

## Challenging behaviour, sensory processing issues and communication



### ***Responses to challenging behaviour, communication and SPD***

***How can we help pupils who present with sensory processing issues and challenging behaviour to develop more effective communication? Can we develop a holistic approach, and what might this look like?***

In the workshop, we considered learners with MSI who have both sensory processing issues and challenging behaviour. Students with these needs may respond challengingly to triggers such as

- being ill, in pain or tired – having fewer resources to deal with their environment
- changes – beginning or finishing an activity, changes in routine – stress and anxiety
- being rushed, coping with sudden or loud noise, being engrossed in an activity for a long period – getting overloaded

The same factors will also hinder communication development.

Vestibular or proprioceptive problems will in themselves also affect communication – for example, students who need greater pressure to register sensations may break switches by hitting them too hard and/or may have parallel problems using signs (especially on-body signs) and objects of reference.

So how do we support communication development for these students?

We know how to adapt students' learning environments (the places, objects, people and activities they experience) to take account of their visual, hearing and tactile needs, but we are often less confident about vestibular and proprioceptive approaches. Specialist OTs are the experts here and we can find ourselves patching recommended strategies onto students' programmes rather than integrating them.

In the workshop, we discussed the strategies that participants have used to build sensory processing approaches into the overall learning environment, with the aim of

- reducing sensory overload,

- maintaining appropriate arousal levels and
- supporting students in developing more effective communication.

The ones suggested are listed (in no particular order) below.

- ❖ Providing rest breaks between activities.
- ❖ Alternating activities which place high demands on sensory processing (through vision, hearing, touch, balance and/or proprioception) with less demanding activities.
- ❖ Reading students' signals and adjusting our responses – for example, slowing the pace of interaction.
- ❖ Daily massage/pressure routines – simple routines which student-staff pairs can work together to extend or repeat, and which may become a way for students to indicate that they need help to calm.
- ❖ Movement breaks built into the timetable – for example, using a soft play room on arrival at school after a long bus journey.
- ❖ Sensory strategy 'charts' from which students can choose the strategy they think will help – these may be charts, collections of symbols or photos on a choice board or a collection of objects.



*library of symbols – two or three options from these put onto choice board*

- ❖ Sensory drama sessions in which each part of the drama offers vestibular or proprioceptive input – for example, exploring a scary castle and
  - being a bat (stretching a body sock over your arms and flapping)
  - meeting a skeleton (pressure on different joints in turn)
  - finding a huge spider (stretching a resistance band by pulling your hands apart – furry legs attached to the band)
- ❖ Using props giving pressure and other sensory input within other school activities.

- ❖ If students have individual base areas, furnishing these with the equipment they need – opportunities to lie on a mattress or sit fully supported on a beanbag, or pull on items attached to a frame, or...



*wood and metal frame, 1.5m by 1m, bolted to wall of student's personal base area*

- ❖ Students packing up and carrying their own resources from session to session in a backpack.
- ❖ Cleaning the environment – vacuuming, cleaning tables, cleaning windows...
- ❖ Building choice-making into sensory activities set up by OTs – for example, skin-brushing.
- ❖ Using bath massage mitts to stroke down arms.
- ❖ Adjusting school transport routines to make them more predictable and less stressful for students.
- ❖ Ensuring clinical and other unfamiliar settings know about students' needs beforehand; attending with families if possible to provide support.
- ❖ Limiting the number of peers in peer interaction to avoid overload.
- ❖ Providing movement breaks by asking students to run errands – for example, photocopying (at the most distant photocopier).
- ❖ Adjusting routes around school so that students pass (and can choose to use) large equipment, for example a zipwire.
- ❖ Opening bags of crisps by clapping and popping them!