

# Sensory Differences



**We have learned a lot from people on the autism spectrum describing their own particular sensory issues and how they can impact upon their lives and experiences (Williams, 1992 & 1996, Lawson, 2000 and Grandin, 1995). Many would say that sensory differences affect most of their everyday routines.**

Neurotypical people, unaffected by Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), would take the following in their stride or at least have some strategies for coping:

- Bright supermarket lights
- Queueing at a checkout
- Loud music over the public address system
- People needing to get past
- Children crying
- An error at the cash till

**For some people with ASDs this would lead to a major meltdown because it involves sensory overload.**

In terms of sensory processing, individuals with ASD report that sometimes the consistency of perception may be different on different occasions, ranging from:

- Hyposensitivity (a dulling of sensation) which may give rise to a craving for extreme sensations
- Hypersensitivity (an over arousal of sensation) which may give rise to over-reaction to common or familiar experiences
- Or something that is tolerable one day/minute might be overwhelming the next.

Looking at 7 sensory areas, here are some of the common issues on the left and some of the considerations and checks that may need to be made on the right.

### **SENSORY AREA:**

#### **Visual/sight**

*May not meet eye gaze  
Uses sight at sides of eyes  
Fear of some environments  
Over reacts to some forms of lighting  
Needs a clear visual order, cannot cope with clutter or chaos  
Strong visual likes and dislikes*

### **CHECK:**

*Bright lights cause discomfort  
Fearful of dark rooms  
Misses detail in the foreground*

#### **AND TRY:**

*Different coloured Perspex overlays  
Deciding whether it's more important to look or listen, **not both together**  
Don't insist on eye contact*

### **SENSORY AREA:**

#### **Auditory/hearing**

*Appears not to be paying attention  
Some noises cause over reaction or inappropriate response  
Cannot screen out background noises  
Uses hands over ears to cut out noise stimulation  
Finds the human voice hard to tune into*

### **CHECK:**

*That they have heard what was said  
They are not having to use 2 or more senses in combination  
They are not making their own noise to mask other distractions*

#### **AND TRY:**

*Forewarning of any sudden noises e.g. alarms  
Using more visual means of communication  
Using socially acceptable ear protectors e.g. headphones*

### **SENSORY AREA:**

#### **Tactile/touch**

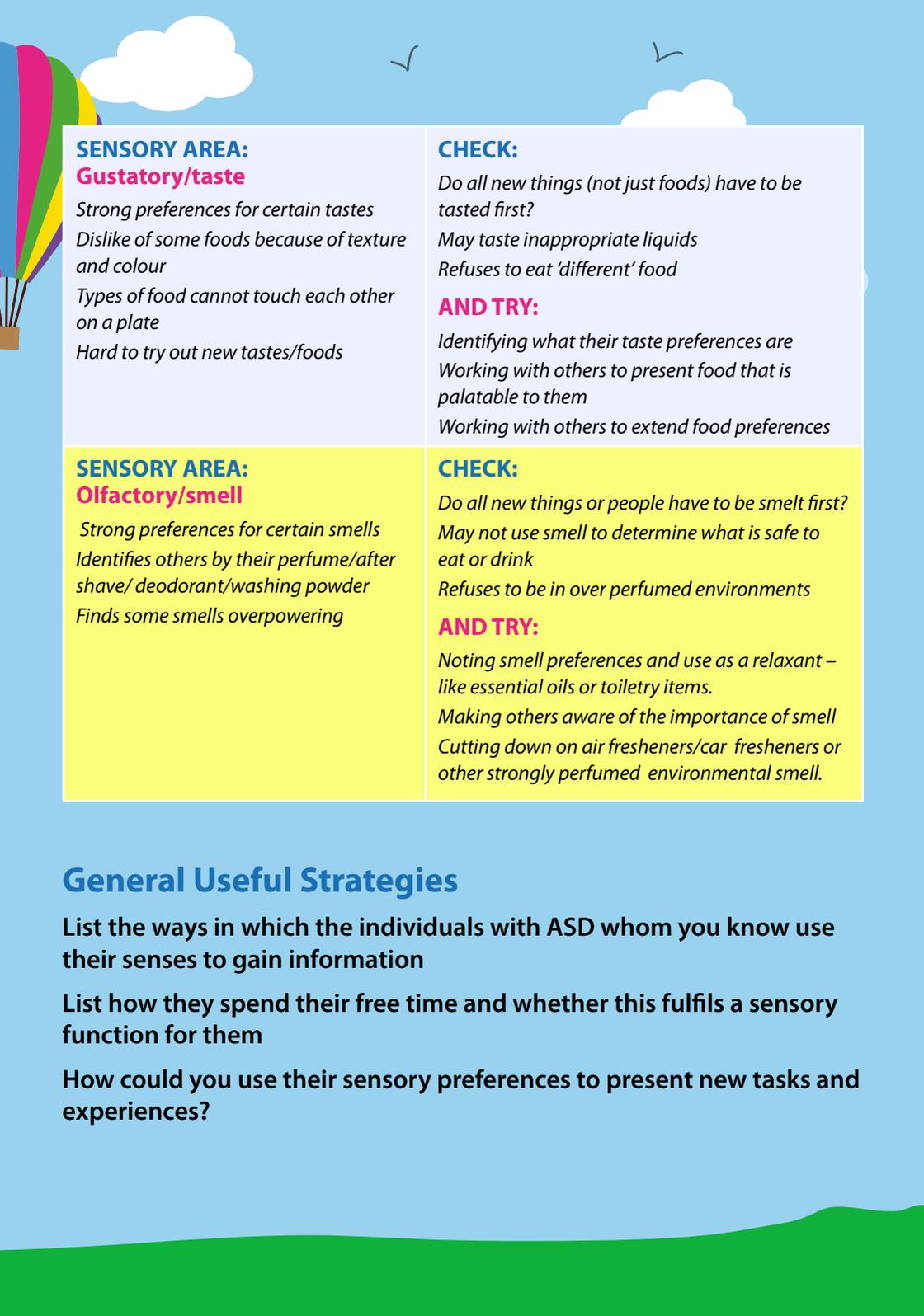
*Over or under reacts to certain types of touch  
Finds some clothing too uncomfortable to wear - Including fastenings, labels, seams on clothes  
Does not want to get 'dirt' on hands or clothing  
Over or under reacts to temperature or pain*

### **CHECK:**

*What are their preferred types of clothing?  
What types of touch do they find acceptable?  
Different responses to hot/cold/pain*

#### **AND TRY:**

*A more acceptable dress code (e.g. no labels)  
Building an understanding that we wear clothes to suit the expected weather  
De-sensitising activities e.g. involvement in cooking to make tolerance of 'dirty' tasks*



**SENSORY AREA:**

**Gustatory/taste**

*Strong preferences for certain tastes  
Dislike of some foods because of texture and colour  
Types of food cannot touch each other on a plate  
Hard to try out new tastes/foods*

**CHECK:**

*Do all new things (not just foods) have to be tasted first?  
May taste inappropriate liquids  
Refuses to eat 'different' food*

**AND TRY:**

*Identifying what their taste preferences are  
Working with others to present food that is palatable to them  
Working with others to extend food preferences*

**SENSORY AREA:**

**Olfactory/smell**

*Strong preferences for certain smells  
Identifies others by their perfume/after shave/ deodorant/washing powder  
Finds some smells overpowering*

**CHECK:**

*Do all new things or people have to be smelt first?  
May not use smell to determine what is safe to eat or drink  
Refuses to be in over perfumed environments*

**AND TRY:**

*Noting smell preferences and use as a relaxant – like essential oils or toiletry items.  
Making others aware of the importance of smell  
Cutting down on air fresheners/car fresheners or other strongly perfumed environmental smell.*

## General Useful Strategies

List the ways in which the individuals with ASD whom you know use their senses to gain information

List how they spend their free time and whether this fulfils a sensory function for them

How could you use their sensory preferences to present new tasks and experiences?

### **SENSORY AREA:**

#### **Vestibular/balance**

*Loves spinning, rocking, bouncing*

*Craves strong physical activities*

*Seeks out experiences that challenge centre of gravity*

*Appears to lack a sense of personal safety*

### **CHECK:**

*Choices of sitting and standing*

*Can they keep still as a 'statue'?*

*How active do they need to be during a period of time?*

#### **AND TRY:**

*Safe centre of gravity activities e.g. climbing walls, trampolining, rebounding, bouncy castles*

*Using weighted objects to encourage sitting still*

*Finding a chair/seated position that is comfortable for them*

### **SENSORY AREA:**

#### **Proprioception & proxemics/ body position in space**

*May stand too close or too far away from people in conversation*

*Finds making choices in environments hard – e.g. what chair to sit on; where to stand in a space*

*May over or under use force – pulls and pushes too hard or not hard enough*

### **CHECK:**

*Force of their grip/grasp*

*How they move around people and places – do they walk 'through' people?*

*Is it stressful to find a table to sit at?*

#### **AND TRY:**

*To practice an acceptable distance from others you know very well/quite well and those who are strangers*

*Practising different strengths of pushes/pulls and grips*

*Identifying how to choose a good place to sit/stand*

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