



Top 5 tips for autism professionals: Dr Olga Bogdashina on sensory difficulties

In this article Dr Olga Bogdashina, author, practitioner and lecturer gives her Top 5 Tips for managing sensory difficulties for people on the autism spectrum. This article aims to provide an easy read overview of practical tips for professionals when working with people on autism spectrum who have sensory issues.

A brief introduction to sensory processing differences

There is a continuum of sensory perceptual problems/differences in autism. Some children have severe sensory distortions while others may experience only mild but nevertheless confusing sensory problems. To effectively teach and treat autistic children it is necessary to understand how the qualitative differences of sensory perception associated with autism affect each particular child.

As children are unable to cope with the demands of the world they are not equipped to deal with, they are likely to display behavioural problems, such as self-stimulation, self-injury, aggression, avoidance, rigidity, high anxiety, panic attacks, etc. It is important to remember that these children have no control over their problems, as they are caused by neurological differences.

Top 5 tips

Managing sensory difficulties for people on the autism spectrum

1. Protect from sensory overload

Many autistic people are very vulnerable to sensory overload. They may become overloaded in situations that wouldn't bother other people. The overload comes when they have taken in more than they can keep up with.

Learning to recognise sensory overload is very important. It is better to prevent it than to 'deal with the consequences'. As soon as you notice early signs of coming sensory overload (which are different for different individuals), stop activity and provide time and space to recover, e.g. invite the person to get into a quiet place or outside. It is useful to teach the individual how to recognise the internal signs of the overload, and ask for help or use different strategies (e.g. relaxation) to prevent the problem.

2. Create 'sensorily safe' environment

The sensory environment is very important for autistic people. They lack the ability to adjust to sensory assaults other people accept as normal. If we accommodate it and try to 'keep it clean' in order to meet their very special needs, the world could become more comfortable for them. With sensory needs met, problem behaviour becomes less of an issue. If there were no danger to be attacked, you would not need defense.

Many behaviours that interfere with learning and social interaction are, in fact, protective or sensory defensive responses of the person to 'sensory pollution' in the environment. It is impossible for children to learn if they are bombarded with painful and confusing stimuli – they are not equipped to cope with it.

- Monitor a number of simultaneous stimuli, reduce all irrelevant stimuli
- Structure and routines make the environment predictable and easier to control. Routine and rituals help to facilitate understanding of what is going on and what is going to happen next.
- Introduce any change slowly and always explain beforehand what is going differently and why.

3. Hypersensitivity

- Identify which stimuli the child finds disturbing and either reduce or eliminate them (e.g. use natural lighting instead of fluorescent lights) or, if impossible, provide the child with 'sensory aids' (tinted glasses, earplugs, etc.)
- Be aware of the colours and patterns of the clothes you are wearing and of your perfume
- Remember, what we think is enjoyable (e.g. fireworks) may be fearful or overwhelming to an autistic child
- Always warn a child about the possibility of the stimulus he is fearful of and show the source of it. Often it is not the stimulus itself that can trigger what we call difficult behaviours, but rather the inability to control or predict it.
- Depending on the sensitivity, desensitise the child's ability to tolerate the stimuli via sensory diet.

4. Work with autism, not against it

Autistic individuals seem to develop (voluntarily or involuntarily) the ability to control their awareness of incoming sensory stimuli in order to survive in the world bombarding them with extraneous information.

Mono-processing (using one sense at a time):

- A person with mono-processing may have problems with multiple stimuli. Find out which channel 'is open' at the moment and reduce all irrelevant stimuli.
- Always present information in the person's preferred modality. If you are not sure what it is or which channel 'is on' at the moment (in the case of fluctuation), use multi-

sensory presentation and watch which modality 'works'. Remember, though, that they could switch channels.

- Peripheral perception:
- Direct perception in autism is often hyper. Some autistic individuals actually hear (=understand) you better when they are not looking at you! Some autistic people seem to be hypersensitive when they are approached directly by other people. For some, if they are looked directly, they may feel it as 'a touch' – sort of 'distant touching' with actual experience.
- They can understand things better by attending to them directly, e.g. by looking or listening periphery (such as out of the corner of one's eye or by looking at or listening to something else). The same is true for other senses if they are hypersensitives: indirect perception of smell or touch are often defensive mechanisms to avoid overload.
- Never force eye contact.
- Do not approach the child directly in his hypersensitive modalities. When hypersensitivity of the affected channel is addressed and lessened, the direct perception becomes easier.

5. Adjust the way you interact with the child

Autistic people learn better with concrete information, whether it is visual, auditory, tactile, etc.

Let them use their ways to explore the world. In many ways 'autistic perception' is superior to that of non-autistics. Autistic individuals with their heightened senses often can appreciate colours, sounds, textures, smells, tastes to a much higher degree than people around them. Their gifts and talents should be nurtured and not ridiculed, as it is often the case.

Now, when we know that autistic individuals have problems with information presented verbally, there is a great emphasis on using pictures to help them comprehend information. However, not all autistic people are 'visual thinkers'. That is why, it is important to choose the methods of instruction to match the child's 'mental language', e.g. tactile aids for 'tactile thinkers', etc.

- To identify the interaction style to be used with the person – direct or indirect communication
- To identify the preferred sensory channel used by the child and to select the communication system – not all autistic children are visual thinkers/ think in pictures

Give them time to take in your question/instruction and to work out their response. Be aware that autistic individuals often require more time than others to shift their attention between stimuli of different modalities and they find it extremely difficult to follow rapidly changing social instructions.

These top 5 tips are meant only as a very general guide to what to think about.

Suggested further reading:

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Grandin, T. *The Way I See It. Future Horizons.*

Williams, D. *Autism: An Inside-Out Approach.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bogdashina, O. *Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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