physical touch or certain clothing.

The opposite experience—hyposensitivity—is also common. In these cases, a child with hyposensitivity may seek sensory input from their environment. Individuals engage in self-stimulatory behaviour for a variety of reasons. In persons with autism, self-stimulatory behaviour may provide internal pleasure, help them cope with stressors in their environment, enhance their focus, or help them express their emotions. Generally, interventions to reduce or

eliminate stimulation activities should be used only if they interfere with learning, community inclusion, or are dangerous.

But not all sensory input is safe or appropriate. For example, behaviours such as chewing non-food items could be a health or safety issue, while touching another person could be misunderstood. And if a child is not able to secure the sensory input they need, it may become even more difficult to self-regulate.

Now that we understand why sensory input is important, let's examine some ways that you can help by providing what is needed.

### Replacement behaviours

Some behaviours, such as vocal and/or motor self-stimulatory behaviours, can interfere in learning

or community inclusion. Finding a replacement behaviour or a less obvious behaviour which serves the same function(s) will limit interference of such behaviours.

It's important to first assess the function of the behaviour and the situations or events that may trigger more intense self-stimulatory behaviour. Knowing the triggers and functions will help you to anticipate the behaviour and identify replacement.

Understanding possible behaviour triggers, such as loud noises, a lot of unfamiliar people, you can teach the use of a replacement behaviour that is less overt, such as squeezing a stress ball, or squeezing hands together instead of flapping hands in front of the face. Fidget spinners or bendee sticks are also alternatives for sensory input that are more widely available.

### Detect and intervene

Our first instinct when an individual is engaging in repetitive, self-stimulatory behaviours is to call attention to it and directly ask the person to stop. A more effective approach is instead to interrupt the behaviour and redirect it to a more appropriate or desired response that can offer similar, more appropriate input. Here's an example: If you notice your child chewing on something inedible, you could say "I can see that you're excited"—could we blow some bubbles together?" If a child is banging his head or body parts together, note "I see you have some energy to let out—how about we..." and offer an alternative activity.

If the repetitive behaviour is verbal in nature, you can use this same strategy by interrupting the behaviour with a 2-part question on a topic of high interest to your child, or related to a task or activity in which your child is likely to engage. For example, "what computer games do you think your cousin will like?" or "What should we have for dinner tonight? Chicken or pasta?" You can also ask questions regarding an activity your child is allowed to engage with, such as "What would you like to do now while we wait—paint or play a computer game?"

### Key indicators and some suggested interventions:

Indicator of Input Seeking	Ideas for Input
Bites/chews on objects (shirt, pen/pencil)	Chew gum or blow bubbles, or eat pretzels
Banging body parts (head, hands)	Squeeze your hands together or squeeze a fidget ball
Rough play with others	Give yourself a big hug and count to 5

Remember, it's important to NOT bring attention to repetitive verbal behaviour. It is possible that once attention is provided, the child will want to continue that behaviour.

### Embed sensory breaks into the day

Another approach is to include 3-minute sensory breaks into your child's daily routine. Provide a menu of 3 or 4 simple exercises that the child may do to proactively gain the sensory input they seek. Initially, you can provide the list of exercises or activities for your child, making up a menu to provide choices. Add clip art of use actual photos to represent the activity or exercise. Laminate the menu or use a sheet protector, and practice! Over time, your child and you may add to the menu—have fun and experiment as to what works best for your child. Some ideas: 1. Take 5 deep breaths. 2. Stretch your arms up in the air and take a deep breath 5 times. 3. Push on your head and count to 5. Stop. Repeat this 3 times.

### Create a behaviour story

Sometimes children seeking sensory input can call out phrases repetitively, or clap their hands. If this input is interfering with learning or draws negative attention, you can help your child find a substitute behaviour by using a behaviour story. This story provides a child with an understanding of their perspective, as well as the perspectives of others related to the behaviour of concern. You can create a behaviour story that includes what is of concern and how it may make the child's peers feel. For example: "Sometimes when kids talk they 'clap' or say extra things like 'whew' or 'whoa'. That's OK! But sometimes it can bother other kids in the room, and they might not be able to do their school work. So what can a person do if they feel like clapping or saying 'whew' or 'whoa'? They can try self-control. What is self-control? Self-control is when you stop and think before you do or say something. What does self-control look like? If you feel like clapping, STOP and THINK! And you can do something quiet instead, like fold your hands or arms, or open and close your hands quietly. Or, you can whisper the words so you don't bother anyone."

Try these strategies either individually or in tandem to support your child's need for sensory input. As you experience success in providing sensory supports to your child, you'll become more confident and better able to anticipate your child's potential triggers and need for input. 📌

*Teresa O'Brien, M.Ed. has worked in creating and supervising programs in the education and behavioural health field for more than 15 years, she currently works as an educational consultant with The Watson Institute.*