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Autism Agenda



Linn Benton Lincoln ESD-Cascade Regional Autism Program

How to handle holiday gatherings with sensory sensitive kids

By Lesley Scott

It was Christmas time, and we were in a busy mall. People were swarming around us, Christmas music was piping through the mall speakers, and sparkly decorations and twinkling lights abounded. In the center court, Santa and his elves were surrounded by brightly decorated trees as they listened to the wishes of excited children.

For us, this chaotic overstimulation led to an epic meltdown. My kids were so excited to meet Santa, and I was so looking forward to sharing in their excitement that I didn't give any thought to the busyness and sensory inputs all around us.

Holidays are usually a time for fun and festivity, a time for families to gather and share meals and memories. During the holiday season, routine and familiarity are often set aside as we connect with our loved ones.

For many families, though, the additional sensory stimulation that the holidays bring can be a challenge. For children (and adults) with sensory sensitivities, the holiday season can be a distressing and difficult time, with noise, different foods, and large groups of people all being potential triggers.

Continued on page 2.



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HOW TO HANDLE HOLIDAY CONTINUED....

WHAT IS SENSORY SENSITIVITY?

Sensory sensitivity, sometimes known as [sensory processing disorder](#) (SPD), occurs when the brain has difficulty receiving and responding to external stimuli such as noise or light.

Overstimulation of the senses causes a sensory overload, which can result in extreme behaviors, such as [tantrums, meltdowns](#), or withdrawal. If your child has sensory processing issues, it doesn't mean they have autism, but almost all [autistic children](#) do have sensory sensitivities.

Children with [ADHD](#), OCD, and other behavioral disorders may also have difficulty with sensory processing, and kids with no associated disorders or other diagnoses may also have sensory sensitivity.

HOLIDAY SENSORY TRIGGERS

While typical children will take the sights, sounds, and smells of the holiday season in their stride, those with sensory sensitivity will process these stimuli differently. This can trigger a “flight, fright, or freeze” response. We have 5 sensory systems that can be overwhelmed or overstimulated: visual, auditory, taste, tactile, and vestibular.

Here are some examples of how common holiday activities can act as sensory triggers:

- **Visual:** Flashing lights on trees and in displays, light show projections, sparkly tinsel and decorations, and brightly colored wrappings can be disorienting to a visually sensitive child.
- **Auditory:** Excited peers, noisy malls, lots of people talking over each other in enclosed spaces, and loud music can all trigger kids with auditory sensitivity. Parties, excited classmates gathering in the classroom or playground, and busy malls or entertainment venues can be distressing for a child who is easily overwhelmed.
- **Taste:** Holiday meals often involve special foods that may not be eaten at other times during the year. Kids with sensory sensitivities may be [picky eaters](#) who prefer a familiar range of foods or food textures. Smells also form a part of this type of stimulus. Holiday foods have a scent of their own, and your aunt may get a bit carried away when applying her holiday perfume. Kids who are triggered by strong or overpowering smells might find a holiday meal too much.
- **Tactile:** Kids who have tactile sensitivities might struggle to wear clothes designed for events and photographs.
- **Vestibular:** The vestibular system affects our movement and our proprioception, that is, where our body is in space. Kids use movement to regulate their attention and behavior. Long periods indoors and having to sit at the dinner table can lead to irritability, misbehavior, and meltdowns.

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HOW TO HANDLE HOLIDAY CONTINUED....

4 TIPS FOR MANAGING SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOLIDAY GATHERINGS

Many factors will be beyond your control during the holidays, so you should focus on the things you can control.

Educating your family members about sensory sensitivities and preparing them for potential [meltdowns](#) can go a long way towards easing your own anxiety around the festive season. More importantly, by being proactive and equipping your sensitive child with coping mechanisms to deal with sensory overwhelm, you can pave the way for a sensory-friendly holiday.

1. Routine is important

Where possible, try to keep mealtimes and bedtimes as normal as usual. When there are disruptions to the routine, you can keep your child calm by providing a quiet and secure space where they can go to decompress.

A loved toy or fidget, soft music, and some comfortable blankets and cushions can provide a safe haven for an overstimulated child.

2. Open conversation with others

Not everyone will be understanding about your child's sensory sensitivities, and some family members might believe you are just allowing "bad" behavior. Make sure that the people you'll be spending your holidays with know that your child is easily over-stimulated.

Describe what a meltdown or shutdown (withdrawal) might look like and explain what mechanisms you have put in place if this happens, for example, allowing your child to leave the table, wear their headphones, or go outdoors to play. You can even request gifts for your child that provide the positive stimulation they need to remain calm.

3. Know your child's triggers

When you understand what triggers your child, you can be better equipped to limit or change their environment.

4. Advance preparation

Knowing what to expect can help a child prepare for events or activities that may otherwise cause [anxiety](#) and distress. You can talk to your kids about what will happen over the holidays and help them prepare by creating a holiday calendar.



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HOW TO HANDLE HOLIDAY CONTINUED....

SENSORY TOOLKIT FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

Depending on what stimuli trigger your child, this holiday guide for sensory kids will help you create a toolkit to cope better.



Visual

For visually sensitive children, caps or hats and sunglasses can reduce visual stimuli. For long periods of sitting still, activities requiring focus will help to hold their attention.

Auditory

Children who are distressed by loud or ongoing noise might find noise-canceling headphones or earplugs helpful. Letting your child compile a playlist of their favorite music to listen to can also be calming.

Taste

If your child is a picky eater or prefers certain food types or textures, you might want to take [pre-packed meals](#) with you if you go out. Explain to your host ahead of time that you're doing this to prevent an issue.

Tactile

Holidays aren't the best time for a child with tactile sensitivities to try out new outfits or fabrics. Where possible, allow your child to choose their own outfit or have a comfortable set of clothing on standby.

Tactile sensitive kids may also become overwhelmed by people bumping into them or by hugs from loving relatives. Allow your child the opportunity to take breaks from busy environments and let them choose whether or not to accept hugs from family members.

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HOW TO HANDLE HOLIDAY CONTINUED....



Vestibular

One of the key factors in managing vestibular sensitivity is providing kids with plenty of opportunities to get feedback from their environment.

A fidget or favorite toy can provide feedback, as can this TheraBand progressive resistance band on their chair. Letting your child push the shopping cart, help with preparations, and have breaks for running around between courses can all help them remain calm and engaged in the festivities.

Having a quiet space and a weighted blanket for when things get a bit much can also avert a crisis. More on this [here](#).

For kids with sensory sensitivity, a “sensory diet” can be created by an occupational therapist to help your child build self-awareness. These activities are tailored to your child’s specific sensory needs. Activities assist your kid with remaining in the “right” zone for calm, engaged interactions with others and with their environment. If your child has a sensory diet, you should try to continue with it throughout the holidays.

CONCLUSION

The holidays can come with many additional stressors, especially for families with neurodiverse kids. You should remember that it’s important to do what is right for your family, even if it means creating new traditions to accommodate all family members. By knowing your child, you can take action and make decisions that are in your whole family’s best interests to ensure that everyone has a happy holiday season.

[How to handle holiday gatherings with sensory sensitive kids - Genes2Teens](#)

38 TIPS FOR A MELTDOWN FREE HOLIDAY

38 TIPS FOR A MELTDOWN FREE HOLIDAY

Posted by Bonnie Arnwine on Nov 6th 2020

The holidays are a fun time to visit with friends and family. Special decorations and traditions make it a festive time for everyone. Unfortunately, the holidays can also present challenges for individuals on the autism spectrum especially this year when you throw in the challenges of Covid19. However, with a little preparation, you can create a supportive environment that everyone will enjoy.

Remember Change is Hard

Most individuals on the spectrum enjoy routines. This year all of us have experienced extra stress due to the changes in our routines. Although it can be challenging, if possible, try to maintain your usual routine during the holiday season. Maintaining consistent mealtimes and bedtimes can alleviate stress and be very comforting.

At a conference, I heard the story of a young man at a group home that kept attacking the Christmas tree. Everyone was very upset with his behavior. When the behaviorist arrived, he learned that the staff had moved one of the living room chairs to make room for the tree. When the behaviorist asked the staff to put the chair back, they were reluctant because they thought the room wouldn't "look good". As soon as they put the chair back, the young man ran to the chair and never attacked the tree again. The staff had inadvertently disrupted his home and his routine. With this story in mind, remember:

- No decoration is worth disrupting a comforting routine.
- Ask yourself whose home is it? Decorations are for occupants to enjoy. If a decoration is disruptive it isn't serving its true purpose.
- If possible, allow your family member to pick some of the decorations and put them up. Being a part of the process allows them to prepare for the holidays and "own" the new look.
- Pick out a decoration of the day. Add the decorations gradually as a way to prepare for the holiday. If this works particularly well, then you may want to slowly take down decorations to help your child transition out of holiday mode as the holidays pass.
- Remember too much sensory stimulation can make it much easier for your family member to experience over-stimulation and stress. Years ago, a friend of mine bought a set of tree lights that had several different blinking modes. She quickly found out that the best mode was the one with no flickering or dancing lights. Her son just needed them on or off.

As much as possible try to prepare your family member for any changes that will come with the holidays.

- Remember when introducing change to use positive language. For example you could say, "we are going to Grandma's house for Christmas dinner. It will be fun to see Grandma and eat Christmas cookies." As much as possible try to avoid inadvertently priming for failure. For example, "we are going to Grandma's for Christmas dinner I know it will be different and stressful, but try to have fun."
- Consider writing a social story that explains the special day. You can learn how to write a simple social story [here](#).
- Creating a visual schedule for special days. This can be as simple as writing a list of activities and marking them off as you complete them. You can print off simple images for your schedule as well. The internet is full of free pictures you can download.
- Consider using a calendar to mark down the days before the vacation or family event.



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38 TIPS FOR A MELTDOWN FREE HOLIDAY CONTINUED...

Avoid the Meltdown

The holidays can easily become overwhelming for any of us. A meltdown on a special day is sad for the family and for the child, so be sensitive to signs of stress and create calming opportunities to avoid a meltdown.

- If possible, talk to your family member ahead of time while they are relaxed. Ask them if they have any ideas on how you can help them if they get stressed.
- When traveling or visiting, keep with you a favorite [calming item](#), like a [vibrating pillow](#), [fidget](#), or [stress ball](#).
- Wear [noise reduction ear muffs](#) to minimize unexpected noises.
- As soon as you see signs of stress, give your family member a break. Small frequent breaks are much better than pushing someone a little bit longer.
- Have a calming plan and communicate it with your family members.

A Calm Safe Spot

Make sure to have a calming area your family member can go to when they need a break. If you are going to visit family, talk to them about creating a calming area for your child before you arrive. Here are a few ideas:

- Designate a room or quiet corner of a room as a safe spot. Provide soft pillows or stuffed animals to sit and snuggle with. Provide different textures to touch - this can be as simple as a regular pillowcase and a flannel pillowcase.
- Make sure to bring familiar comforting items like a favorite pillow, blanket, or a couple of toys to leave in the safe area.
- Provide some soft lighting if possible.
- Make sure the area is quiet or provide some headphones or soft music.
- You can also put a sheet over a table and create a quick safe fort if your child would enjoy it.

Presents - Presents – Presents!

Presents can be a highly anticipated part of a holiday. They bring a light of excitement and stimulation. Unfortunately, they can also cause over-stimulation and stress. So, preparation for presents is important.



- My son always wanted to know which presents were his. So, I let him pick out his wrapping paper. I wrapped all his presents with the paper. On the big day, he didn't worry about which presents were his because he could easily identify them.
- Help your child understand present protocol with a social story. You can see some free gift themed social stories here:

<https://able2learn.com/products/i-can-give-a-gift-...>

<https://able2learn.com/products/i-can-get-a-gift-...>

- If possible identify which present will be the most preferred gift. Save this gift for last or give it to your child when you BEGIN to see them becoming agitated. Allow them to open this gift and play with it while everyone continues to open their gifts. Remember the goal is family time, not completing the task of opening the gifts.

Continued on page 8.

38 TIPS FOR A MELTDOWN FREE HOLIDAY CONTINUED...

- If your family member wants a specific gift and you will not be able to provide it, make sure you tell them before the big day.
- If your family member is hyper-focused on a specific gift and needs to talk about it or ask questions about it, make some rules. The Autism Society of America has a great suggestion, “give them five poker chips. They are allowed to exchange one chip for five minutes of talking about the desired gift. Also, if you have no intention of purchasing a specific item, it serves no purpose to tell them that maybe they will get the gift. This will only lead to problems in the future. Always choose to be direct and specific about your intentions”. To read more of their tips [click here](#).

But I Want Your Stuff...

What is your plan if your family member wants somebody else's gift? Here are a few ideas to help with this situation:

- Make sure your family member understands the concept of a gift. You can share this [social story](#)
- Talk to visiting family members ahead of time and prepare them for this possibility. This is important for younger children.
- If possible, create a reward for not taking gifts. Allow your child to earn a token each time they congratulate someone for a gift, or high five them instead of taking the gift. Make sure to give lots of praise and have a reward the child will really enjoy for a job well done.

Guest Preparation

Family members often come together for the holidays and they really want to spend quality time with your child.

- Prepare your family member to meet new people by showing them a picture or use social media. Social media can be a powerful tool that can build family connections. Become Facebook friends or follow family members on Instagram.
- Sit down and take a minute to think of three tips that will help your friends and family to understand how best to interact with your child and communicate this to them before the visit.
- Prepare for a positive introduction. Does your child dislike being hugged? Then how about greeting with a thumbs up or a high five? Let your family members know what works best for a positive start to your visit.
- Explain what overstimulation looks like and when they should come and get you.
- Explain the purpose of your quiet area and what to do if your child needs to go there.
- If possible, prepare a simple activity your family members can do with your child. Grandmas and grandpas want to connect with their grandchildren. Perhaps they can take turns putting pieces in a puzzle, or play with play-doh together, or they can count the number of jumps your child does on the trampoline. If possible, put away a favorite toy or activity for several days before the family member arrives. Allow them to get it out of the closet and present it to your child. (Note: for this to work there can be no negative feelings or discipline surrounding the item. You may want to put up the toy while your child is asleep.)



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38 TIPS FOR A MELTDOWN FREE HOLIDAY CONTINUED...

The Big Meal

So much of the holidays surround food. Big family meals where everyone comes together to eat and enjoy each other's company. A lot of time and thought goes into the preparation of the food. While some make it all about the food, the real goal is for everyone to get together and visit. For the person with autism, big family meals can be a real challenge. Lots of people mean lots of noise. New foods that they haven't tried before isn't fun - it's challenging. Here are a few things you can do to make the situation easier.



- Let your family member eat before the meal. There is nothing worse than being genuinely hungry but unable to eat because the environment is too stimulating, or the food is too different. Let your family member eat beforehand and then save them a spot at the table to visit and maybe have a roll or try something if they want too.
- Communicate with your family before the meal. Tell them that your child will eat ahead of time, or that you will prepare their plate. I have told my family members to not try to make my son eat a food he does not want or to put any food on his plate.
- If you want your family member to try new foods, try them at home in a familiar environment first. Do you want them to try grandma's pumpkin pie? Ask grandma for the recipe and introduce it to your family member a few times before the big meal.
- Bring a dish to share that you know your family member will enjoy.
- If you know it will be loud, bring headphones or earplugs and let your child wear them at the table.

<https://nationalautismresources.com/blog/38-tips-for-a-meltdown-free-holiday/>



BUILD-YOUR-OWN Sensory Break!

Mix and match the tools to calm down, focus and express yourself

move	play	calm	focus
1 Have a Ball	5 Find the Pieces	9 Bubble Table	13 Take a Break
2 Jump	6 Build	10 Relax Inside	14 Sit and Wiggle
3 Climb and Rock	7 Toss	11 Shake It	15 Get a Hug
4 Roll	8 Time Yourself	12 See the Light	16 Stretch

MY NAME

BEFORE THE ACTIVITIES, I FEEL...

ACTIVITIES

AFTER THE ACTIVITIES, I FEEL...

<https://funandfunction.com/build-your-own-sensory-poster>

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AUTISM, ANXIETY, AND SENSORY OVERLOAD

Autism, Anxiety, and Sensory Overload: A Sensory Key



Autism and anxiety are often linked.

The Anxiety and Depression Society of America says that 40% of young people with autism experience anxiety.

Did you know that managing the sensory experience is key to **helping autism and anxiety**?

To help with your understanding of the sensory experience, learn more about your eight senses. Yes, eight not five, you can read more in this blog we wrote about the eight senses. For now, know that you see,

hear, taste, touch, smell, and have a sense of movement, balance along with your internal organs.

Many people, including people of all ages with autism, have difficulties with their senses.

Autism and sensory issues are very much linked. For instance, autistic people experience sensory sensitivity and sensory overload.

THE ANXIETY SENSORY KEY

Anxiety contributes to sensory overload. Besides, the reverse is true too: sensory overload makes people anxious.

For example, you worry and become anxious about going out to an event or a place that is busy, noisy, and bright. In particular, if those things bother your senses. Alternatively, noise exposure, especially for a long time, can bother you and make you more anxious. Think about how you feel when the smoke detector goes off because you burnt your toast. Especially when you cannot get it to stop. During that time, you can think of nothing else. You cannot simply ignore it.



When you are anxious, you often have less bandwidth to cope with extremes in your senses. For instance, think of a time you were worried about something. You might even say something like, "I just want peace and quiet".

However, it is important to know that sensory overload is also experienced by people who do not also have anxiety or autism. Some people experience sensory overload daily. In contrast, some people only experience it in certain circumstances.

For example, you might only experience sensory overload when you are tired. After a long day of traveling abroad and little sleep, when you arrive somewhere new, you might feel overwhelmed by the sounds, smells, sights, and experiences there. Nevertheless, following a good night's sleep and recovering from jet lag, you love to travel and experience someplace new. That feeling of being overwhelmed, overstimulated was just temporary, normal sensory overload.

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AUTISM, ANXIETY, AND SENSORY OVERLOAD CONTINUED....

MORE THAN JUST AUTISM AND ANXIETY

On the other hand, some people experience **sensory overload** because of an underlying disability, disorder, or difference in their brain. Moreover, they experience sensory overload more often. Finally, it is more disruptive to their daily life.

Did you know that sensory overload is more often associated with autism, Asperger's, the Highly Sensitive Person, anxiety, fibromyalgia, and PTSD? However, there are many more things that can make people experience overstimulation in daily life.

Having a disorder, disability, or difference does not mean you will automatically experience sensory overload. To clarify, it just means you are more likely to.

So your child has **autism** and anxiety as underlying conditions. Furthermore, they experience sensory overload.

Now, what do you do?

HOW TO CALM A CHILD WITH SENSORY OVERLOAD

This is the most oft-asked question by parents, "How to calm down a child with sensory overload." Moreover, these strategies work with children but also with anyone of any age.

4 ways to manage autism, anxiety and sensory overload:

1. Go to **sensory-friendly** events and places.
 - sensory-friendly movies
 - museums with sensory-friendly visiting times
2. Choose sensory-friendly service providers and businesses.
 - grocery shopping during quiet hours
 - a sensory-friendly dentist
3. Manage your child's sensory experience by making it shorter.
 - arrive late and leave early!
4. Reduce your child's sensory experience.
 - bring ear muffs, the kind that **blocks out noise**. Not the kind that covers your ears in winter.

- Going to a sensory-friendly **event or place** helps with sensory overload. It does so because the event or the place reduces the sensory experience of the people visiting. Examples might be turning off flashing lights, or turning off background music.
- Choosing sensory-friendly **service providers or businesses** helps with sensory overload. They also reduce the sensory experience of their customers. Therefore, a dentist might provide noise-blocking headphones or a weighted blanket. Alternatively, a concussion clinic might have a calming room for its patients.

4 ways to manage autism, anxiety and sensory overload

- Choose sensory-friendly events and places**
 - Fewer lights
 - Less background music
- Choose sensory-friendly features**
 - Noise blocking headphones
 - Calming rooms
 - Weighted blanket
- Make sensory experience shorter**
 - Take breaks from busy, noisy and bright places
- Reduce sensory experience**
 - Noise blocking headphones
 - Sunglasses

Sensory Friendly Solutions

Continued on page 12.

AUTISM, ANXIETY, AND SENSORY OVERLOAD CONTINUED....

- Manage your child's sensory experience by **making it shorter or breaking it up**. Some amusement parks, arenas, and airports have quiet rooms or quiet spaces. Find them and plan to take breaks away from the busy, noisy, and bright.
- Finally, you can reduce your child's sensory experience by having them wear **noise-blocking headphones** that block out sounds. You can wear **sunglasses** indoors or even outdoors on a cloudy day.

SEVEN THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SENSORY OVERLOAD:

1. You have more than five senses.
2. You have at least **eight senses**: see, hear, touch, smell, taste, move, balance and interoception.
3. Sensory overload means that the senses are overstimulated and overwhelmed.
4. There are disorders, disabilities, and differences that make it more likely for someone to experience sensory overload.
5. Sensory overload can cause many distressing symptoms.
6. **Sensory-friendly** events, places, services, or businesses help prevent or manage sensory overload.
7. Sensory overload can occur in one or more of the senses at the same time.

THE AUTISM SENSORY LINK

For an autistic person, a different sensory experience is **part of the diagnosis**. That is to say, the formal diagnostic criteria use words like hyposensitivity and hypersensitivity.

We all have some degree of sensory sensitivity. Subsequently, when someone has a sensory impairment, sometimes called a **sensory disorder** or sensory processing disorder, they might show characteristics described as hyposensitivity or hypersensitivity.

Hyposensitivity

Let's talk about hyposensitivity first. Hypo means low or below normal.

Hyposensitivity means that your brain receives information from the senses less or with less intensity than other people do. So, a child with a sensory processing disorder, where hyposensitivity is a characteristic, might constantly touch things.

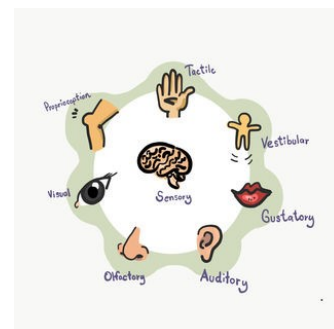
In this example, **hyposensitivity, or being less sensitive to touch**, causes the child to seek out sensory input excessively. Sometimes a child likes to cuddle with a soft blanket and rub it to go to sleep. Importantly, that is not a sign of hyposensitivity or part of a sensory processing disorder.

However, imagine or a child who repeatedly goes around a room. A child who touches everything without an ability to stop. Or stop upon request. That is a problem. It is interrupting learning and play. It is interrupting typical development. As well, it is a sign of a sensory processing disorder.

It is important to know that hyposensitivity as part of a sensory processing disorder can be dangerous. For example, if a child is hyposensitive and does not feel pain like they should. That child might not feel a cut or a burn when they are hurt. Hyposensitivity is not a part of a sensory overload but it is serious.

Hypersensitivity

On the other hand, hypersensitivity is part of sensory overload. For example, a child who has difficulty with the feeling of clothing and thus has difficulty getting dressed shows hypersensitivity. As a result, that child can experience sensory overload from clothing.



Continued on page 13.

AUTISM, ANXIETY, AND SENSORY OVERLOAD CONTINUED....

It is also important to know that a toddler refusing to get dressed because they are exerting their independence or would rather play or do something else is not a child experiencing sensory overload. That is not hypersensitivity. That is normal for toddlers.

Hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity are opposites.

So where hypo means low or below. Hyper means over, above normal or high.

Children and adults who are **hypersensitive experience sensory overload**. Therefore, a child with hypersensitivity feels things from one or more senses too much. That child will often avoid them. And when exposed to too much of a sensory experience become overwhelmed. A child experiencing sensory overload might become upset, cry, and have a meltdown. Moreover, a child experiencing sensory overload may not be able to explain what they are feeling. They will not be able to necessarily explain why they are upset.

Sensory-friendly clothing for sensory overload, autism and anxiety.

Sensory-friendly clothing is helpful for both children and adults who experience sensory overload. In the instance, where the hypersensitivity is from the sense of touch.

Sensory-friendly clothing has things like no seams and no tags. It is often very soft. Children and adults who experience sensory overload may feel a tag, or a seam, roughness in a piece of fabric. They likely even feel a thread sticking out that other people do not notice at all.

Some clothing is identified as being sensory-friendly. Some mainstream clothing already incorporates no tags for example without even being labeled sensory-friendly.

SENSORY OVERLOAD AND AUTISM

People often wonder if sensory overload and autism are the same things. Sensory overload and autism are different, but as we've discussed, they are linked. Sensory overload is not the same as autism. However, people with autism often have sensory issues. They are more prone to experience sensory overload.

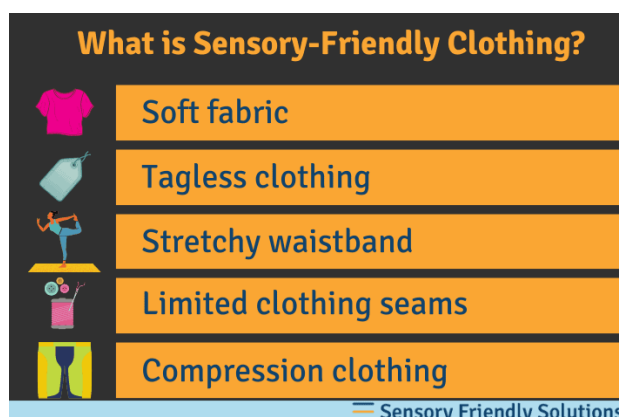
Many different words are used concerning sensory overload, in particular with autism. Words like **sensory sensitivities, hypersensitivity, sensory issues, sensory difficulties, sensory challenges, and sensory overload**. Moreover, these terms are used interchangeably but they do and can mean slightly different things.

Hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity are both used as part of the diagnosis of autism as cited above. However, it is important to know that hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity alone is not an indication of autism. Therefore, a child with autism might have hypersensitivity. Or that child experiences sensory overload as part of the diagnosis.

To clarify, not every child who has autism experiences sensory overload. Likewise, a child who experiences sensory overload does not necessarily have autism.

People with autism have other symptoms like poor social skills, poor emotional skills, difficulties or delays in communication, or restricted interests. Sensory overload can be part of the difficulties for an autistic person. Autism, anxiety, sensory overload, and the sensory key, in summary.

Continued on page 14.



AUTISM, ANXIETY, AND SENSORY OVERLOAD CONTINUED....

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SENSORY OVERLOAD AND AUTISM

Can a child experience sensory overload and not have autism?

Yes, a child can experience sensory overload and not have autism.

Can a child experience sensory overload and have autism?

Also yes. For some children, a sensory disorder, in particular hypersensitivity and sensory overload is part of their autism.

Can a child have autism and not experience sensory overload?

Yes, some children have autism but do not experience sensory overload at all.

Is sensory overload and autism the same thing?

No. Sensory overload, hypersensitivity, and autism are not the same thing.

Does sensory overload always happen with autism?

No. Not every child with autism experiences sensory overload.

But more children with autism experience sensory overload than children who do not have autism.

Is sensory overload just a type of autism?

No, sensory overload is different from autism.

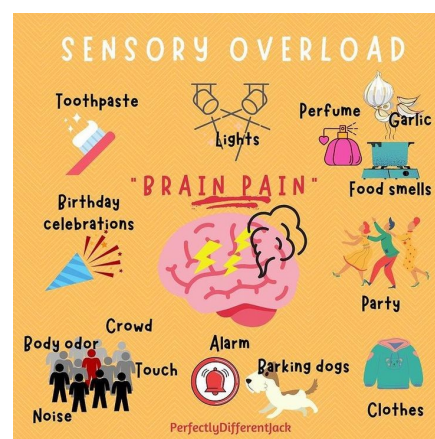
Sometimes they overlap.

Sometimes they do not overlap.

Is autism at the type of sensory overload?

Autism is not a type of sensory overload.

So the senses and sensory experience can add to anxiety. But going to sensory-friendly events or places helps. So choose sensory-friendly providers or products. In particular, that helps people whose anxiety is made worse by what they experience from their senses. And people with autism, who are also more likely to experience anxiety can have sensory differences. Again, choosing sensory-friendly environments and experiences can help ease sensory overload when that is a problem for the autistic person.



[Autism, Anxiety, and Sensory Overload: A Sensory Key - Sensory Friendly Solutions](#)

Sensory breaks

Calming	Alerting
Deep breath	Seat bounce
Blowing	Seat twists
Foot stomp	Head up/down
Animal walk	Arm swing
Wall push	Star jump
Wall sit	Jumping
Down dog	Jogging
Squeeze	Twist
Head press	Always finish with a calming exercise

Sensory Break Choices

Play Doh	Go for a Walk	Ride a Tricycle
Bounce	Pinch Putty	Fidget
Hug	Jump	Bounce

Sensory Break Choices

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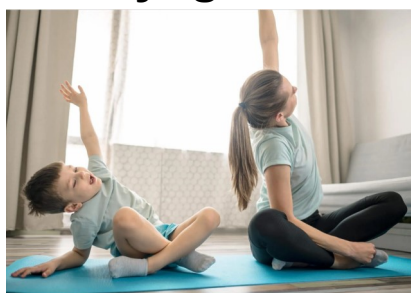
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MANAGING SENSORY OVERLOAD

Managing Sensory Overload With Yoga Poses for Kids

Lindsay Hall is a Certified Yoga Teacher (200 YYT) with additional training in prenatal yoga as well as yoga for the pelvic floor. In this blog post, Lindsay tells about the benefits of yoga poses for kids in relation to [sensory sensitivities](#).

I love yoga!



There, I said it. I don't really consider myself a true yogi, but I've experienced so many positive changes since yoga entered my life. I also love being an occupational therapist (OT). Yes, I do love lots of things, like coffee, reading, anything with salted caramel and chocolate, skiing. However, other than my family and friends, yoga and being an OT definitely rank near the top of my list of loves.

I'm an occupational therapist, with a love for yoga that developed after having my second child. I came to the revelation that yoga and OT, especially the sensory processing side of what occupational therapists do, seem to truly go hand and hand.

As I mentioned, I am a mom and it is my favorite occupation. I am a mom who introduced yoga to her children from an early age. One of my favorite videos of my children is of my sweet daughter at the age of two, flowing through her own Sun Salutation, in footed PJs. When her father asked what she was doing, she responded "I do OGA".

I also have a charming son, who, like his mother, can struggle with certain [sensory inputs](#). He doesn't like the feel of certain clothing and can be very particular when it comes to the gear needed for sports (skiing, running, soccer, hockey, to name a few). When it comes to [sleep](#), he has very specific needs, as do I. He craves movement and is always on the go. He can also get easily overwhelmed in certain situations and truly did not know how to calm himself, nor really did I, that is until we began yoga.

For many other children, kids with [autism, anxiety, and sensory overload](#) are linked and yoga definitely helps!

YOGA AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY FOR KIDS

Yoga is a practice that combines the body, the mind, and the spirit, through breath, movement, and meditation. In occupational therapy, our focus as clinicians is to enable individuals to participate in what they want and need to, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Both defined practice areas focus on the needs of the "whole person". How great is that?!

So, how is it that yoga is now an intervention I never thought of before? Even after working as an OT for over 15 years and 4 years spent in pediatrics. Luckily, the "aha" moment happened and it's my hope it can happen for many others.

Continued on page 16.

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MANAGING SENSORY OVERLOAD CONTINUED...

Ways to Incorporate Yoga to Manage Sensory Overload

Create peaceful and calming yoga environments



Begin with short and basic yoga classes



Utilize breath work



Practice different individual and partner poses



Incorporate mindfulness and meditation



Sensory Friendly Solutions

BREATH OR PRANAYAMA

First of all, the introduction of “pranayama” (breath work) as part of the practice of yoga has given my son the resources for his own sensory tool kit to be able to help self-calm and refocus. He uses breathing techniques at night as needed or when he is simply overwhelmed with the world around him. He knows now how to sit in quiet and simply focus on his breath when things may seem out of his control at home. (i.e., His sister did something to make him angry!)

Breath practice can regulate the heart rate, refocus the mind, increase blood flow, and most importantly, can move someone from

the “fight or flight” reaction that occurs when our sensory system is overloaded.

YOGA POSES FOR KIDS, OR ASANA

Learning various poses or “asanas” tap into my son’s need for movement. He is an athletically gifted kid and loves more advanced poses such as crow pose and handstand (a very difficult pose that I cannot seem to master!).

These yoga poses for kids, as well as so many others like downward dog, plank pose, and tree pose can provide individuals who need vestibular, tactile, and even proprioceptive feedback their body may be seeking. Partner poses, such as downward dog, and lizard lying on a rock provides deep pressure which is often found to be calming or soothing.



MEDITATION/MINDFULNESS OR DHYANA

One of the other key components of a yoga practice is meditation and mindfulness.

Mediation is our ability to connect or to disconnect from the world around us and focus on the mind and body. There is evidence that has found that meditation can turn off the stress responses in the body and change the structures in the brain to become more resilient to stress. This is rather impressive!

Here is an [article about mindfulness](#) I found to further explain this.

When we meditate, we focus on our breath and truly let go of the thoughts that might enter our brains. We can think of them as clouds floating in and floating out. We can acknowledge them, but not focus on them. This work towards clearing the mind and connecting with the breath can go along way in terms of self-regulation when someone is experiencing sensory overload.

My aunt, a long time yogi, has told me she can meditate for the length of a flight now and this has helped her cope with her anxiety of flying. I have seen children simply go into the easy pose (cross leg sitting) with hand on their knees and eyes closed to help center themselves in the middle of a room.

Meditation is such an amazing tool to have in one’s sensory toolbox.

Continued on page 17.

MANAGING SENSORY OVERLOAD CONTINUED...

OTHER BENEFITS OF YOGA FOR KIDS

In addition to breathing, yoga poses for kids, and meditation, there are many other wonderful features of yoga that I feel tap into the needs of both children and adults with sensory processing challenges.

The yoga class environment is typically calm and welcoming, with limited distractions and dim lighting. This tends to be very calming for the visual system. If someone were to practice at home, I would recommend a similar environment, maybe a quiet bedroom or study.

There is also no need for special clothing or equipment. This is a huge bonus for children, who like my son, finds any form of sporting equipment, (i.e. hockey or even skiing), very overwhelming to his tactile system. Additionally, lack of footwear in yoga allows for feet to obtain the tactile and proprioceptive feedback from the ground and mat.

Music is generally very calming at a slower tempo and helps regulate our auditory system. This helps to guide the breath and movement.

Research has found that children who practice yoga have a decrease in anxiety, stress and improved emotional regulation and sleep.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

When I teach my weekly yoga class to adults, my favorite part is the last 5-10 minutes. As I wrap up each class, I encourage everyone to find their favorite resting pose, most often Savasana. Each person has an eye pillow filled with lavender and flaxseed and a cozy blanket to cover up in.

The music is soothing and the lights are low. I travel around the room providing deep pressure touch to the shoulders or feet of those who are requesting it. I guide participants through a brief meditation. Then, I encourage them to find their breath and let all their thoughts go.

For those that have had an overload of stimuli or are in sensory overdrive, this is often the ultimate way to re-set the sensory system (which has **8 senses**).

I am so grateful when I watch my participants breathe deeply into relaxation and let go. This class truly taps into all the sensory systems, and the benefits of taking this time, even only 10 minutes, can change so much. I encourage everyone to give yoga a try. For people with sensory processing challenges, it is a wonderful, underutilized intervention.

Partaking in a yoga class and having the chance for the ultimate relaxation at the end of a class is so worth it. My son and daughter would agree.

<https://www.sensoryfriendly.net/yoga-poses-for-kids-with-sensory-needs/>



12 TIPS TO HELP WITH THE HOLIDAYS

TWELVE TIPS FOR HELPING INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM HAVE A HAPPY HOLIDAY SEASON

While many happily anticipate the coming holiday season, families of people on the autism spectrum also understand the special challenges that may occur when schedules are disrupted and routines broken. Our hope is that by following these few helpful tips, families may lessen the stress of the holiday season and make it a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved. The following tips were developed with input from the Autism Society, the Indiana Resource Center for Autism, Easter Seals Crossroads, the Sonya Ansari Center for Autism at Logan and the Indiana Autism Leadership Network..

1. Preparation is crucial for many individuals. At the same time, it is important to determine how much preparation a specific person may need. For example, if your son or daughter has a tendency to become anxious when anticipating an event that is to occur in the future, you may want to adjust how many days in advance you prepare him or her. Preparation can occur in various ways by using a calendar and marking the dates of various holiday events, or by creating a social story that highlights what will happen at a given event.

2. Decorations around the house may be disruptive for some. It may be helpful to revisit pictures from previous holidays that show decorations in the house. If such a photo book does not exist, use this holiday season to create one. For some it may also be helpful to take them shopping with you for holiday decorations so that they are engaged in the process. Or involve them in the process of decorating the house. And once holiday decorations have been put up, you may need to create rules about those that can and cannot be touched. Be direct, specific and consistent.

3. If a person with autism has difficulty with change, you may want to gradually decorate the house. For example, on the first day, put up the Christmas tree, then on the next day, decorate the tree and so on. And again, engage them as much as possible in this process. It may be helpful to develop a visual schedule or calendar that shows what will be done on each day.

4. If a person with autism begins to obsess about a particular gift or item they want, it may be helpful to be specific and direct about the number of times they can mention the gift. One suggestion is to give them five chips. They are allowed to exchange one chip for five minutes of talking about the desired gift. Also, if you have no intention of purchasing a specific item, it serves no purpose to tell them that maybe they will get the gift. This will only lead to problems in the future. Always choose to be direct and specific about your intentions the individual becoming anxious, calmly remove him/her from the anxiety-provoking setting immediately and take him/her into the calming environment.

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12 TIPS TO HELP WITH THE HOLIDAYS CONTINUED...

5. Teach them how to leave a situation and/or how to access support when an event becomes overwhelming. For example, if you are having visitors, have a space set aside for the child as his/her safe/calm space. The individual should be taught ahead of time that they should go to their space when feeling overwhelmed. This self-management tool will serve the individual into adulthood. For those who are not at that level of self-management, develop a signal or cue for them to show when they are getting anxious, and prompt them to use the space. For individuals with more significant challenges, practice using this space in a calm manner at various times prior to your guests' arrival. Take them into the room and engage them in calming activities (e.g., play soft music, rub his/her back, turn down the lights, etc.). Then when you notice the individual becoming anxious, calmly remove him/her from the anxiety-provoking setting immediately and take him/her into the calming environment.

6. If you are traveling for the holidays, make sure you have their favorite foods, books or toys available. Having familiar items readily available can help to calm stressful situations. Also, prepare them via social stories or other communication systems for any unexpected delays in travel. If you are flying for the first time, it may be helpful to bring the individual to the airport in advance and help him/her to become accustomed to airports and planes. Use social stories and pictures to rehearse what will happen when boarding and flying.



7. Be prepared and stand firm. Accept well-meaning but unwanted advice with the phrase, "I'll have to think about that," and smile.

8. Prepare a photo album in advance of the relatives and other guests who will be visiting during the holidays. Allow the person with autism access to these photos at all times and also go through the photo album with him/her while talking briefly about each family member.

9. Practice opening gifts, taking turns and waiting for others, and giving gifts. Role play scenarios with your child in preparation for him/her getting a gift they do not want. Talk through this process to avoid embarrassing moments with family members. You might also choose to practice certain religious rituals. Work with a speech language pathologist to construct pages of vocabulary or topic boards that relate to the holidays and family traditions.

10. Prepare family members for strategies to use to minimize anxiety or behavioral incidents, and to enhance participation. Help them to understand if the person with autism prefers to be hugged or not, needs calm discussions or provide other suggestions that will facilitate a smoother holiday season. If the individual becomes upset, it might also be helpful to coach others to remain calm and neutral in an effort to minimize behavioral outbursts.

11. If the person with autism is on special diet, make sure there is food available that he/she can eat. And even if they are not on a special diet, be cautious of the amount of sugar consumed. And try to maintain a sleep and meal routine.

12. Above all, know your loved one with autism. Know how much noise and other sensory input they can tolerate. Know their level of anxiety and the amount of preparation it may take. If you detect that a situation may be becoming overwhelming, help them find a quiet area in which to regroup. And there may be some situations that you simply avoid (e.g., crowded shopping malls the day after Thanksgiving). Know their fears and those things that will make the season more enjoyable for them.

<https://www.autism-society.org/holiday-tips/>

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SOCIAL STORIES

PREPARE FOR THE HOLIDAYS BY USING SOCIAL STORIES

Adapted from <https://behaviorexchange.com/prepare-for-thanksgiving-by-using-social-stories%E2%80%8B/>

Holiday traditions are different for every family. They can include football games, parades, copious amounts of food, travel, and visiting or hosting family.

These changes in daily routine can be stressful for children with autism, as they rely on predictability and routine. So how do we help autistic children navigate this season? One strategy is to use social narratives, also called Social Stories.

What is a social story?

The creator of Social Stories, Carol Gray, describes them as a “...*social learning tool that supports the safe and meaningful exchange of information between parents, professionals, and people with autism of all ages.*”

A social story is simply a narrative you create with words and images that shows your child how they should respond behaviorally to specific situations or to anticipated problems. Social stories teach social norms, improve social skills, and reduce anxiety by letting children know what to expect in social situations.

Social stories can be created on paper, or they can be in a digital format, whichever is best and readily accessible for your child.

When creating a social story, keep in mind the skills of your child. Some social stories may have written language, pictures, or even videos. Some social narratives can be spread out over separate pages and presented in a book format. Another option is to use a slide show or presentation software to create a social story on a tablet or cell phone. Applications for phones and tablets have even been developed specifically for social story creation.

Here are other important considerations for creating a social story:

1. Be specific. Build a story around a specific situation and a specific goal behavior. For example, it's Thanksgiving dinner and that means sitting at the table to eat.
2. Make it interesting so it gets your child's attention. Use pictures, icons, videos, and colors. Whatever they like and are able to understand. You can find clip art and photos in Google Images.



Continued on page 21.

<https://www.andnextcomesl.com/2018/03/free-social-story-template.html>

SOCIAL STORIES

3. Narrate the story as if from your child's point of view. "I'm going to Grandma's for Thanksgiving."
4. Use simple steps in describing events and behavior expectations. Answer the basic where, when, who, what, how, and why questions to develop your story.
5. Stay positive! Use phrases describing what to DO instead of what NOT TO DO. Positive language will encourage your child to follow the story as well as the behavior expectations.

Once you've created a story, review it repeatedly with your child. Practice the skills that are described in the story. If the goal is to sit at the table with everyone, start by reviewing the story with your child, then sitting at the table with the story. And don't forget to take the story to the place where they are expected to exhibit the behavior they have been practicing.

The most important part of implementing social stories or any other strategy is to be aware of your child's limits and abilities. Don't expect perfection. Just make the experience as predictable as possible, and allow your child the opportunity to enjoy the festivities in their own way.

FREE HOLIDAY SOCIAL STORIES:

Thanksgiving: <http://www.positivelyautism.com/free/thanksgiving.html> (can be personalized)

Christmas: http://www.positivelyautism.com/free/unit_christmas.html (can be personalized)

Hanukkah : <https://jteach.org/project/hanukkah-social-story/>

SOCIAL STORY APP:

Social Story Creator and Library: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/social-story-creator-library/id588180598>



SOCIAL STORIES ONLINE:

Autism Little Learners: <https://autismlittlelearners.com/the-social-story-library/> (free)

And Next Comes L:

<https://www.andnextcomesl.com/p/printable-social-stories.html> (free and for cost social narrative books and videos, plus a free template to make your own)

Some additional Free Social Stories:

<https://www.autismhomeschoolsuccess.com/single-post/2019/12/15/christmas-social-narratives-to-help-your-child-prepare-for-the-holiday>

VISUALS



When a child is dysregulated they can choose a tool to help calm their body.

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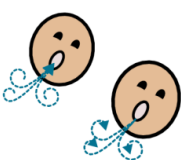




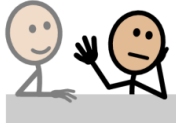


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VISUALS	
 Talk it out 	 Take a breath 
Take a break 	Sigh Big 
 Stop and raise hand, ask for help 	Ignore 
Count to 10 slowly 	Read a book 



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