

# SENSORY SUPPORTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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## HYPO-SENSORY VS. HYPER-SENSORY

**Hypo-sensory** individuals are like a really big cup of water that has a hole in the bottom, you can never fill them up.

- They do not have enough sensory input coming into the brain in order to properly connect information and respond to a given command or demand.
- This lack of information will lead to frustration and anxiety as they do not have "all the pieces of the puzzle" in order to do what is being asked of them.

**Hyper-sensory** individuals are like a very small cup of with too much water being poured in too fast and most of it is spilling over.

- The sensory input to the brain is coming in too fast and furious, causing a "traffic jam" in the brain.
- This will lead to the inability to process all the information and a feeling of being overwhelmed, frustration, and anxiety.

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## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT SENSORY SYSTEMS?

- There are eight main sensory systems.
- Five of them are referred to as the "far senses" in which incoming information to the brain comes from outside our body.
  - They are: touch, olfactory (smell), auditory (sound), visual, and taste.
- Then there are three "unknowns" which are called "near senses". This is sensory information that comes from inside of our body and sends sensory messages about how well our body is operating to the brain.
  - They are: vestibular system, the proprioceptive system, and the interoceptive system.

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## 1. THE TACTILE SYSTEM:

- **Tactile Characteristics:**
- **Hypo:**
  - Does not like being touched
  - Dislikes messy play
  - Dislikes certain clothing such as tags
  - Dislikes catch / sitting on carpet for circle time
  - Feeding issues
  - May like deep pressure-calmng
  - Is "tight or tight" mode
- **Hype:**
  - Needs tactile input, likes to touch
  - Does not know what a bubble space is
  - High pain tolerance
- **Tips for teachers:**
  - Clutter
  - Organization difficulties
  - Likes to be in close proximity of others
  - Things in mouth
  - Fidget toys (as long as they can't eat it)
  - Spaced out seating
  - Deep pressure
  - Pressure clothing
  - Tactile desk strips (Velcro, other fabrics under desk, etc.)
  - Seize in front or back of line to avoid stimulation
  - Do not force certain clothing

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## 2. THE OLFACTORY SYSTEM:

- Students with olfactory (smell) sensory processing needs may have trouble after cleaning school classrooms due to the effect of the chemical smells.
- They may not like to walk near or be in classrooms that are heavily scented (wax burners, candles, etc.).
- Some may even have food intolerances due to the smells that accompany foods.
- Their behavior can be impacted by the chemicals / ingredients found in foods and environmental agents.
- **Tips for teachers:**
  - No perfumes or scented lotions, etc.
  - Don't have their desk near trash cans or other places that hold smells
  - Avoid snacks high in sugars, dyes, and preservatives when possible
  - Avoid the use of chemical cleaners around them.

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## 3. THE AUDITORY SYSTEM:

- **Auditory Characteristics:**
- **Hypo:**
  - May be sensitive to the hum from fluorescent lighting
  - Covers ears
  - Easily distracted / irritated
  - Excessive talker
- **Hype:**
  - Needs oral instructions repeated
  - Talks loud
  - Difficulty with spelling because of trouble with differentiating sounds
- **Tips for teachers:**
- **Hyper Auditory**
  - Headphones & ear plugs (use sparingly)
  - iPad or something with their favorite music
  - White noise in the classroom
  - Sit away from classroom noises
  - "Quiet Zone" option
- **Hypo Auditory**
  - Speak slowly, be very clear and repeat when necessary
  - Use visuals along with auditory
  - Make sure the child is listening

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## 4. THE VISUAL SYSTEM:

- Even a child with 20/20 vision may have difficulty processing what they see. Visual images received through the eyes provide 80-90% of the information that the brain receives (this is why I say visual, visual, visual!)
- Visual characteristics:
  - Poor handwriting
  - Squints/rubs eyes with visual work or when going outside
  - Difficulty copying from the board
  - Frequent headaches
  - Poor hand-eye skills
- Tips for teachers:
  - Seat child near the front
  - Give them a copy of the board work
  - Have them touch each word as they read
  - Cover up work that is not necessary to an assignment
- For hypersensitive visual children:
  - Rely on natural light when possible
  - Dim lights or get covers for fluorescent lights
  - Avoid visual clutter

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## 5. THE TASTE SYSTEM:

- Children with sensory sensitivities in this area may be picky eaters.
- They may also exhibit pica which is the act of eating non-edible items (chalk, crayons, dirt, etc.)
- Tips for teachers:
  - Be careful of toxic toys
  - Be careful and watchful of choking if you have a student that eats non-edible items
  - Sensory chew items ("chewelry")

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## 6. THE VESTIBULAR SYSTEM:

- The Vestibular System is the "MVP" as it acts like the conductor of the orchestra for all of the sensory systems.
- It has the ability to "amp up" or "tune down" the intensity of sensory information coming into the brain.
- It also regulates how each sensory system interacts.
- Characteristics: inconsistent response to sensory input, emotional volatility, difficulty maintaining or shifting attention, problems with self-regulation.
- Hyper:
  - Fearful of head movements / gravity changes
  - May not like running or games with any movement
  - May not like swinging
- Hypo:
  - Needs to be on the move
  - Wiggles and fidgets
  - Poor balance
  - Poor trunk stability
  - Tends to injure hurt frequently
- Tips for teachers:
  - Exercise balls for sitting
  - Wobble Cushions
  - Balance exercises in class before an assignment
  - Less doing, more moving

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## 7. THE PROPRIOCEPTIVE SYSTEM:

- Proprioceptive information is received from the movement of joints and muscles. It lets your body know where it is in space and how to use it in that space.
- Proprioception is calming and centering. It helps ground children and helps them screen out other unwanted sensory input.
- It is needed to sit still and pay attention as well as to remember and recall letters, numbers, etc.
- These children typically "pull, push, punch" and get in trouble for aggressive behaviors.
- Characteristics: poor fine motor skills, poor use of symmetrical extremities (use crawling, a ball with both hands), sit on wall, rub all legs, kick desks, will use vision to compensate.
- **Hyper:**
  - Tense easily
  - Poor muscle tone
  - Slumps
- **Hypo:**
  - Clumsy
  - Poor handwriting
- Breaks toys/pencils/crayons
- Needs heavy input on the joints & body (runs, hits, jumps, etc.)
- Grinds teeth
- **Tips for teachers:**
  - Deep pressure (books, backpacks, weighted lap pads, and sit OT about deep joint compression)
  - Tight head clothing
  - Weighted vests or blankets (follow the guidelines)
  - Rocking chairs
  - Body socks
  - Exercise balls to sit on
  - Wobble cushions
  - Frequent breaks
  - Trampolines
  - Call stretches

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## 8. THE INTEROCEPTIVE SYSTEM:

- The process of noticing what our internal organs are sensing is called interoception.
- It is how we perceive physical/physiological feelings from our bodies, which then determines our mood and sense of well-being.
- The interoceptive system is associated with autonomic motor control, and gives rise to feelings from the body including: pain, temperature, itch, heart rate, muscular sensations, hunger, thirst, and more.
- It is the basis for self and emotional awareness.
- Characteristics: they have difficulty determining the following: are they hot or cold, are they hungry or not, are they thirsty or not, do they have a full bladder, do they need to have a bowel movement, do they have pain or not, anxiety symptoms, and possibly poor body image.
- **Tips for teachers:**
  - Some of the previous activities that were shared for vestibular and proprioceptive may be helpful for those with interoceptive deficits.
  - Since this system is based on proper autonomic nervous system function, it is imperative that the underlying cause be addressed through the child's doctor.

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## SENSORY SUPPORTS:

- Sensory supports should not be provided to children based on their behavior.
  - A true sensory support should not be given to a child to use based on how their morning was or how they did in specials classes.
- These supports are a means to provide them with the tools needed to be successful in the school setting and should be available to them throughout the school day.
- If/when you teach your students how to properly use the sensory supports you offer them, they will properly use them and eventually will become independent with getting them or asking for them as needed.
- Sensory supports when used correctly are a preventative measure in a sense.

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### EXAMPLES OF SENSORY SUPPORTS BEING USED DURING READING CENTERS:




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### RESOURCES:

- Buerger, M. (n.d.). *The SENSATIONAL Brain Workbook: Ready, Set, Focus.*

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