

UNDERSTANDING SENSORY OVERLOAD

Quick Guide for School Staff

Sensory overload occurs when a pupil receives more sensory input than their brain can process comfortably.

Autistic pupils may experience heightened sensitivity or reduced sensitivity to:

- Sound (e.g., chatter, alarms)
- Light (e.g., fluorescent bulbs, glare)
- Touch (e.g., clothing tags, crowded spaces)
- Smell (e.g., strong perfumes or cleaning products)
- Movement (e.g., busy corridors, sudden activity)

People with autism may react to a variety of stimuli with both hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity. The majority of people have both.

Signs of **SENSORY OVERLOAD**

Pupils may:

- Cover ears or eyes
- Withdraw from activities
- Appear distressed or anxious
- Struggle to follow instructions
- Have meltdowns or shutdowns

These behaviours are physiological responses, not deliberate misbehaviour.

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Reduce sensory input

- Dim harsh lighting where possible
- Remove unnecessary visual clutter
- Allow noise-reducing headphones or ear defenders

Respond calmly

- Reduce verbal instructions
- Lower noise and demands
- Give time and space for self-regulation

Offer movement and regulation breaks

- Stretching or calm movement
- Quiet walks or sensory-friendly tasks
- Scheduled breaks to reset sensory systems

Create a low-stimulus safe space

- Calm corners or quiet areas
- Access when pupils begin to show signs of overload
- It's not avoidance – it's prevention

Increase predictability

- Use visual timetables
- Give advance warning of changes or transitions
- Use consistent routines

- ✓ **Consistency and understanding are vital across the classroom team**
- ✓ **Collaboration with families and specialists ensures the best outcomes for each pupil**