

Sensory Seeking and Avoiding Examples

This implementation tool lists both typical and potentially problematic behaviors that can be seen as adaptations to sensory seeking or sensory avoiding in eight sensory areas, as well as suggested replacement behaviors to provide students with alternative ways to meet their seeking or avoiding needs. These are additional classroom supports (not replacements) to increase students' access to learning and do not to replace a sensory profile performed by a qualified occupational therapist.

Gustatory					
Seeking			Avoiding		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
Chews on pencils, nails, clothing. Craves spicy, hot foods.	Sucks thumb (social stigma). Licks or ingests inedible or toxic items. Chews nails until bloody or infected. Bites other students.	Provide candy to suck or apple sauce/pudding to eat through a straw. Provide or allow gum, mints, fruit, fruit roll-ups, spicy Cheetos, breath mint strips. Provide chew sticks or water bottle to bite.	Selective eating. Avoids certain textures. Gag reflex engages easily (e.g., trouble swallowing pills).	Refuses to eat any foods, weight loss. Refuses to ever brush teeth.	Partner with parent or caregiver to provide preferred food, protein shakes. Encourage student to try one bite of a new food. Avoid power struggle.
Olfactory					
Seeking			Avoiding		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
Smells glue sticks, markers or dry erasers. Enjoys essential oils, perfumes, scented candles.	Smells bad things (e.g., sweaty armpits, digs in pants and then smells fingers). Eats/drinks dangerous items due to not noticing noxious odor.	Provide scented playdough, paint, markers or essential oils. Explore arousing scents (e.g., basil, garlic, lemon, coffee) and calming scents (e.g., almond, vanilla, cinnamon).	Sensitive to perfumes, lotions or other scents. May complain about odors not evident to others.	Tells other people they stink. Avoids public places.	Allow to carry handkerchief with a preferred smell. Breath through clean bandana. Teach socially appropriate way to leave area to avoid a smell.

Sensory Seeking and Avoiding Examples

Auditory					
Seeking			Avoiding		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
Seeks out loud noises (e.g., blasts radio in car). Enjoys white noise, ocean sounds.	Makes constant noise. Blurts out in class. Fails to monitor own voice.	Engage in call and response. Use rhymes and chants. Provide sound machines. Run a fan, air conditioner or water.	Covers ears and is sensitive to sound. Startles easily. Occasionally asks people to be quiet.	Runs out of room to avoid noise. Covers ears in distress, crying. Feels people are yelling, demands people “shut up.” Distracted from work by small sounds (e.g., pencil scratching).	Provide ear plugs, noise cancelling head phones, head phones with soothing or preferred sounds. Allow to go to a quieter space to complete work.
Visual					
Seeking			Avoiding		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
Enjoys high graphics video games. Seeks bright objects or lights. Moves or shakes head during writing. Seeks visual stimulation (e.g., fans, spinning patterns).	Has difficulty focusing on stationary items. Frequently loses place on page.	Use visual schedules, color matching activities, reading guide, beanbag toss, mazes. Allow drawing, painting.	Averts eye contact. Prefers low lighting. Squints. Withdraws from group movement activities. Rubs eyes.	Frequently keeps eyes closed or puts head down on desk. Frequent headaches, dizziness or nausea when using sight.	Provide eye breaks. Use meditation or visualization with eyes closed. Reduce clutter.

Sensory Seeking and Avoiding Examples

Tactile

Seeking			Avoiding		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
<p>Touches surfaces, runs hands along walls. May lean into others or against surfaces. Prefers tight clothes. Consistently dirty. Craves vibration.</p>	<p>Lacks personal space boundaries. Under responsive to pain. Aggressive with other children - may push or hit.</p>	<p>Use tight squeeze (e.g., bear hug), hand massage, heavy work. Have student wear snug, athletic top. Teach personal bubble using hula hoop/other visual cue. Provide fidget toys, dough, spinners, clay, finger paints. Teach body scan to identify pain.</p>	<p>Avoids touch (i.e., not a “hugger”). Avoids certain clothing or textures. Avoids messy activities (e.g., finger painting). Does not like to be barefoot, toe walks.</p>	<p>Flinches at touch. Overly responsive to pain. Overly distressed by seams, tags and other textures. Refuses hair brushing and bathing. Anxiety with light touch or in crowds. Refuses stand in line.</p>	<p>Give advance warning of touch. Approach student from the front. Give language to set personal boundaries (e.g., “I’m not a big hugger”). Have student dress in layers. Provide safe area in class or extra space.</p>

Vestibular

Seeking			Avoiding		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
<p>Has poor balance. Bounces, rocks. Prefers to hang upside-down, or off edge of chair or couch.</p>	<p>Spins frequently. Falls out of seat. Cannot keep chair legs on the floor. Unable to sit still. Runs everywhere. Takes unsafe risks.</p>	<p>Use yoga, swinging, alternative seating, and contained movement activities (e.g., slow marching). Provide rocking chair.</p>	<p>Is sedentary. Dislikes elevators and escalators. Dislikes feet to leave the floor.</p>	<p>Complains of being dizzy with slight movement. Does not want or is fearful of movement (e.g., playground equipment). Avoids all stairs.</p>	<p>Use deep breathing and mindfulness. Teach small, slow steps to movement (e.g., let feet stay on the ground).</p>

Proprioception

Sensory Seeking and Avoiding Examples

Seeking			Avoiding		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
Walks heavily. Struggles with motor planning and coordinating movements.	Too much or too little pressure when holding a cup or pencil. Too rough with objects.	Use wall or chair pushups, jumping in place. Provide hand held pencil sharpener.	Seems lazy or lethargic. Avoids active things. Prefers to sit still. Lack of coordination. Bad posture.	Withdraws. Clumsy (e.g., falls, bumps into things).	Use movement activities isolating one muscle group, slowly adding additional muscle groups.
Interoception					
Over Responsive			Under Responsive		
<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>	<i>Typical</i>	<i>Problematic</i>	<i>What educators can do?</i>
Feels pain more intensely and acutely for longer periods of time - major response to a minor incident.	Overreacts to minor “hurts.” Panics near lunchtime or when hungry. Unexplained “meltdowns.”	Use calming words and reflective listening (i.e., affirm feelings). Use deep breathing and mindfulness.	Disconnected from feelings - “How do you feel?” is answered by “I don’t know.” Cannot discern emotional from physical pain.	Confused (i.e., cannot discern a body signal, does not respond to pain until overwhelmed). Self-harming behaviors. Dehydration. Malnutrition.	Use visual schedule, body scan, and mindfulness.