

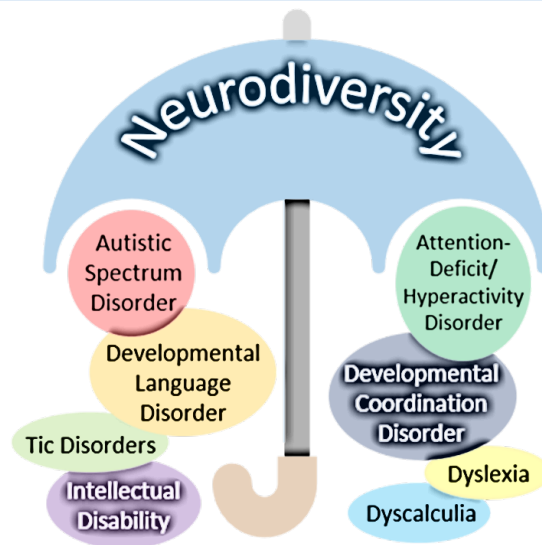


Mental Health Support Team

Supporting neurodivergent students with anxiety

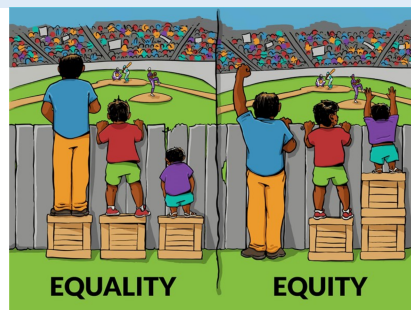


Supporting neurodivergent students with anxiety



“Instead of labelling people with deficits or disorders, when we use the term neurodiversity, we take a balanced view of an individual’s unique strengths and challenges. Many ‘challenges’ neurodivergent people face are more to do with the environment and systems they are placed in, often designed by a majority population”

[Introduction | Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#)



Autistic people have many strengths:

Honest, a strong sense of fairness & justice, loyal and trustworthy, sincere, non judgemental, kind, accepting of people who are different, dependable, conscientious, creative, think outside the box, level-headed, logical, problem solvers, great at entertaining themselves, are focused and persistent.

ADHDers or people with ADHD may be **creative, out of the box thinkers** who may **struggle with boring** tedious or mundane tasks. Many ADHDers work in creative and sociable roles. ADHDers can **excel when challenged** (especially if hyperfocusing on a project they are passionate about)





Social, emotional and mental health difficulties

What we might see:

- Find relationships difficult to navigate
- Withdrawn and isolated
- Behaviours viewed of by others as challenging

What might be underneath:

- Can indicate underlying mental health difficulties e.g. anxiety or low mood.
- Can also be a result of unmet need e.g. sensory, communication, learning needs

Anxiety - Being Neurodivergent in a neurotypical world

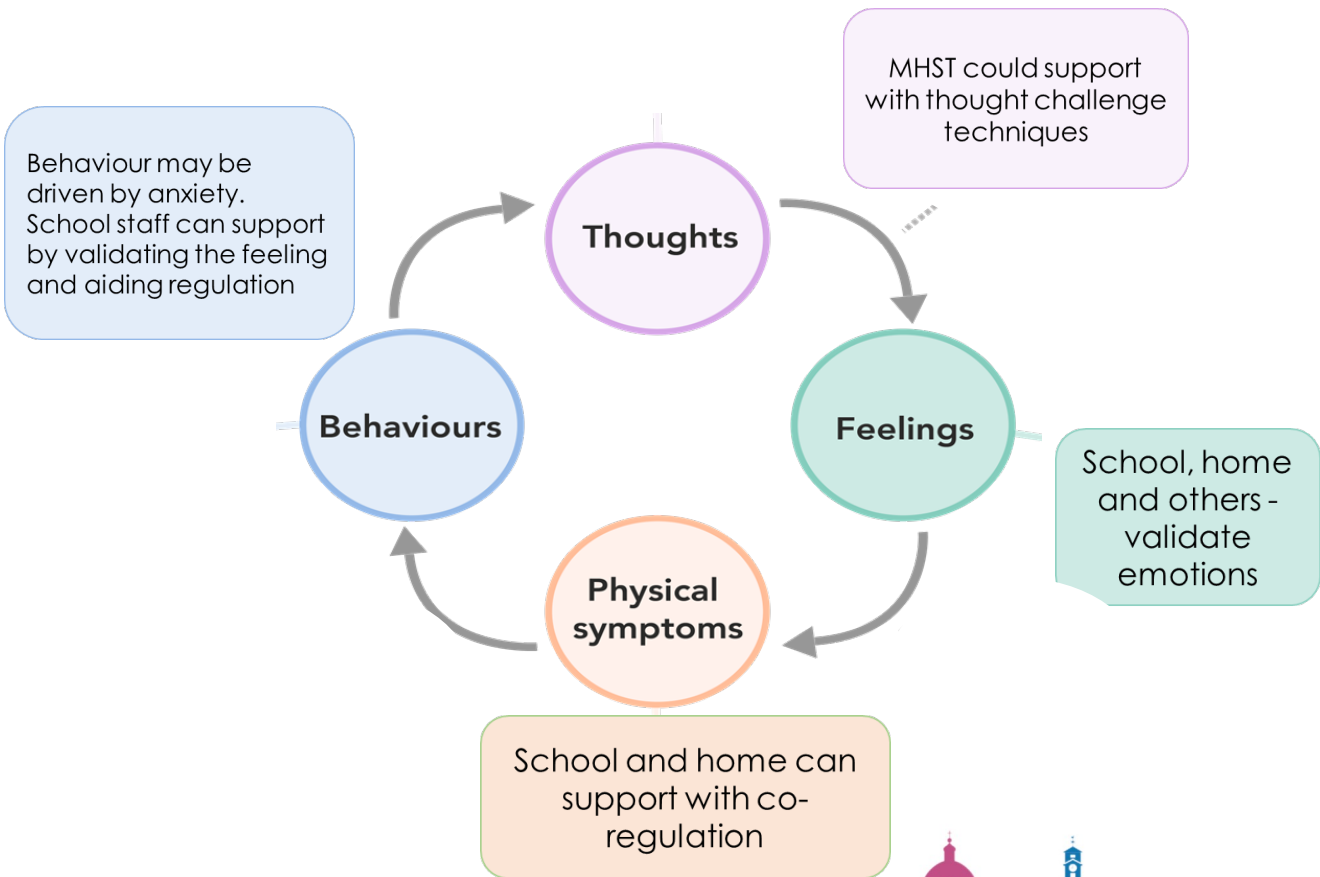
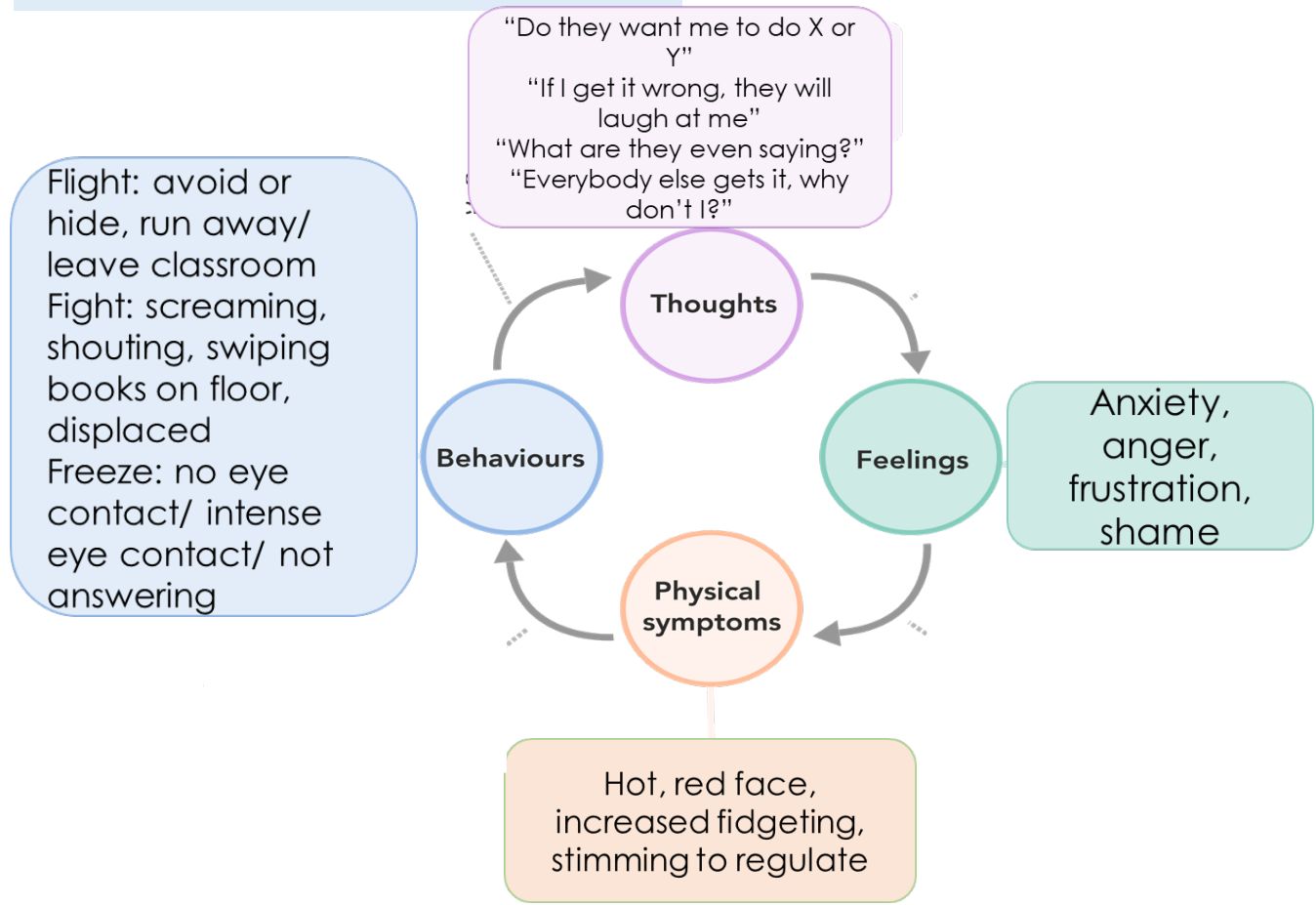
- Navigating social-communication patterns
- Difficulties with time management
- Overlooking details/ very detail focused
- Losing or forgetting things easily
- Difficulties with organising tasks or executive functioning
- Sensory based anxiety or sensory overload
- Difficulties falling asleep or waking up on neurotypical sleep schedules





The Cycle of Anxiety

Communication



Window of Tolerance

When we are anxious or experiencing sensory distress then we are much more likely to move out of our window of tolerance. It is normal for every human to have limits to the sensory information we can process. However, neurodivergent people process sensory information differently and so can reach their tolerance much more quickly .

Fight/Flight



Angry, anxious, panicky, confused, lack of focus, hypervigilant

Safe



Calm, have energy, focussed, connected, feeling in control

Freeze

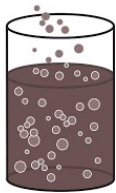


Shutdown, numbness, low mood, feeling out of your body, withdrawn, disconnected

How to help

School staff can support children and young people by co-regulating with them. They may need support and guidance, as self regulating can be difficult. You can create a personal, simple plan, create a visual.

1 -



I'm feeling fizzy

2 -



I need to stop

3 -

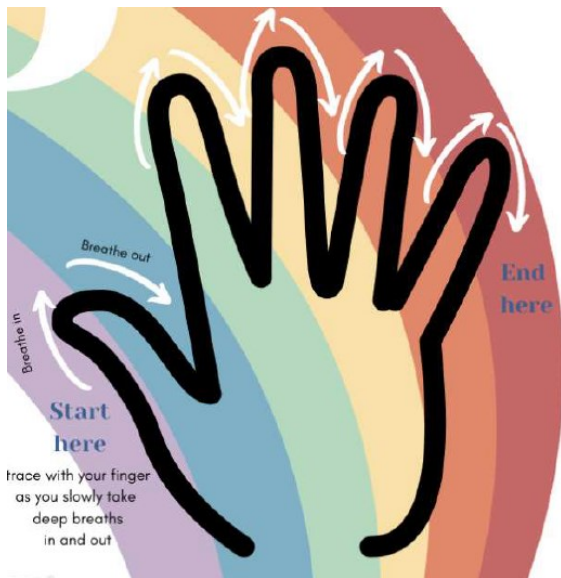


Go to quiet corner

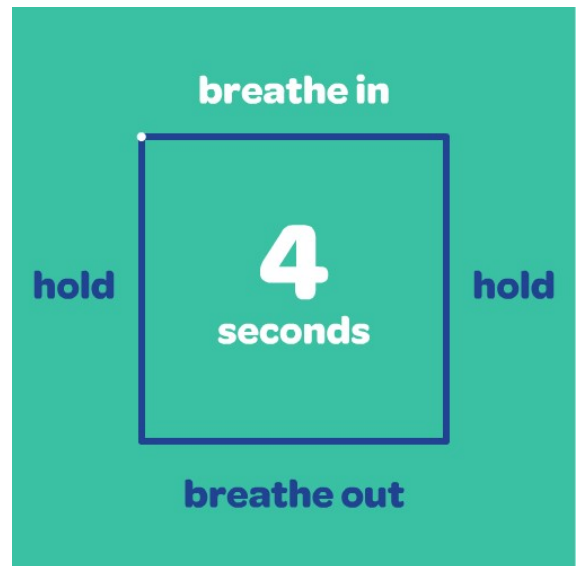


Strategies for emotional regulation

Finger breathing



Box breathing



Hot chocolate breathing

HOT CHOCOLATE BREATHING

Quietly breathe in through your nose as if you are smelling a mug of hot chocolate or mint tea. Exhale by blowing through your mouth as if you are cooling it off. Repeat a few times until you notice your body relaxing.



Bumblebee breath

Bumblebee Breathing

Sitting comfortably, gently place the tips of your pointer finger in your ears and close your eyes.

Breathe in through your nose and then hum quietly as you slowly breathe out.



Strategies for emotional regulation

54321

Room search

The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

Ease your state of mind in stressful moments.

Acknowledge 5 things that you can see around you.

Acknowledge 4 things that you can touch around you.

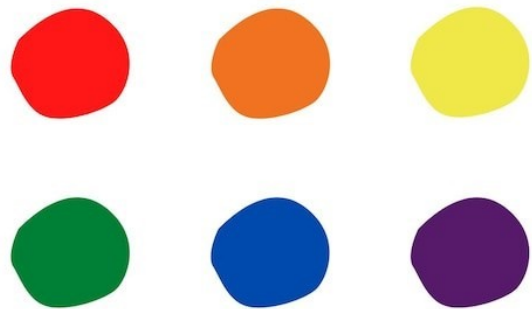
Acknowledge 3 things that you can hear around you.

Acknowledge 2 things that you can smell around you.

Acknowledge 1 thing that you can taste around you.

#DeStressMonday DeStressMonday.org

Grounding Technique



Look around and find the colors of the rainbow in order

Object focus

observe

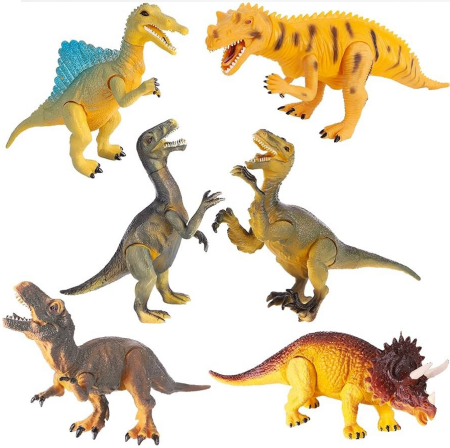
describe an object in detail: color, texture, shadow, light, shapes





Strategies for emotional regulation

Distractions



Special interest



Movement



Reading/ Colouring/ Sorting



Key signs to look out for- created by Ruby (MHST Youth Involvement Champion)

Autism:

How to spot it:

- Special interests
- Likes being alone
- Feels outcast often
- Social anxiety
- Selective mutism
- Particularly shines in a certain subject
- Seems more 'mature' or more 'immature' for their [age](#)
- Uses quite complex words for their age
- Dissociates often
- Sensory issues with uniform
- Honest/blunt
- Meltdowns
- Shutdowns
- Imitation of others
- Tiptoeing
- Executive dysfunction
- Collection and organisation of objects
- Stimming/fidgeting
- Eye contact irregularity
- Sensitive to sound/temperature/lights
- Dislikes sudden changes
- Pushing back against conforming/PDA
- Overwhelmed in clouds/large groups



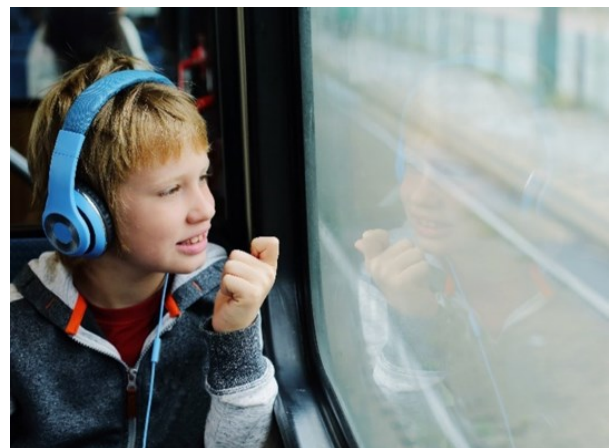
Key signs to look out for- created by Ruby (MHST Youth Involvement Champion)

Autism:

What can be done to help:

- Time out
- Sensory room
- Regular check ins
- Sensory aids
- Speak literally
- Identifying emotions
- Drawing feelings
- Pre-warn of sudden change
- Establish clear routine
- Visual plans of the day/lesson
- Warn about group work in class
- Communication cards
- Work with parents

How Autism & ADHD 'stereotypically' look:



Key signs to look out for- created by Ruby (MHST Youth Involvement Champion)

ADHD:

How to spot it:

- Fidgeting/stimming
- Lack of attention span
- Hyperactivity
- Impulsiveness
- PDA (Persistent Drive for Autonomy)
- Avoiding work
- Easily distracted
- Difficulties with social boundaries
- Sensitive to noise
- Meltdowns
- Tiptoeing
- Sensory seeking
- Impatient
- Forgetful
- Executive dysfunction
- Mental health/mood struggles
- Can be easily irritable

How Autism & ADHD can look:



What can be done to help:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| • Sensory aids | Something to fidget with in class |
| • Movement breaks in lessons | Seating plan to minimise distraction |
| • Regular check ins | Focus on the positives |
| • Communication cards | Work with parents |
| • Try not to label them | Timer for work to improve motivation to focus |
| • Give clear instructions | |





Masking can include:

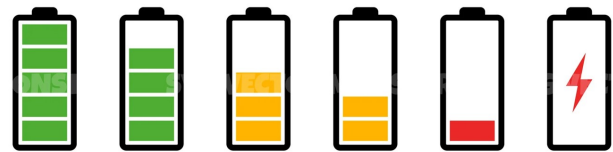
- Observing and copying other people’s behaviour
- Forcing themselves to make eye contact
- Forcing themselves to vary their facial expression
- Copying the body language of the person they are interacting with
- Preparing and memorizing scripts for conversations
- Forcing themselves to hide sensory sensitivities
- Refraining from stimming and discussing special interests



It takes a lot of energy for an ND person to get through their day. Their ability to cope can be influenced by their sensory environment, how much sleep they had, as well as how stressed or anxious they may be feeling. It is common to feel **social exhaustion** or that your battery is drained.

By the time they get home from school they may feel as if they’re ready to explode or shutdown. They may not be able to tell their parent/ carer how they are feeling.

Energy Management is vital, a day of draining activities will require more rest and recovery activities to restore the balance .



Ways to shake (autistic) burnout



- Consistently provide positive feedback for the things the young person can do
- Acknowledge their experiences and explore reduced timetables
- Explore adaptations- these may be different to or additional to previous reasonable adjustments
- Remove/reduce time limits if possible
- Acknowledge that this may take time for them to feel full back to themselves



Providing a neuro-affirming learning environment:

Meaningful engagement with autism/ADHD/neurodiversity awareness weeks

Considering a young person's individual needs e.g. *reflecting on a young person's sensory profile*

Consistently consider the 'small' things

Clear class rules. Offer students the chance create class rules at beginning of term and review these rules at the beginning of each term to see if anything needs to be added.

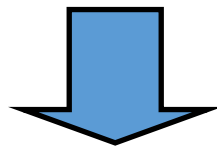
Encourage students to start to identify their learning needs and discuss these with them

Clear expectations and learning objectives provided at beginning of lessons

"learning mascots" available for all students

Use clear, concise language when offering support.
Provide different options if open questions do not seem helpful

Encourage creative approaches to homework and assignments that incorporate a universal design for learning



Reduces stigma

Promotes inclusivity

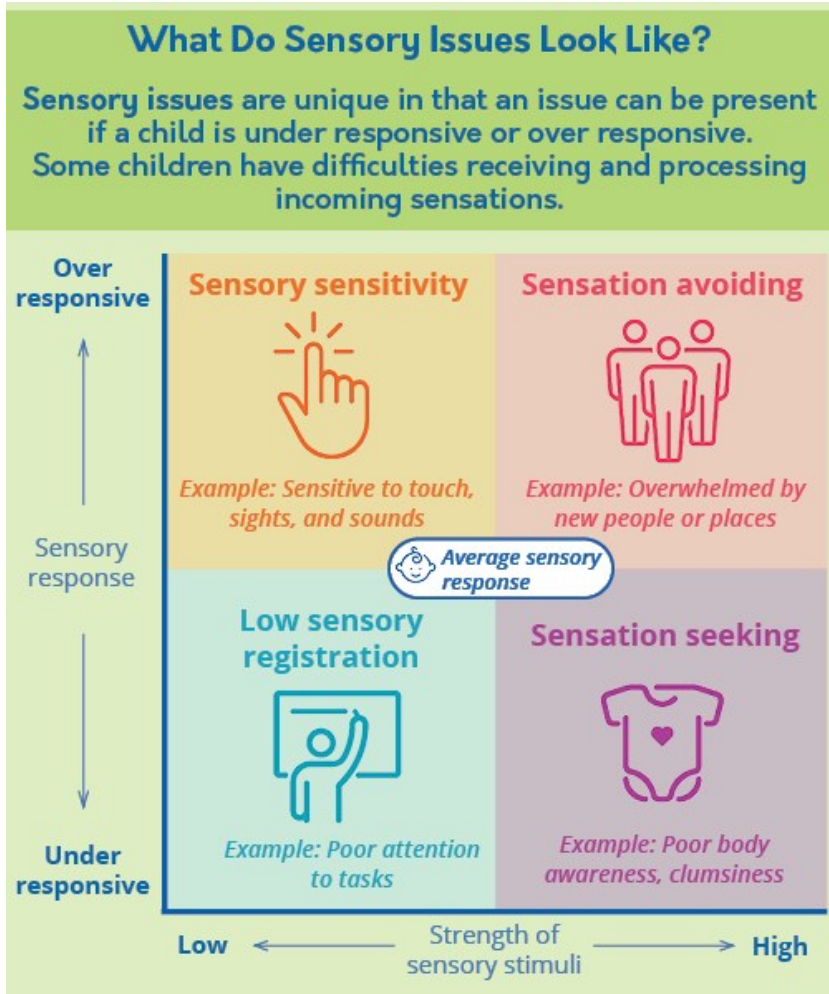
Celebrates difference

Feel more seen, validated and safe










Sensory









What is Proprioception?

Proprioception is the **body awareness sense**. It helps with:

Knowing where our body parts are	 Scratching an itch and knowing where to scratch without looking	 Touching hands to feet, also known as "finding your feet"
Understanding how much force to use	 Using a pencil with the proper amount of force	 Holding a delicate item without breaking it
Coordination between body parts and senses	 Riding a bike and coordinating the movements to stay on track	 Using hand-eye coordination to catch a ball




What is Interoception?

Interoception is the **internal sense**. It helps with:

Understanding our body's needs	 Recognizing feelings of hunger	 During potty training, knowing when to use the bathroom
Knowing how to appropriately address needs	 Sensing pain and looking for ways to relieve it	 Scratching an itch with the proper amount of force
Regulating emotions and controlling behavior	 Feeling sensations of anxiety and calming self	 Avoiding temper tantrums by meeting basic needs

What is the Vestibular Sense?

Vestibular is the **balance sense**. It helps with:

Moving smoothly	 Walking up and down stairs without tripping	 Riding a bike or skateboard
Maintaining a sense of balance	 Riding in a moving vehicle	 Rocking back and forth
Sitting and standing upright	 Sliding down a slide and staying upright	 Maintaining upright posture



Sensory profile activity


Smells that I find too much/ too difficult:

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Smells that I find enjoyable / calming:

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Tastes that I find too much/ too difficult:

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Tastes that I find enjoyable / calming:

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Touch that I find too much/ too difficult:

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Touch that I find enjoyable / calming:

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Sights that I find too much/ too difficult:

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Sights that I find enjoyable / calming:

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Sounds that I find too much/ too difficult:

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Sounds that I find enjoyable / calming:

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Body signals that I find too much/ too difficult:

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Body signals that I find enjoyable / calming:

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Body awareness that is too difficult:

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Body awareness that is easy/ calming:

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Balancing that I find too much/ too difficult:

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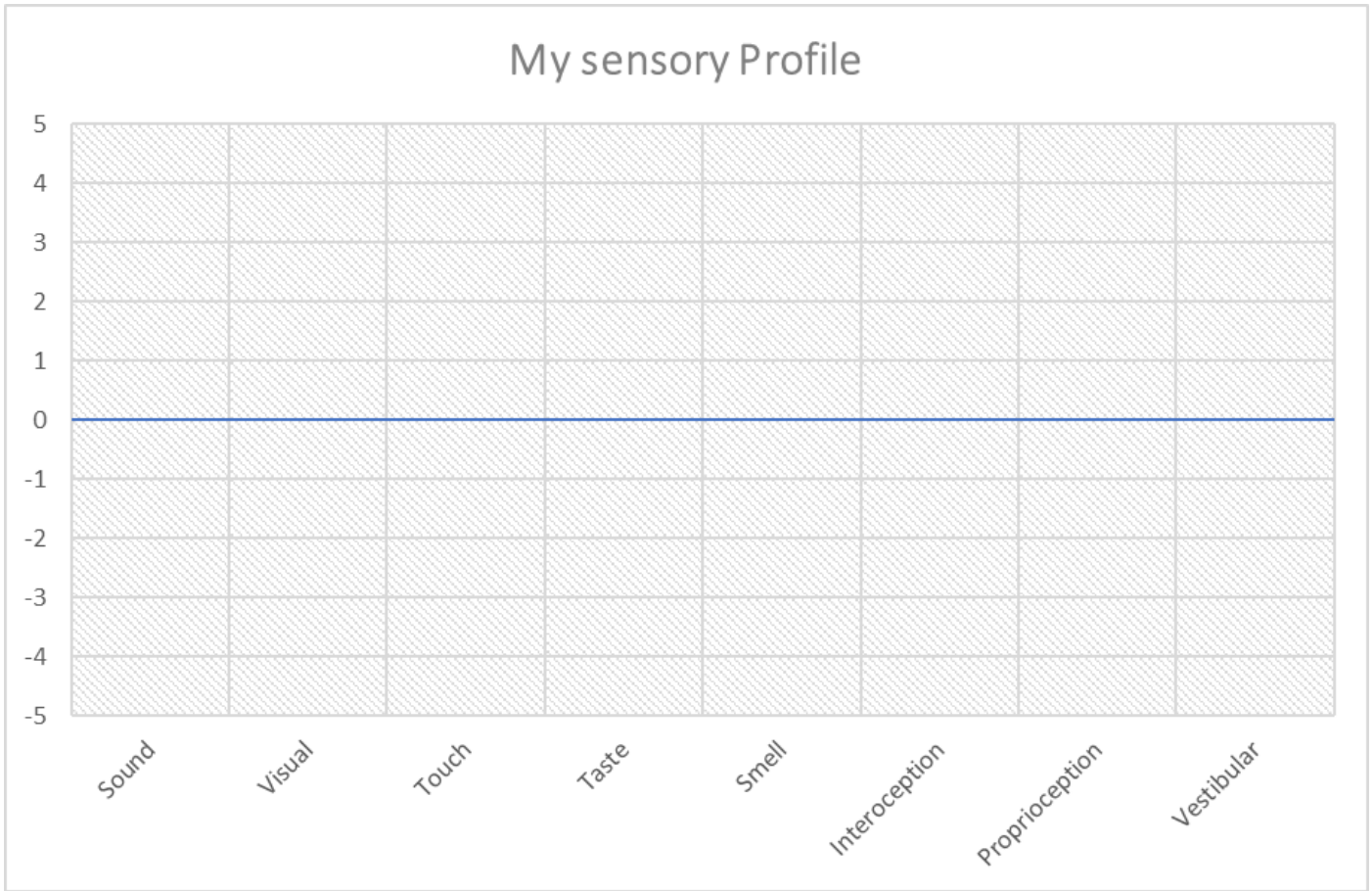
Balancing that I find enjoyable / calming:

.....
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.....
.....





My sensory Profile



0 to 5: Hypersensitive

- 1 mild or very little sensitivity
- 2 Some noticeable sensitivity
- 3 Moderate sensitivity
- 4 Very sensitive
- 5 Extreme sensitivity

0 to -5: Hyposensitive

- 1 mild or very little sensory seeking
- 2 some noticeable sensory seeking
- 3 Moderate sensory seeking
- 4 Very sensory seeking
- 5 Extreme sensory seeking

Hypo sensitive = under sensitive
 Hyper sensitive = over sensitive



Brain breaks

Simon says /
follow the leader



Seated side bend



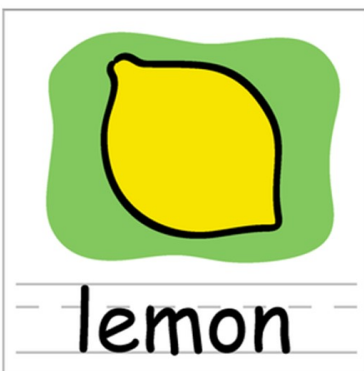
Heel drops








Invisible pictures

In groups of two, have one student “draw a picture in the air while their partner guesses what it is.” To give students a starting point, provide them with categories like foods, animals, or places, and then allow their creative minds to lead the way. For a bit of extra help, allow the guessing partner to ask one or two yes or no questions that will provide them with crucial context.

Making Lemonade



-  Reach up to the tree and pick a lemon with each hand.
-  Squeeze the lemons hard to get all the juice out.
-  Throw the lemons on the floor and relax your hands.
-  Then repeat, until we have enough juice for lemonade.
-  After your last squeeze and throw, shake out your hands to relax!





More Support



Mountain Molehill App

