



SENSORY EXPERIENCES

How Autism Affects the Senses - What is Autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD or autism) is a neurological disorder which means that the brain of someone with autism works differently than yours or mine. We do not know what causes autism. There is no cure, but there are treatments that can help.

People with autism process and respond to information in many ways. Some people with autism experience different sensations than your or I because of how their brain processes information from their senses. Explore some of the differences here.



Eyes & Sight: Bright lights, colors, or a busy setting can cause a person with autism to feel overwhelmed.

 Dim or turn off lights and 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 (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.

Most importantly, every person with autism is an individual!

Though their differences may sometimes be difficult to understand, no two people are ever the same. People with autism are unique, just like you and me.

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.



Local Community Cadres

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/>



How-Tos, Tips & Modules available on the HANDS in Autism® website

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