

Understanding Sensory Sensitivities and Developing Supports and Accommodations

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Based on the book "AUTISM: Handle with Care! Understanding and Managing Behavior of Children and Adults with Autism" Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc. (817) 277-0727, (800) 489-0727, ISBN#1-885477-14-7

Tactile

What Individuals Who Experience Autism Say ...

I was six months old when Mother noticed that I was no longer cuddly and that I stiffened up when she held me. When I was a few months older, Mother tried to gather me in her arms, and I clawed at her like a trapped animal.

Temple Grandin

I never used to like being picked up and cuddled. I screamed as though I was on a roller coaster if anyone tried to pick me up. I also hated it when my teacher, Mrs. Ingram, tried to make me hold my pencil properly or my parents tried to make me do up my laces or shirt buttons. They had no idea of what was wrong with me at the time. In addition, since I thought it happened to everyone, I did not tell anyone. Nevertheless, I found such treatment excruciating... I do not like pressing my lips on spoons or hard glass either.

Darren White

Indications of Tactile Sensitivity

Rejection of human touch♣

♣ Rejection or discomfort to the touch of clothing.

♣ Sensitive feet

♣ Avoidance of games that involve tactile contact such as kicking or catching a ball

♣ Discomfort when sitting in one place for any length of time.

♣ Genital manipulation or masturbation. Commonly a sign of lack of quality tactile experiences.

♣ Sensitivity to extreme temperature changes. Body temperature water can be almost obsessive.

♣ The mouth is a very sensitive area.

♣ The tips of the fingers are also very sensitive. So, watch for problems holding things and doing tasks, especially where a firm grip is needed.

♣ There also may be difficulty in writing.

♣ There may be a great desire for cleanliness, a dislike for sticky or dirty hands.

Supports and Accommodations

Control our impulse to touch those for whom we are♣ providing care

- ♣ Do not take others withdrawal personally--it may mean protection for them.
- ♣ Explore the use of deep pressure and light touch to reduce "pain"
- ♣ Lack of touch may be a way of showing respect

Taste

What Individuals Who Experience Autism Say...

I remember sitting at the table and hating dinnertime - staring at my food knowing that it would make me gag if I tried to eat it and that would make my parents mad. Other people constantly teased me about how I ate my food. Kids are supposed to like chocolate, whipped cream and maple syrup; I did not. I do not like vegetables either. Cheese, creams, sauces, casseroles, salads - nothing. I hate being invited out or over to eat -it's never how I like to eat it. People keep telling me I would grow to like other foods, I'm still waiting."

B. Kirby

There are few foods that I can tolerate eating. Usually the ones can eat are soft textured. Italian seems to be the Limit. Sometimes I think it is a wonder that I am still alive.

Thomas McKean

Indications of Diet Sensitivities

Refusal♣ to eat certain foods.

- ♣ An insistence on eating only a limited number of foods.

Supports and Accommodations

Respect♣ refusal to eat certain foods {e.g., wheat or milk products)

- ♣ High protein diet seems cut down the level of agitation.
- ♣ Never limit liquid intake; their bodies need it.
- ♣ Vitamin B6 and Magnesium supplements seem to help.
- ♣ Keep poisonous substances locked safely away.
- ♣ Fatty, salty diet, especially in the morning, also seems to work well with some individuals.

Auditory

What Individual's Who Experience Autism Say...

She told me she was much more comfortable, that she no longer heard street noises three blocks away, or people flushing their toilets at the other end of the building, or the blood rushing in her veins she had never been able to blowout the candles on her birthday cake because the sound of blowing had been so disturbing. "It sounded like monsters," she said, as had the puffing noise of the drain in the wall. People's breathing had upset her, especially when several adults were in the room.

Why do you think I have so much trouble paying attention in the classroom? I hear everything that goes on every phone call that the principal makes in her office; every single time an eighteen- wheeler truck gears down on the highway three blocks away. I HEAR IT! I HEAR EVERYTHING! I hear people talking outside the school building, and I can understand their conversations. There are so many noises in my head that I cannot concentrate on what Mrs. Weaver tries to say. I cannot focus and pay attention to the teacher's, spoken words -I'm too distracted. In addition, why do you think I am so tired all of the time? It takes so much energy to pay attention that I am worn out. I TRY SO HARD AND I JUST CANNOT DO It!

Nicholas Bober

Indication of Auditory Sensitivity

The♣ appearance of deafness

- ♣ Grimaces when a sound occurs, or perhaps grimaces for no apparent reason.
- ♣ Echolalia, or the parroting back of what you have just said.
- ♣ Agitation or withdrawal from people, who talk fast, talk constantly or talk loudly.
- ♣ Anxiety around people who have unusual vocal tones.
- ♣ Yelling on your part, it will lead to tantrums from them.
- ♣ Response to sounds you cannot hear.

Supports and Accommodations

- ♣ Never assume individuals with autism are deaf.
- ♣ Never shout.
- ♣ Never insist they listen to sounds they obviously do not like because you consider it necessary for their development.
- ♣ Speak as softly and clearly as possible.
- ♣ Do not chatter on and on; do not repeat.
- ♣ Give the person time to decipher what you have said.
- ♣ Create a sound absorbent environment.

Olfaction

Individuals with Autism say...

..."You liked the smell of certain foods, and hated the smell of others, Georgie, but what about people? And animals? How did they smell? " She looked sheepish. "I still have trouble, with that," she said. ", Dogs and cats. And smells like deodorant and after-shave lotion, they smell so strong to me I can't stand it, and perfume drives me nuts. I cannot understand why people wear perfume, and I can smell hand lotion from the next room.

Annabel & Georgie Stehli

Indications of Sensitivity to Odor

- ♣ Stopping up nostrils with the fingers, covering the nose with the hand or constantly waving one's hand in front of the mouth and nose area.
- ♣ Agitation in an environment that has a noticeable smell. (noxious or sweet)
- ♣ Breathing through the mouth rather than the nose.

Supports and Accommodations

- ♣ Concentrate on the environment, not on the behavior (e.g., don't punish for one plugging nose).
- ♣ Keep tissues on hand and offer them. Be aware of odors.
- ♣ Minimize perfumed products. Keep the environment clean and dry .Use scent-free products for laundry.
- ♣ Monitor interactions with strong scents (e.g., feces) as they may over stimulate.

Visual

Individuals with Autism Say...

"Dr. Marek's kitchen was a nightmare. The kitchen had fluorescent lights and yellow walls the worst combinations ever. Even from the doorway, I could see light bouncing off everything. In my tense state everything climbed to hyper, vision included. There were no whole objects in that room, just shiny edges and things that jumped off the yellow walls like sunshine on water. Dr. Marek wanted me to go in there and be blind. Forget it! .

I stood in the doorway looking at the light, my eyes jumping from half object to half object trying to take things in. Maybe I could relax a bit and pay attention to this person I was supposed to meet. She was Mrs. Marek, a face upon which light danced maniacally, turning her into more of a cartoon than a human being. Welcome to Toon Town, Roger Rabbit. I'd like you to enter this torture chamber I call my kitchen and meet my wife, who is a 3-D cartoon. She just wants you to look at her in pieces, say hi whether you mean it or riot, and treat her like a human being.

"I also remember one Christmas when I got a new bike for a present. It was yellow. I would not look at it. Extra red was added to the color making it look orange and it blurred upwards making it look like it was on fire. My favorite colors were those I could see more clearly than others. I also could not see blue clearly, it looked too light and it looked like ice (imagine the sea on a sunny day, it would look frozen over, in spite of the sun). The bike was painted purple, which I liked better because I could see it more clearly. "

Darren White

Indications of Visual Sensitivity

- ♣ Apparent blindness.
- ♣ Squinting.
- ♣ Sleeping problems.
- ♣ Closed eyes, or eyes rolled up so only the whites show. .
- ♣ Looking past people or seemingly through people. .
- ♣ Pointing directly at something while looking off in another direction.
- ♣ Looking off to one side rather than straight ahead while walking, watching TV, or doing task.
- ♣ Fear of bright shiny objects, mirrors and often certain colors, or of different color combinations
- ♣ Attempts to mold the faces of caregivers.
- ♣ Constantly having to touch the environment (e.g., running hands along the wall as walks!)
- ♣ Agitation or refusal to comply when exposed to certain colors.
- ♣ Long periods of time spent staring directly into a bright light.
- ♣ Finger fiddling in front of eyes, spinning objects, fascination with fans or other moving objects.
- ♣ Fascination with spinning objects (tops, lids, wheels of toy cars, records and cassette tapes).
- ♣ Fear of heights, stairs, dark tunnels, and movement.
- ♣ Rubbing, touching or hitting eyes.
- ♣ Agitation in environments that are loaded with visual stimuli, especially moving stimuli

- ♣ Agitation in room in which fluorescent lighting just used.
- ♣ Poor depth perception (getting on elevators, walking down stairs) or walking over objects without apparently seeing them.

Support and Accommodations

- ♣ Never assume person is blind or not looking at you, the task.
- ♣ Respect peripheral vision.
- ♣ Never force person to look directly at a task.
- ♣ Monitor for visual over stimulation (neutralize environment)
- ♣ Monitor use of bright lights, bright shiny objects.
- ♣ Eliminate fluorescent lights (if possible).
- ♣ Consider colors, or color combination of objects, clothing or a room.
- ♣ Monitor clothes they wear, and what you wear (neutral colors, earth tones seem best).
- ♣ Monitor colors in the environment (E.g., papered sections of walls in classrooms).
- ♣ Monitor background visual distraction during tasks.
- ♣ Utilize dimly lit rooms before bedtime to reduce serotonin production. Sleep in pitch black.
- ♣ Do not insist on eye contact.
- ♣ Allow person to develop a "visual map" of new areas-when only few people present.