Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may show sensory sensitivities demonstrating either over- or under-reactivity to particular lights, smells, sounds, tastes, and/or touch/motion. Some individuals may cover their ears at everyday sounds. Others may refuse to touch or eat certain foods. Individuals may also look at objects from unusual angles. Some individuals may show links between particular senses, such as gagging when touching certain objects. Alternatively, some individuals with ASD may not exhibit any reaction to what typically create responses in others (e.g., broken limb, spicy food, slamming door). Repetitive movements or activities may assist in reducing anxiety experienced from these challenges and induce calm.

For more information on sensory sensitivities, explore HANDS in Autism® Sensory Experiences handout (see p.2 for the Sensory Chart)

A sensory kit includes various activities and/or objects that can potentially help reduce anxiety, frustration, and/or resulting behaviors and allow the individual to better focus on daily tasks and activities. Sensory kit items may include objects that address a variety of sensory needs and can be used in any setting or context that may cause anxiety and stress – from waiting rooms or emergency situations to unstructured times (e.g., waiting, recess, car rides).

Below are ideas for putting together and using a sensory kit, keeping in mind safety rules that may apply based on age, functioning level, and other considerations.

Here are some examples of what a kit may include:

**Items to help with light and auditory sensitivities**, such as:
- Sunglasses
- Noise canceling headphones

**Items to provide proprioceptive input**, such as:
- Weighted shoulder or lap pad

**Items to encourage fidgeting**, such as:
- Squishy balls
- Bags/toys with rice or beans
- Fidget spinner

**Options individualized to the particular needs** (i.e., age, functioning level, accessibility may vary across context)

**Items to assist in the use of the sensory toolkit: Communication**:
- Portable white board and dry erase markers
- Functional communication cards (see HANDS in Autism How-To: Pulley cards)

**Choice** (see HANDS in Autism® How-To: Choice Board)
**Sensory Chart**

**Eyes & Sight:** Bright lights, colors, or a busy setting can cause a person with autism to feel overwhelmed.
- Dim or turn off lights, reduce clutter, and provide visual supports to help set boundaries and expectations of the duration and ways to calm (e.g., use of sunglasses or a brimmed hat).

**Skin & Touching:** Some people with autism are sensitive to or avoid light touch, different textures, and pressure. Others may instead seek these feelings.
- Use sensory items like weighted vests or blankets, and remove items like tags from clothes. Visual supports may be used to show when and where touch may be necessary (e.g., at the doctor). Sensory kits may provide distraction and calming to lessen the negative impact of touch.

**Stomach:** Some people with autism do not prefer or tolerate certain types of food or those with different textures, smells, or color.
- Provide visual cues or clarity of the amount of the less-desired food to eat before getting preferred foods. Only small, incremental changes of single aspects of foods (e.g., texture, smell, color) should be altered at one time.

**Pictures & Words:** People with autism are often better at processing and learning from pictures than listening to someone speak.
- It can help to speak slowly and clearly and draw or write to provide a visual.
- Use visual supports (e.g., schedules, labels, visual rules) to help an individual understand structure, expectations, and sequence of activities or events. Whenever possible, add pictures to written text to help support understanding.

**Sounds:** Some people with autism are very sensitive to loud, sudden, or sharp noises. Others are sensitive to even regular daily noises that may interrupt or seem unpredictable.
- Minimize less preferred sounds using carpets, silent timers, and other adaptations or use stoplights or countdowns to specify the duration of these sounds. Using headphones and/or a quiet calming area available can also minimize distress.

**Talking:** Some people with autism cannot speak while others talk well but don’t always understand.
- Speak slowly, use simple and direct language, and leave time for processing the information. Visual supports such as pictures, words or a combination can increase understanding and also let the individual to point, give or otherwise communicate their needs.

**Coordination:** Some people with autism can be uncoordinated in their movements, like when playing sports, doing things like drawing, or cutting with scissors.
- Allow the individual to participate in the portions of the task/activity they are able to or are interested in. Provide added support to allow learning and participation in added parts.

**New People & Things:** Because the brain of a person with autism processes information differently, a person may feel overwhelmed and frightened by new places or people.
- Use social narratives, modeling, or video modeling to show what is going to happen and the expected responses. Visiting, role-playing and/or otherwise learning the flow, people, and expectations of the visit (e.g., doctor’s office) can be helpful.

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This resource is a product of the collaboration of HANDS in Autism® and the Southeast Local Community Cadre (LCC) to increase general knowledge, understanding and advocacy pertaining to ASD across the region. Learn more about how regional LCCs partner with HANDS to address local needs regarding ASD. https://handsinautism.iupui.edu/collaborations/lcc/
Sensory Kits for Home

You can individualize a sensory kit for an individual by first filling out the Sensory Considerations Checklist (see p. 6). The items contained within the toolkit as well as the format of the toolkit itself (e.g., bag, bin, shelf) will depend on a number of factors relevant to the context (e.g., general use vs. high stress situations, and whether the sensory kit needs to be portable (e.g., for trips to community visits and outings).

Sensory Kits for Medical & Community Use

Sensory kits can be used in medical offices and public spaces in the community which are known to create anxiety for a large number of individuals with ASD (e.g., bus, library, waiting room). For these purposes, the more broad-based needs across all sensory areas need to be accommodated for those in the community (vs. specific to any individual). It is important to consider items that may address diverse needs but are also easy to clean and safe to handle by individuals across ages and abilities.

Items for common consideration may include those that address common anxieties such as lights (e.g., sunglasses) and sounds (e.g., noise-canceling headphones), as well as items such as fidgets and tools to assist with functional communication.

If you need to quickly assess the needs of individuals, you can use the chart to the right.

Ideas for a First Responder Sensory Kit

First responders need to not only quickly assess evolving situations, but also help minimize anxiety in individuals with ASD and de-escalate dangerous situations.

Sensory toolkits have been gaining popularity among first responders and are now added to many first responder vehicles across the nation. When creating a sensory kit for first responders, consider the items that can be portable and fit many issues. Additionally, add blankets and communication tools.

Interested to request sensory poster magnets, let us know!

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HOW TO MAKE A SENSORY KIT:

1. Review the sensory kit materials list (p. 5) and sensory considerations checklist (p.6) to brainstorm items to include in the kit.

2. Determine which items would be appropriate and safe for age and functioning level of individuals likely to be using the kit. Remember: a sensory kit should contain several options, targeting each of the senses.

3. Create a bag, bin, or shelf with items safe and appropriate to the intended user(s).

4. Consider labeling the kit, providing visual instructions and training so the individual(s) can know to recognize the need and how to access materials as needed.

HOW TO USE A SENSORY KIT:

1. Place the kit in an area that is easily recognizable and accessible.

2. Offer items preferred by the individual (add to this bag, if needed)

3. Monitor and/or supervise to ensure appropriate use

4. Use sensory items during downtime/unstructured time (e.g., waiting) or social activities/events (e.g., gatherings)

5. Use sensory items as a means for preventing problem behaviors (i.e., provide before any behavior starts)

6. If behavior has begun, distract by looking at the items in the kit, commenting only on the materials (not on the problem behavior), and awaiting a brief (i.e., few seconds) time without behavior before providing with the sensory items.
Sensory Kit Materials List

Choosing Items for Your Sensory Kit

Items in the sensory kit should be presented only with proper supervision.

Tactile:
An individual may find comfort in tactile input if she or he explores items through touch or seeks out various textures to feel or mouth. Possible items:

- Vibrator/Bumble ball
- Feather Duster
- Fabric Samples
- Pin Image
- Koosh Balls
- Texture Blocks
- Squeeze Balls
- Self-held Fan
- Bristle Blocks
- Vibrating Stuffed Animals
- Thera-Putty/Silly-Putty
- Play-dough

Visual:
An individual may find comfort in visual input if she or he explores items closely with his or her eyes, watches visually stimulating items, or shakes items in front of his or her eyes. Possible items:

- Spinning Tops
- Theme Books
- Trains
- Expanding Sphere
- Magna Doodle
- Video Games (hand held)
- Stacking Items
- Hot Wheels
- Timers with Gel Center
- Slinky
- Light Wands
- Figurines
- Mirror
- Bounce Balls

Olfactory:
An individual may find comfort in olfactory input if she or he explores items through smell, smells items or people, or seeks various smells. Possible items:

- Scented Bounce Balls
- Scented Markers
- Scratch & Sniff Stickers
- Scented Toys
- Scented Books

Auditory:
An individual may find comfort in auditory input if she or he explores the world through sound, plays with or is drawn to items that make noise, is easily distracted by noises, or enjoys listening to music/noises. Possible items:

- Music
- Headphones/CDs
- Microphone
- Toys that Make Noises
- Musical instrument
- Tape Recorder

Gustatory:
An individual may find comfort in gustatory input if she or he explores items through taste, puts items in his or her mouth, or seeks out specific tastes or flavors (e.g., crunchy, salty, etc.). Check with the family before introducing any gustatory sensory items. Possible items:

- Fireball Cinnamon Candy
- Saltine Crackers
- Sour Candy
- Gummy Candy
- Suckers

Proprioceptive:
An individual may find comfort in proprioceptive input if she or he enjoys deep pressure sensations, engages in activities involving pushing or pulling, lifting, tight spaces, jumping, or hugging tightly. Possible items:

- Weighted Vest or Blanket
- Body Sock
- Play Tunnel
# Sensory Considerations Checklist

Individuals with autism often process sensory information differently than others in their environment. These sensory processing difficulties can lead to distractibility, anxiety, pain, and frustration. Lending predictability and a sense of control to these sensory issues can also be of benefit. This form will provide information useful to adapting the environment to better accommodate your child’s sensory difficulties.

Sample sensory issues are noted below. Please check which items you have observed to be of concern to your child. If a certain item is missing, please include it at the end of that particular section.

## Auditory (Sounds)
- **Loud, unpredictable sounds:**
  - Fire alarms
  - School bell
  - Fireworks
- **Ordinary/daily sounds:**
  - Toilet
  - Vacuum
  - Blow dryer
  - Baby crying
  - Singing or talking
- **Subtle sounds:**
  - Fluorescent light bulbs
  - Fans
  - Vent noises
  - Distant plane/train
  - White noise
  - Doesn’t respond to:
    - Sound of own name
    - Most sounds
    - Other
- **Responds to dislikes with:**
  - Hands over ears
  - Yelling, screaming or crying
  - Running away
  - Other

## Olfactory (Smells)
- **Responds to subtle smells**
- **Investigates items by smelling**
- **Bothered by foul smells**
- **Bothered by everyday scents:**
  - Food cooking
  - Perfume
  - Soaps
  - Hands/fingers
  - Other
- **Responds to dislikes with:**
  - Gagging
  - Vomiting
  - Yelling
  - Other

## Visual (Sight)
- **Focus on parts of objects**
- **Bothered by visual distracters:**
  - Fans
  - Lights
  - Mirrors
  - Other
  - Looks at items up close
  - Looks at items at angles
  - Difficulty focusing/tracking items
  - Other

## Vestibular (Movement)
- **Negative reaction to movement**
- **Enjoys movement:**
  - Swinging
  - Rocking
  - Spinning
  - Exhibits poor balance
  - Enjoys being upside down
  - Fearful of not being upright
  - Enjoys climbing
  - Other

## Gustatory (Taste)
- **Tastes/eats non-food items**
- **Preference for:**
  - Carbohydrates
  - Salty
  - Sour
  - Sweet
  - Crunchy
  - Pureed
  - Certain temperature
  - Other
- **Responds to dislikes with:**
  - Gagging
  - Vomiting
  - Yelling
  - Other

## Tactile (Touch)
- **Preference for textures**
- **Irritated by textures**
- **Dislikes bare feet**
- **Insists on having bare feet**
- **Dislikes light touch**
- **Avoids “messy” play**
- **Seeks “messy” play**
- **Irritated by having hair touched**
- **Dislikes having face washed**
- **Dislikes being tickled**
- **Strong tolerance to pain**
- **Insensitive to touch**
- Other

## Proprioceptive (Pressure in Joints)
- **Seeks activities involving:**
  - Pushing/pulling
  - Lifting
  - Tight spaces
  - Jumping
  - Other
  - Grinds teeth
  - Difficulty sitting up in a chair
  - Other
- **Responds with:**
  - Falling hard
  - Hugging
  - Breaking toys
  - Slamming doors
  - Stomping
  - Hitting
  - Playing rough
  - Other

## Other Notes
- Additional observations or specific needs can be noted here:
  - ______________________
  - ______________________
  - ______________________
  - ______________________
  - ______________________
  - ______________________
  - ______________________
  - ______________________