

Working with children and young people with sensory processing needs - position statement.

Introduction

This position statement represents the views of Local Authorities, healthcare providers, and healthcare commissioners in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent in relation to the use of the terms 'Sensory Processing Needs' and 'Sensory Integration Therapy'

The purpose of the statement is to provide guidance to professionals, practitioners and parents/carers who support children and young people facing challenges in managing their sensory processing needs. The aim is to promote consistency among professionals and reduce uncertainty for families. This position statement draws upon research and evidence and has been agreed by representatives of Health, Social Care and Education in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent¹.

Sensory processing needs

Sensory process is the cycle that we receive, process and respond to sensory input all of the time. This sensory information helps us explore and understand our surroundings

Sensory processing needs are the differences in how a person's brain receives and processes any sensory information (Sight (Vision), Smell (Olfactory), Hearing (Auditory), Taste (Gustatory), Movement (Proprioception) , Internal (Interoception), Touch (Tactile), Balance (Vestibular)) and can have an impact on how they are able to interact within their environment.

While Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) was a term proposed by Dr Miller to describe sensory differences, it is not part of the DSMV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5) which is the diagnostic manual used to guide diagnoses and so it is not a recognised diagnosis².

The evidence suggests that sensory processing needs are often associated with conditions like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attachment Disorder, difficulties with Mental Health, Cerebral Palsy, Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In practice, people often have sensory processing needs listed alongside their diagnosis. We do acknowledge that people can have sensory processing needs that can benefit from support with or without an associated diagnosis.

¹ Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB, Staffordshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Midland Partnership University Foundation NHS Trust, North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust.

² American Psychiatric Association 2013

Sensory Integration Therapy

Ayres Sensory Integration (ASI) Therapy® is an intervention approach based on Ayres Sensory Integration theory. It is delivered directly by a qualified sensory integration practitioner and is intended to be carried out in a clinic setting using specific equipment. It aims to change a person's sensory processing through direct, intensive input.

The Royal College of Occupational Therapy review of the evidence related to ASI® Therapy has identified that it is limited and inconclusive; they deduced that sensory needs must be considered in the context of the person's engagement and performance in activities within relevant environments³.

Recent research looking at the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of sensory integration therapy for children with autism and sensory difficulties across behavioural, functional and quality-of-life outcomes indicated that sensory integration therapy shows no clinical benefit across a range of outcomes over and above standard care for young children with autism. In addition, the results also indicate that sensory integration therapy is not a cost-effective treatment option in this population⁴.

Local position statement

While we recognise the impact that sensory processing needs can have upon participation in daily activities, we also acknowledge that there may be differences in professional viewpoints. However, we need to take an evidence-based approach in what services and interventions are commissioned and delivered locally. Therefore in following an evidence-based approach, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent:

- shall not assess for or use the diagnosis/ label of Sensory Processing Disorder.
- Shall not commission specific ASI® Therapy⁵.
- agree that standalone sensory assessment is not best practice. Instead, an individualised assessment should be carried out to address challenges in communication, mobility, and participation in daily life.

In addition, some sensory interventions carry additional risk and will not be recommended:

- Weighted blankets⁶
- Weighted jackets
- Brushing

Local perspective

Together, through multi-professional and multi-agency working, we are committed to

³ Informed View - Sensory integration and sensory-based interventions – children & young people. Royal College of Occupational Therapists. 2021

⁴ Randell et al. Sensory integration therapy for children with autism and sensory processing difficulties: the SenITA RCT. June 2022; Health technology assessment. activities by the appropriate professional following their professional guidelines.26(29):1-140

⁵ staffsstoke.icb.nhs.uk/your-nhs-integrated-care-board/our-publications/governance-handbook/all-policies/commissioning/icb-excluded-and-restricted-procedures-policy-v3-1/?layout=default

⁶ [RCOT launches official weighted blankets guide for occupational therapists - RCOT](#)

supporting education settings, children, young people and their families.

To aid a multi-professional and multi-agency way of working a system wide **sensory processing needs toolkit** has been developed. It is part of the graduated approach based on best practice and available evidence from health, education, and social care professionals.

Taking the universal element of the tiered approach is the first stage of helping children with sensory needs. This stage includes quality first teaching, along with accessing website, resources, and training offered by professionals.

If universal elements have been adopted and have not had the impact on sensory processing needs and participation in daily life as anticipated, the next stage is to take a targeted approach. The current version of the sensory processing needs toolkit is primarily aimed at educational settings and provides information on a targeted approach for meeting sensory processing needs.

We shall be mindful of ongoing research in this field of sensory processing needs and will continue to monitor guidance and best practice to ensure that we strive for the best possible outcomes for our children and young people.

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