

Sensory Integration

What is Sensory Integration?

Sensory Integration (SI) is the process that allows us to make sense of the world, and interact appropriately within it. We have sensory receptors within our eyes, ears, skin, mouth, nose, inner ear, muscles and joints, which allow us to take in information about the environment. This information is sent to the brain where it is processed, before an appropriate response is actioned.

Our senses work together to form a picture of who we are, where we are and what is happening around us. They are the building blocks for all skills – helping us to learn how to use our bodies effectively to do the things we want or need to do. When our sensory processing is not working effectively, this can lead to all sorts of physical and functional difficulties, such as poor coordination, increased sensitivities to touch or sound, difficulties with arousal levels (too low or too high), and sensory seeking behaviours such as rocking, flapping, bouncing and spinning. Many of our students, particularly those with ASD, experience these difficulties. In fact, studies estimate that 45 - 96% of children with ASD demonstrate sensory difficulties.

The term 'Sensory Integration' is used to describe the theory, assessment and intervention associated with this approach. Sunfield's therapeutic work and our sensory integration suite comply with Ayres' esteemed pioneering guidelines for sensory integration therapy

How does Sunfield help children with Sensory Integration difficulties?

Sunfield is privileged to have a dedicated Sensory Integration suite, designed and equipped by specialists. We have an on-site team of full-time staff trained in this specialist therapeutic approach. Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT) aims to improve the way students process sensory input, with a view to improving functional performance. Sessions are child-led and focused on play; appealing to the child's intrinsic desire to engage, develop and learn. We tailor each session to the child's individual needs, selecting specific pieces of specialist equipment from our range of state-of-the-art resources. Activities are designed to provide each child with the 'just right' challenge, where abilities are playfully challenged, but the child is always successful.

Alongside sensory integration therapy, students have a 'sensory diet', which is an individualised programme of sensory and movement activities designed to be facilitated throughout the waking day - within both care and education settings. Specialist equipment and activities are selected, based on the sensory processing needs identified in the assessment of the student. The aim of the sensory diet is to provide regular sensory input throughout the day, to promote more regulated arousal levels, enabling the child to focus, engage, learn and rest, to a more optimal degree. This can also help to reduce sensory seeking behaviours, which can interfere with daily life.

What is the difference between sensory rooms and sensory integration suites?

Sensory rooms are designed purely for sensory stimulation but do not require active engagement. The focus is usually on one sense at a time, rather than an integrated approach. The sensory room at Sunfield, for example, contains a heated water bed, music, bubble tubes and lights, which the students can experience for relaxation and enjoyment, but do not necessarily need to interact with. By contrast, the sensory integration suite utilises specialist suspended equipment and activities are designed to provide a multi-sensory, interactive movement experience specifically, aimed at enhancing the individual student's sensory processing skills.

Further reading

Ayres, A. J. (2014) *Love Jean: Inspiration for Families Living With Dysfunction of Sensory Integration*.

Ayres, A. J. (2005) *Sensory Integration and the Child: Understanding Hidden Sensory Challenges*. 25th Anniversary Edition

Ben-Sasson, A., Hen, L., Fluss, R., Cermak, S. A., Engel-Yeger, B., & Gal, E. (2009). A meta-analysis of sensory modulation symptoms in individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 39(1), 1–11.

Lane, A. E., Young, R. L., Baker, A. E. Z., & Angley, M. T. (2010). Sensory processing subtypes in autism: Association with adaptive behaviour. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 40(1), 112–122.

Miller, L. J. (2014) *Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder*.

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