SUPPORT GROUP

For parents who have autistic children

18 October 2022

# Christmas

For many children, Christmas is a special and exciting time of year filled with plenty of fun and excitement from the magic surrounding Father Christmas, to receiving gifts and seeing members of the family who they don’t often get to see.

However, for autistic children who are used to routine and might be hypersensitive to noise, taste, touch, smell or bright lights, the Christmas period can be a very stressful time. Even things like Christmas decorations can be disruptive.

Aunties, uncles, grandparents and cousins who may live further away might be unfamiliar to a child with autism, and can cause the child confusion and distress if they’re not prepared.

## To prepare for a family gathering you could:

* Use photos of the family members you will see and explain to your child who they are, even better if they have a common interest.
* Do a daily countdown with your child to prepare them for the unfamiliarity. Start at least 1 week before the date of arrival.
* Arrange a quiet space for the days leading up to the celebration so to escape the noise and bustle. Even a sheet over an airier in a quieter room could make a hideaway.
* Reassuring and prompting that it’s okay to use it may also help your child.
* Tell your relatives how they need to behave around your child and what to expect, for example, your child will leave the room, or not join in until later and that in YOUR house that is o.k. Your child does not like to be hugged or kissed and so on.

If traditions are overwhelming or unhelpful, it’s important to ask ‘Who am I doing this for?, Is this truly bringing joy to me and my family or is it something that Expectation Claus is making me do?’ There is no shame in redefining the whole of Christmastime to suit yourself and your child. If your child can’t handle the Christmas routine, change the routine! For example, if overwhelmed by them, do all the gifts have to be opened on Christmas day. If a child doesn’t react well to surprises, buying only what they have asked for will reduce the risk of a present they don’t like or didn’t want, which in my family caused lots of problems!

(I have a friend whose child liked Argos catalogues that is all that they wanted!)

Can you avoid taking them to busy, noisy, loud shops. My daughter did not have stranger danger, I spent all other months of the year trying to teach that- there was no way I was going to sit her on that stranger’s (with the white beard and enticing gifts) knee. I had to get over my desire to give her the traditional Christmas experiences in order for her to have a chance of coping.

# Sensory Differences

*Courtesy autism.org.uk*

Processing everyday sensory information can be difficult for autistic people. Any of their senses may be over- or under-sensitive, or both, at different times. These sensory differences can affect how they feel and act, and can have a profound effect on a person’s life. Here we help you to understand autism, the person and how to help.

## Too much information

Sometimes an autistic person may behave in a way that you wouldn't immediately link to sensory differences. A person who finds it difficult to process everyday sensory information can experience sensory overload, or information overload. Too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and possibly physical pain. This can result in withdrawal, distressed behaviour or meltdowns.

"If I get sensory overload then I just shut down; you get what's known as fragmentation...it's weird, like being tuned into 40 TV channels."  **- an autistic person**

Sensory differences

Here we look at some of the effects of hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, balance and body awareness, and ways you could help.

### **Sight**

**UNDER-SENSITIVE**

* objects appear quite dark, or lose some of their features
* central vision is blurred but peripheral vision quite sharp
* a central object is magnified but things on the periphery are blurred
* poor depth perception, difficulties with throwing and catching, clumsiness.

**OVER-SENSITIVE**

* distorted vision - objects and bright lights can appear to jump around
* images may fragment
* easier and more pleasurable to focus on a detail rather than the whole object
* has difficulty getting to sleep as sensitive to the light.

You could make changes to the environment, such reducing lighting, providing sunglasses, using blackout curtains

### **Sound**

### **UNDER-SENSITIVE**

* may only hear sounds in one ear, the other ear having only partial hearing or none at all
* may not acknowledge particular sounds
* might enjoy crowded, noisy places or bang doors and objects.

You could help by using visual supports to back up verbal information, and ensuring that other people are aware of the under-sensitivity so that they can communicate effectively. To meet the person’s individual sensory need, include experiences they enjoy in their daily timetable.

**OVER-SENSITIVE**

* noise can be magnified and sounds become distorted and muddled
* may be able to hear conversations in the distance
* inability to cut out sounds – notably background noise - leading to difficulties concentrating.

"Do you hear noise in your head? It pounds and screeches. Like a train rumbling through your ears."

**- Powell, J., in Gillingham, G. (1995), page 41**

**You could help by:**

* shutting doors and windows to reduce external sounds
* preparing the person before going to noisy or crowded places
* providing ear plugs and music to listen to

### **Smell**

**UNDER-SENSITIVE**

* some people have no sense of smell and fail to notice extreme odours (this can include their own body odour).
* some people may lick things to get a better sense of what they are.

**You could help by**:

Creating a routine around regular washing and using strong-smelling products to distract people from inappropriate strong-smelling stimuli (like faeces).

**OVER-SENSITIVE**

* smells can be intense and overpowering. This can cause toileting problems
* dislikes people with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.

"Smells like dogs, cats, deodorant and aftershave lotion are so strong to me I can't stand it, and perfume drives me nuts."

-**Gillingham, G. (1995), page 60**

**You could help by**:

Using unscented detergents or shampoos, avoiding wearing perfume, and making the environment as fragrance-free as possible.

### **Taste**

**UNDER-SENSITIVE**

* likes very spicy foods
* eats or mouths non-edible items such as stones, dirt, soil, grass, metal, faeces. This is known as pica.

**OVER-SENSITIVE**

* finds some flavours and foods too strong and overpowering because of very sensitive taste buds. Has a restricted diet
* certain textures cause discomfort - may only eat smooth foods like mashed potatoes or ice-cream.

Some autistic people may limit themselves to bland foods or crave very strong-tasting food.

### **Touch**

**UNDER-SENSITIVE**

* holds others tightly - needs to do so before there is a sensation of having applied any pressure
* has a high pain threshold
* may be unable to feel food in the mouth
* may self-harm
* enjoys heavy objects (eg weighted blankets) on top of them
* smears faeces as enjoys the texture
* chews on everything, including clothing and inedible objects.

**You could help by:**

* for smearing, offering alternatives to handle with similar textures, such as jelly, or cornflour and water
* for chewing, offering latex-free tubes, straws or hard sweets (chill in the fridge).

**OVER-SENSITIVE**

* touch can be painful and uncomfortable - people may not like to be touched and this can affect their relationships with others
* dislikes having anything on hands or feet
* difficulties brushing and washing hair because head is sensitive
* may find many food textures uncomfortable
* only tolerates certain types of clothing or textures.

"Every time I am touched it hurts; it feels like fire running through my body."   **- Gillingham, G. (1995)**

**You could help by:**

* warning the person if you are about to touch them - always approach them from the front
* remembering that a hug may be painful rather than comforting
* changing the texture of food (eg purée it)
* slowly introducing different textures around the person's mouth, such as a flannel, a toothbrush and some different foods
* gradually introducing different textures to touch, eg have a box of materials available
* allowing a person to complete activities themselves (eg hair brushing and washing) so that they can do what is comfortable for them
* turning clothes inside out so there is no seam, removing any tags or labels
* allowing the person to wear clothes they're comfortable in.

### **Balance (vestibular)**

**UNDER-SENSITIVE**

* a need to rock, swing or spin to get some sensory input.

You could encourage activities that help to develop the vestibular system. This could include using rocking horses, swings, roundabouts, seesaws, catching a ball or practising walking smoothly up steps or curbs.

**OVER-SENSITIVE**

* difficulties with activities like sport, where we need to control our movements
* difficulties stopping quickly or during an activity
* car sickness
* difficulties with activities where the head is not upright or feet are off the ground.

**You could help by**:

Breaking down activities into small, more easily manageable steps and using visual cues such as a finish line.

### **Body awareness (proprioception)**

Our body awareness system tells us where our bodies are in space, and how different body parts are moving.

**UNDER-SENSITIVE**

* stands too close to others, because they cannot measure their proximity to other people and judge personal space
* finds it hard to navigate rooms and avoid obstructions
* may bump into people.

**You could help by:**

* positioning furniture around the edge of a room to make navigation easier
* using weighted blankets to provide deep pressure
* putting coloured tape on the floor to indicate boundaries
* using the 'arm's-length rule' to judge personal space - this means standing an arm's length away from other people.

**OVER-SENSITIVE**

* difficulties with fine motor skills, eg manipulating small objects like buttons or shoe laces
* moves whole body to look at something.

**You could help by:**

Offering 'fine motor' activities like lacing boards.

## **Synaesthesia**

Synaesthesia is a rare condition experienced by some autistic people. An experience goes in through one sensory system and out through another. So a person might hear a sound but experience it as a colour. In other words, they will 'hear' the colour blue.

# Some of the physical resources which may be useful

Double sided wobble cushions, movement breaks, swing, fidget toys, safe space (sometimes sheet over a table is all that’s needed), bubble wrap (hands and feet), headphones, white noise, backpacks (can be grounding), weighted blankets, bean bags with arms, chew toys.

# Online resources which may be useful – thank you to Heidi and Laura for these

<https://www.caudwellchildren.com/autism-sensory-packs/?fbclid=IwAR3TLZzPbxhDw6l1N5gi7m8WRYKSqfDskW4gPBElCgC8-y4SGju4FuTaEy8>

A collaborative padlet that has been produced by autistic community members- this has ambitions to cover almost anything!

<https://padlet.com/spectrumgaming/AutismResources?fbclid=IwAR05IeiBfqNtW48nY3YU1zt9jt_0eTIgIzwsdFy85CXbWHo4JYE72ekrr10>

Spectrum gaming- safe online gaming community for under 17s  <https://www.spectrumgaming.net/>

Aucademy- many free videos/advice articles from autistic people <https://aucademy.co.uk/>

Aucademy resource masterlist <https://aucademy.co.uk/books/>

Includes:

## **Stims/Stimming**

Stimming is self-regulation through stimulation which brings joy and helps regulate overwhelm. This can include repetitive movements like rocking, pacing, chewing, as well as certain sounds, images, textures etc. Although it is highly associated with Autistic people, as we often need to regulate overwhelm due to the sensory world and constant inaccessible environments, it is a human experience

Everyone stims, yes, even you skeptical Neurotypicals, as you click your pen, tap your foot or wiggle your toes. If you don’t stim you’re not human, some are just more noticeable than others, and some of us like to embrace stimming and buy a bunch of stim tools.

#### **ARTICLES/BLOGS**

* + [Autisticality – Stimming](https://www.facebook.com/111732458177011/posts/pfbid0fHZVymkMiPUN7awBh4Z96a1cWLEGz4crANx8zodLeQCJidYNvMtaMpDuqT8CzEeFl/?d=n)

#### **ORGANISATIONS/CHARITIES**

* + [The Sensory Projects](https://www.thesensoryprojects.co.uk/conferences-training)

#### **TOOLS**

* + [Stimobjects&AutisticthingsWishList](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/ZWP04WTRP531?ref_=wl_share)
  + [AutismSensoryPacks**–**CaudwellChildren](https://www.caudwellchildren.com/autism-sensory-packs/?fbclid=IwAR3TLZzPbxhDw6l1N5gi7m8WRYKSqfDskW4gPBElCgC8-y4SGju4FuTaEy8)**(some person-first language/requires diagnosis/PBS promoted, but provides affordable sensory packs)**

#### **VIDEOS**

* + [Autistic sensory, stimming, & relaxation techniques: Annette & Monique educate Aucademy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51fqpWj61V8&t=10s)
  + [Harmful stims and self-harm with David Gray-Hammond](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3BoXuyhZCc)

Other places to buy sensory stuff

<https://sensooli.com/home/sensory-shop/> - this is where I got my stim toy advent calendar from. It is ***EXTREMELY***overpriced normally, but is worth mentioning- the chew toys are food safe, which is sometimes a concern with cheaper toys.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Fidget-Toy-Advent-Calendar-2021/dp/B0944BRMR4>

<https://www.smythstoys.com/uk/en-gb/toys/sensory-toys/fidget-toys/toy-mania-sensory-advent-calendar/p/214480>

more reasonably priced versions, but does not include chewing toys.

more sites

<https://www.playinc.co.uk/shop-by-product-68-c.asp>

<https://www.exploreyoursenses.co.uk/>

<https://www.sensorydirect.com/products/sensory-toys-and-games/sensory>

Facebook group "Autie Not Naughty"-Chesterfield supermums (& Dads)  
  
Derbyshire Autism Services Group  
<https://www.derbyshireautismservices.org/>  
  
Autism East Midlands Family Support  
<https://www.autismeastmidlands.org.uk/child-services/family-support-hubs>

# Advice for obsessive friendships

* advise an alternative activity
* suggest finding an adult to find you a friend
* for an autistic child, it may take time to process what is appropriate, for some processing can take years.
* talk about this with the child kindly but honestly and clearly- euphemisms and “trying to lessen the blow” might mean they don’t pick up the hidden messages from the words used.

# Advice for sleeping through the night

Unfortunately, there is no ‘quick fix’, but you can try:

* weighted blankets- check weight guidelines for the weight of your child
* white noise
* bolster cushion at the side of the child
* the bedroom is often used as the playroom and this may confuse an autistic child – if possible have a separate play area away from the bedroom
* once awake go through the bedtime routine again can resettle some.
* trying to get to the root of not sleeping – this awareness may only come at an older age, but it may a chink of light keeping them awake, it may be the sound of the heating coming on, etc.
* GENERAL ‘pick your battles’ -have I the energy to spend on this right now. Is it that important right now or can it wait for future.

# A special mention…

A massive  to Laura whose insight into living with autism was invaluable and highlights how important it is to listen to autistic voices. You may find it useful to follow related accounts on social media.

# Next Meeting

8 February 2023 at 9am