



Helping Your Child Cope with his Sensory Needs

*By Lauren Lowry
Hanan Certified Speech-Language Pathologist*



Have you ever been bothered by a tag in the back of your shirt, feeling desperate to cut it out the minute you return home? Is there a food that you really dislike because of its texture or taste? Are there certain sounds that you find intolerable, like nails on a chalkboard or the drill at the dentist's office? Do you flick your pen cap or play with your hair while you are thinking about something? If you have experienced any of these things, then you know what it is like to have a "sensory preference" – a dislike or desire for a specific sensation. While this sensation may have preoccupied you at that moment, you were likely able to avoid it or do enough of it that you felt satiated and able to go about your daily life.

Now imagine that there are several sensations that you either crave or detest. The sounds, smells, tastes, sights, and textures bombarding you during daily life would make it difficult to concentrate on anything else. A visit to your local coffee shop could be a nightmare, as the smell of the coffee, the noise of the espresso machine, music, and customers, and the feeling of your new shoes rubbing against your heel would be so overwhelming that you would likely want to go home, no matter how much you wanted a coffee.

How Individuals with Autism Process Sensory Information

Most of us are able to integrate all of the sensory information that we constantly face, paying attention to and tolerating important sensory information and disregarding information that is less important at that moment. For individuals with autism, however, this is not the case. Many people with autism have difficulties processing information taken in through the senses. Besides the five senses of smell, taste, sight, hearing, and touch, individuals with autism can also struggle with their sense of movement and balance.

People with autism might be **over-sensitive** to certain sensations, which means that just a small amount of that sensation will stimulate them. It is, therefore, very easy to become over-stimulated by that sensation, causing the individual to try to avoid it. An example would be a child who is over-sensitive to sounds, who might cover his ears when he is in a noisy classroom or hears the vacuum at home. Or a child who is over-sensitive to taste might be quite a picky eater.

Individuals with autism can also be **under-sensitive** to certain sensations. This means that it takes a lot of that sensation to stimulate that person. Children who are under-sensitive to a sensation will seek out more of it in order to feel satiated. For example, a child who is under-sensitive to sounds may enjoy turning up the volume on the TV. Or a child who is under-sensitive to movement may want to be constantly on the move. An individual can have a combination of over- and under-sensitivities (over-sensitive to some things, under-sensitive to others).

Think for a moment about the following children who are over-sensitive to certain sensory input. The sense that they are avoiding is in parenthesis.

- Jane avoids playground equipment. She cries if you place her in a swing or on a slide (over-sensitive to movement)
- Sam is very particular about the clothing he wears (over-sensitive to touch)
- Thomas cries when his mother uses the hair dryer (over-sensitive to sound)
- Sarah prefers a dark room and avoids bright, sunny spaces (over-sensitive to sight)
- Isaac gets upset when his aunt Michelle comes to visit. Aunt Michelle wears very strong perfume (over-sensitive to smell)
- Nathan prefers bland food (over-sensitive to taste)

Now consider the following children who are under-sensitive to certain sensory information. The sense that they seek out is in parenthesis.

- Laura loves to jump on the couch, her bed, and the backyard trampoline (under-sensitive to movement)
- John constantly looks at his fingers and moves them repetitively in front of his eyes (under-sensitive to sight)
- Oliver hides in a tight corner behind the couch (under-sensitive to touch)
- Vicki's favourite toys make music or sounds (under-sensitive to sound)
- William loves to watch the wheels of toy cars as he pushes them over and over again (under-sensitive to sight)
- Aidan enjoys licking objects (under-sensitive to taste)

If your child seems to seek out certain sensations or avoid others, it can be helpful to complete a sensory checklist in order to get a better sense of your child's sensory preferences. The *More Than Words* guidebook (Sussman, 1999) includes such a checklist, "My Child's Sensory Preferences", which can be a helpful tool for parents to better understand their child's sensory needs.

What Can You Do About Your Child's Sensitivities?

Once you understand your child's sensory preferences, you will be able to understand why he engages in certain behaviour or avoids certain activities or situations. You can also use this information to think of ways to help your child manage difficult situations. If your child is over-sensitive to certain sensations, avoiding your child's sensory dislikes can be helpful. For example, choosing clothing that is more comfortable for him will free him up to concentrate on other things and not be bothered by the feeling of his shirt on his skin. Or if he is bothered by the sound of the chair legs scraping against the floor in his classroom, socks can be placed over the feet of the chairs to dampen the sound. An Occupational Therapist can provide other suggestions regarding adaptations and activities to help with your child's sensory needs.

If your child is under-sensitive to sensations and seeks them out, you may have to find creative ways of fulfilling this sensory need. While your instincts might tell you to remove certain objects or situations that cause your child to engage in repetitive or disruptive behaviours (such as removing all of the toy cars so your child can't watch the wheels spin or removing the trampoline so your child can't jump for hours at a time), this usually doesn't work very well. If a child has a sensory preference, he will usually find another outlet to fulfill this need. A better idea can be to use your child's sensory preferences to create games that you can play together that will not only satisfy your child's sensory needs but create opportunities for communication and interaction. These games are called "People Games".

People games

People Games are games that are played without toys – just with people. Some People Games involve movement and music (e.g. Ring Around the Rosie), and some involve just movement or actions (e.g. tickles, peek-a-boo, chase). People Games offer a special advantage for children with autism, who learn best through structure and repetition. As People Games are played the same way each time and often have a "script" to say while playing, children with autism can learn many things during these predictable games, such as how to take turns with you, pay attention to you, and imitate your actions, sounds, or words.

Because People Games involve some sort of movement or actions, a child's sensory preferences can be easily incorporated into the game. If a child's sensory preferences are considered when choosing a People Game, the child will be very motivated to play the game. Because he isn't pre-occupied with a need to fulfill a sensory preference, he can pay attention to your words and actions. Some children even say their first words during a People Game. If a child's sensory preferences are stimulated, it often encourages him to communicate and ask for the game to keep going.

The most important thing about People Games is that they are fun! Most families engage in People Games with their children, whether they realize it or not. Here are some examples of People Games:

- Hide and Seek
- Peek-a-boo
- Finger games like “Where is Thumbkin?” or “Round and Round the Garden”
- Rough-housing
- Tickling games
- “This Little Piggy”
- “Ring Around the Rosie”
- Chase
- Piggy back/horsie rides

Turn Sensory Preferences into People Games

Once you determine the sensations that your child likes and dislikes, you can think of a People Game that might incorporate this for your child. Here are some examples of sensory preferences and a People Game that would satisfy that preference:

Child's Sensory Preference	Try This People Game
Running	Chase or races. Or try “Red Light, Green Light”, where you run or walk on the green light and stop suddenly when “red light” is announced.
Rocking back and forth	Try singing Row Row Row your Boat while sitting across from your child on the floor, holding hands as you rock back and forth.
Looking at his fingers	Finger games such as “This Little Piggy” (played on fingers instead of toes), or “Where is Thumbkin?”. Many other examples can be found on the internet by searching for “fingerplays”.
Spinning	Ring Around the Rosie”, or try spinning your child in a revolving office chair.
Deep pressure or strong hugs	Try rolling him up in a blanket, then unrolling him (you can pretend he is a caterpillar going into his cocoon!). Or play chase, and when you catch him, give him a strong hug. He may also enjoy an adaptation of Peek-a-boo, where you hide him under a pile of pillows and then uncover him.
Jumping	Turn this into a People Game by holding his hands while he jumps on a trampoline or on the bed.
Swinging back and forth	Have your child lie in a blanket, while two adults hold the ends of the blanket, swinging it back and forth.
Feeling certain fabric/textures	If your child enjoys soft fabrics, play Peek-a-boo with a soft blanket or cloth, or swing him in a soft blanket.

Avoids certain movements and prefers slower, quieter activities

Try finger games (like “Thumbkin” or “Round Round the Garden”) or Pat-a-cake, which can be done slowly and quietly while sitting.

Some of the best People Games are the ones families create themselves. You can think about your child’s sensory preferences and make up your own game that you think your child might like.

Watch the video clip below from the *More Than Words* DVD of Isaac and his father playing a People Game. Isaac is under-sensitive to visual stimulation and to movement, so he seeks out both of these sensations by looking at his fingers in front of his face, and by jumping often on a trampoline. Isaac’s father makes up a People Game based on Isaac’s need for movement in which he helps Isaac to jump up and down by lifting him.

How to Play a People Game

If you choose a People Game based on your child’s sensory preferences, your child is sure to enjoy the game and pay more attention to you. You will probably find that your child looks at you more often during the game, and may try to communicate with you during the game. No matter what People Game you decide to play with your child, here are some tips that will ensure that your child has fun and learns something in the process:

- **Give the game a name.** Once you’ve decided on the name of your game, be sure to use it each time you play. Verbal children may start to ask for the game using the name.
- **Play the game the same way each time.** Use the same words and actions every time you play the game. This repetition adds structure and predictability to the game, and helps your child anticipate what comes next and what he should do or say.
- **Play the game several times.** Don’t be afraid to play the game over and over if he likes it. This will help your child become familiar with the game and anticipate what comes next.
- **Give your child a chance to participate in his own way.** Once your child is familiar with the game, you can create opportunities for him to do or say something during the game. For example, if you are swinging your child in a blanket, put the blanket down once in a while and wait. See if he hands you the blanket or says something to get you to swing him again. Or pause before you uncover yourself and say “Boo!” during Peek-a-boo. If you wait long enough, your child may touch your hands or say “Boo” himself in order to get you to continue.
- **Help your child send you a message.** If you pause at a key moment and your child doesn’t do or say something, you may need to help him. You can take his hand and help him give you the blanket, you can point to the body part he needs to move next, or you could say the first sound of

the word that he needs to say (eg. “g.....” for “go”). Some verbal children who imitate speech may benefit from you saying the word and then giving them a chance to imitate you.

- **End the game the same way each time.** When your child walks away or indicates that he no longer wants to play the game, say something to indicate that the game is over. By doing so, your child will learn a way to end the game himself. You can say “all done”, use a gesture or sign, or indicate in some other way that the game is finished.

Now take a look at Isaac and his father again, playing the “up and down” People Game. Notice how Isaac’s father plays the game the same way each time, using repetitive language that Isaac can imitate. Because Isaac’s father pauses and waits before lifting him, Isaac has a chance to say some words. Isaac is motivated to play and to communicate because his preference for movement is being stimulated.

When you consider your child’s sensory preferences when selecting People Games to play with him, you will discover many benefits. Your child will be motivated to interact with you, pay attention to you and look at you. He will send you messages about starting the game or keeping it going. He may engage in less repetitive behaviour related to his sensory interest if his preference is satisfied during a People Game. But most of all, you will feel connected to your child and enjoy shared smiles and giggles as you both have fun playing together!

If you have concerns about your child’s sensory processing abilities, you can talk to an Occupational therapist who provides intervention for such difficulties.

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Reference

Sussman, F. (2012). *More Than Words: A Parent's Guide to Building Interaction and Language Skills for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Social Communication Difficulties*. Toronto: The Hanen Centre.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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