

### **Sensory-Friendly Guide to the Holidays**

### **Understanding Sensory Processing**

Sensory processing is how our body and brain take in and make sense of information from the world around us, using our senses to help us respond appropriately. When a child has sensory processing differences, it can be highly beneficial to provide them with tools and strategies to manage these needs.

Having a combination of proactive and responsive accommodations in place, which considers both the child's individual sensory preferences and needs, can greatly enhance the likelihood of a positive holiday experience for all involved.

Preparing children with sensory challenges for changes can reinforce feelings of control and promote self-regulation. It is also important to set realistic expectations based on what you feel the child can manage. If you find that the child is unable to manage established traditions, it may be beneficial to reframe these as opportunities to create new, different experiences.

### **Possible Environmental Challenges to Consider**

#### **Food and Smells**

Festive foods can be stressful for children who are 'picky eaters,' or have a limited food variety, due to having to manage unfamiliar textures and flavours. Even if the child is not made to eat less preferred foods, watching others eat them could still increase feelings of discomfort.

Environmental scents, from items like candles, scented oils, perfumes, and less preferred foods, can also contribute to discomfort.







### **Possible Environmental Challenges to Consider**

### **Sights**

Bright festive lights (particularly if flashing) or large, crowded spaces may be too distracting and overwhelming for some children. Increased visual 'clutter' from indoor or outdoor holiday décor on walls or shelves.

For some children, visual changes in familiar environments, places or rooms, 'looking different' can feel unsettling to them.





#### **Touch**

Wearing novel festive clothing, with more decorative textures, may be uncomfortable for those who are sensitive to touch. When entering busier spaces or standing in queues, sensations such as being bumped into or having skin brushed against may be triggering.

### Sounds

Children with sensitivity or distractibility from sound may struggle with holiday music playing in the background. Loud or unexpected sounds at social gatherings, indoors and outdoors, can also be distressing such as; assemblies, school plays and concerts, parties, outdoor fairs.





### **Possible Environmental Challenges to Consider**

#### Movement

For children who appear more active, or 'on the go', participating in activities that require sitting or standing in one place for an extended period may be difficult for them. Children may also struggle with managing seemingly enjoyable activities, such as rides at holiday fairs or outings, either becoming quickly excited or alternatively, uncomfortable from their movement. Children with physical coordination or body awareness differences may struggle to participate in novel holiday games or to manage smaller, cluttered spaces without knocking items over.





### **Body signals**

Children who struggle to monitor their body signals for thirst, hunger, and toileting may depend more on cueing during natural breaks in their daily timetable and from adults around them to meet these needs. Disruption of this routine, or novel activities and situations, may make it more difficult for them to respond to and meet these needs effectively. Some children also struggle to identify their emotional and physical cues that need to support their regulation (e.g. tiredness, dysregulation); this may be more pronounced in situations that already test their coping skills and other sensory processing abilities.





### Activity: Build a Sensory 'Toolkit'

Tools can be kept in a bag, box, container, or consider a backpack that belongs to the child.

### **Collecting your tools**

Find a few items that can be used as 'tools' to provide comfort and calm.

Some examples could be:

- Ear defenders or noise-reducing earbuds
- Music headphones
- Fidget items
- Weighted lap pad
- A book of interest
- Soft toy with comforting texture
- A cloth square or a soft with preferred scent on it.
- A visually calming object e.g. bubble tubes, sand timer, sensory bottles.
- A chewy or crunchy snack to provide deep pressure input to the mouth.

Identify support strategies to use *any place, any time* that can be put into your toolkit.

Some examples could be:

- Hugs (e.g. from a family member or trusted adult)
- Options to go into a quiet space, etc.
- Relaxation strategies
- Distraction games, such as 'I spy...', 'Simon Says...', or the 'ABC Game' (choosing a category and naming something using each letter).
- Grounding strategies, such as 'Countdown to Senses,' For example: Look for five things you see, four you touch, three you hear, two you smell, and one you taste. Use it to slow down feelings.



### Strategies that can be used at home and school to support children with sensory challenges

### **Designate a quiet space**

Try to set up a space that the child can use to 'relax' or feel calmer when becoming dysregulated- perhaps by sitting on some pillows or a beanbag chair, having a few items to fidget/play with (books, toys, puzzles, music), and having the ability to dim lights and reduce sounds around them. This space does not need to be large; often, a corner in a room or hallway. Even a temporary pop-up tent or blanket den, which can be put up in 'the moment,' may be sufficient for some kids.

#### Be mindful of festive décor

When decorating spaces the child frequents regularly, start slowly and build it up over time. The child may also benefit from assisting in the decorating to feel more in control. If the child seems distractible or uncomfortable with the items being hung up, or furniture being moved around, consider limiting the use of further decorations or confining them only to certain spaces.

### Find ways to control the sensory environment

At all times of year, but especially during the holidays, children with sensory differences can be sensitive to environmental input (sights, sounds, smells, touch). If the child appears to be struggling to regulate, consider strategies such as dimming lights, lowering sounds, reducing less preferred smells, allowing them to wear more comfortable clothing, etc.

### Try to keep a balance of activity and quiet times

Try not to overbook the child if at all possible, for example, if the child has a social gathering one day, try giving them a chance to have a more 'typical' timetable, possibly with extra rest/recovery time, the next day. Children with sensory challenges sometimes require additional time to recover (compared to peers) following activities and situations that test their sensory processing abilities.



### Helpful strategies to prepare children with sensory needs for the holiday season

Things to consider a few days or weeks before key events (e.g. social gatherings, visits to new or less familiar homes)

- Talk about upcoming activities when you feel the time is right. For some children, this may be well in advance. For others, a few days prior may be more appropriate (e.g. if you feel they may worry).
- Calendar countdowns: Counting "How many sleeps until...", hanging a calendar on the wall with events clearly marked.
- Make lists, this can be used in many ways e.g. lists of their concerns, positive things to look forward to, items they'd like to bring along from the Toolkit, etc.
- Map it out. View new locations for the child in advance on visual maps (e.g. Google Earth). This may include the place you are going to, and/or the routes you may take to get there.
- Social stories: These are short, descriptive stories used to describe situations and related expectations to support a child's understanding
- If attending a social gathering in a new location outside their regular environment, you may consider letting the host or location staff know, in case accommodations can be made for the child.
- Get to know people in advance. Have the child view photos of people who will be visiting. If at home, this may be extended to family and friends. If at school, these may be classroom or school visitors.

### Things to consider on the day of the event

- Present a clear plan. Consider making a written/picture schedule of the day's plan (if at all possible).
- Prepare their bodies. Provide your child with calming and grounding sensory input before the holiday event/activity. For some, this may be movement time at the playground or movement game of their preference or going for a walk. For others, this may be carrying out 'heavy work' activities (e.g. pushing, pulling, carrying tasks), providing deep pressure input (big hugs, squeezes to arms and legs, cuddles, massage, progressive muscle relaxation exercises).
- Have a response plan. Identifying ways to cope or manage signs of dysregulation e.g. a safe space for a break (some children may need space to move, for others, a space to relax). Ideally, this location would allow for less sensory input.



### Helpful strategies to prepare children with sensory needs for the holiday season (continued)

#### Things to consider on the day of the event (continued)

- Bring a support item along. Items/toys that can be brought along to support your child's feelings of comfort and security.
- Bringing a sensory Toolkit along: When out and about, bring the kit in a bag; or if your child is able, have them wear a backpack filled with their 'tools' to provide additional, grounding sensory input while also ensuring their items are readily available.

#### When entering a holiday event

- Break Down Expectations. If transitioning between activities causes the child to appear distressed or dysregulated, try breaking them into smaller, more manageable steps, for example, using a now/next board, providing written steps, or using 'now/next' language to present the plan.
- Arrive early, if possible, before the environment becomes busy, to allow the child to 'settle' and explore the space. Review the location they can go to if they need a break, in case unexpected changes have arisen.
- Have regular 'check-ins' with your child: Some children can struggle to self-monitor or know when they need support or a break. Have 'check-ins' at planned times and/or if you see that your child is showing signs of dysregulation. Consider having multiple options for the child, eg they can tell you, have a code word, show you a hand sign (thumb up or down), or point to a picture that depicts their emotion.
- Don't be afraid to leave early! For some children with sensory differences, being in unusual, sensory-rich environments can be taxing on their nervous systems. As a result, they may appear tired or dysregulated more quickly than usual. If your child is showing signs that they have had 'enough', it may be in everyone's best interest to head home. This will not only reduce the risk of upset later on, but it will be much more likely that your child (and the rest of the family) will have a positive experience, and therefore, may be more comfortable in similar situations going forward.



### When it might be time to seek additional support:

While the general strategies included in this booklet can be beneficial for many children, some children will have sensory needs that require more bespoke input from professionals. Occupational therapists can play a central role in supporting children with sensory processing challenges and the adults who care and educate them.

The child is displaying:

- Frequent and intense emotional outbursts.
- Significant difficulty following directions or controlling impulses.
- Challenges in social interactions due to emotional or behavioural difficulties.
- Suspected underlying developmental or mental health concerns.

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