

Managing The Christmas Sensory Overload!

It's that time of year which for some of us is exciting: meeting and catching up with friends and family, putting up glittery decorations and sparkly lights, giving and receiving shiny gifts, parties, dressing up, singing songs and watching TV specials!

Yet for many children, young people and adults, this time of year can be **filled with emotional and sensory overwhelm**. An increase in noise, multiple voices, crowds, social expectations, changes in routine, flashing lights, different textures brought into the house, loud and busy music and surprise gifts.

So, what can we do to ensure a more joyful, or tolerable time for ALL the family?



PREPARING FOR CHANGE IN ROUTINE

December

Many of us have all just settled back into the new school year. This means new routines, work, schools, peers, colleagues, teachers and classrooms. **Then, enter Christmas!** Often packed with lots of off-timetable, off-schedule changes, increased shopping trips, parties, dressing up days, nativities and carol services and trips to see Father Christmas!

Talk and think about what changes there might be:

Use the senses as guidance if it's helpful. What might you see, smell, hear, taste and touch that is different than usual?

What might help body and emotional regulation (adults too!)?

A favourite soft toy or blanket, a scent on a sleeve or tissue, an attachment symbol like a heart drawn on the hand by a loved one, crunchy snacks, noise cancelling headphones, a weighted lap pad.

STICK TO NORMAL ROUTINE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN:

Routine doesn't mean 'boring'. It can be filled with nurturing and reliable rituals that make people feel safe and regulated.

REMEMBER THE AFTER!

Holding it together all day means potentially coming home overloaded. Favourite regulatory activities are essential here! A snuggle on the sofa wrapped up in a soft fluffy blanket, a walk in nature, a bath, hot chocolate, lying in bed having a cuddle and a story, listening to music or maybe wrapped up in a duvet in silence! Regulation is for parents too so if you are trying to support sensory overload in a child then you will need to safely off-load your feelings of being overwhelmed too!

January

February

March

April

May



Some events, activities and get-togethers may:

- Go on for a long time
- Be big in location and/or excitement levels
- Be loud or have lots of different noise levels
- Have many people, both known and strangers
- Have multiple activities
- Be very bright and/or visually busy

If you have any family, friends, teachers and colleagues who want to offer sensitive, understanding and loving relationships, then they are amazing allies, especially at Christmas time!

Think together about any possible adaptations. Can any of the above factors be adjusted to support sensory overwhelm? Are there any compromises to make it more tolerable?

- Can you arrive at the start or at the end of an event or activity, when the music and the flashing lights are off?
- Can the music be turned down and the lights set to be on constantly, rather than flashing?
- Can participation time be shortened, e.g. a child does one song in a carol service and can then leave feeling successful rather than overwhelmed or can you leave a party after an hour, without it being announced?
- Is there a space where there is minimal sensory input so regulation breaks can be taken?
- Is there any way to have less people, or a time when you know less people will be there?
- Could the venue be your own house or somewhere familiar?
- Can you bring things with you that are helpful, e.g. your own food, a blanket, a pair of small discreet noise-cancelling headphones

Remember it is also ok to say no! If there is just one trip out too many, then don't go. It doesn't make you a bad parent/friend/family member to say "I/we need to take a break". Communicate with a child's school. Do they have to take part in EVERYTHING?

The festive time brings with it many traditions, particularly around the food. It often involves lots of different textures and tastes. Party buffets, chocolates, sweets and socialising may mean some people may:

- Struggle to recognise when they are full
- Over-eat
- Hoard and hide food away
- Be pre-occupied by the food and unable to leave the area alone

Food can be a complex and emotive topic so keep it simple:

- Offer small and regular portions of food and treats interspersed throughout the day
- Add regulating crunchy and chewy food.
- Encouragement to move away from food after eating
- Avoid labelling food as having to be eaten 'because it's Christmas'. It's perfectly acceptable to stick to your normal food routine.

Food





This time of year is generally busier with more people going out, shops are busier, lights are flashing and reflecting off of decorations, loud music and Christmas songs are played everywhere!

Some practical ideas might be:


- Wearing a hoodie so ears can be subtly covered
- Listening to your own music with headphones
- Using noise-cancelling headphones
- Avoid having multiple devices playing at the same time
- Switching fairy lights to not flash
- Use less decorations on the tree

To help regulation it may be helpful to incorporate some heavy work based-activities into the routine such as:

- Incorporate more walks outside in nature into the daily routine
- Do jobs in the garden or park: carrying logs, raking leaves
- Carrying the Hoover upstairs or downstairs
- Hoovering, cleaning

Or add some organising activities which help with the body and mind:

- Going for scavenger hunts – can you find something shiny, round, prickly, red?...
- Setting the table, sorting out cutlery, arranging dishes
- Sorting out gifts by size, colour or family members
- Do some mindful colouring, word searches, spot the difference or jigsaws



Gifts can be a very exciting part of the festive period AND it can be a turbulent body and mind experience.

★Excitement alone can be overwhelming, just experiencing that erupting, bubbly feeling in the body can make the body feel unsafe and lead to dysregulation – it can feel like an explosion comes from nowhere right in the middle of a joyful moment!

★Anticipation of presents and who might be giving you what can trigger overwhelm and be especially hard for those who have experienced neglect, trauma, and loss in their early years as gifts can be linked to rejection, manipulation and hurt.

★Receiving unexpected gifts or surprise gifts can also evoke negative responses which appear ungrateful the giver.

Gift giving and receiving can be a collaborative experience:

- ★Manage the gift givers expectations if you know there are struggles around receiving gifts. Let them know the reason behind a potential response and how best they can accept this.
- ★Provide 'wish lists' to family and friends especially if the child has specific sensory sensitivities around fabrics or tastes.
- ★Practice gift giving with your child and how they might respond if they don't like a present, so they have a 'script' in their head. This scaffolds the experience for them so they are able to cope better with the feeling of disappointment in their body.
- ★Spread gifts across the festive period rather than just on Christmas Day or only have a couple of gifts visible at a time so it is less overwhelming
- ★Consider if it would be appropriate to tell a child what presents they will get. It may create calmer present opening if there was no anxiety around 'Will I/Won't I get something?'
- ★Think about the sensory experience of gifts. How does the wrapping paper feel? Is it easy or hard to unwrap the present? Is the tape too sticky? Is it noisy paper? Could you use a bag, tissue paper or even fabric as an alternative? How about paper tape?

£125
GROUP LICENSES
AVAILABLE

THE POWER OF THE SENSES TRAINING COURSE INFORMATION

RE-BUILDING SENSORY SYSTEMS & SUPPORTING REGULATION IN CHILDREN IMPACTED BY EARLY TRAUMA

Children's sensory systems are impacted when they survive extreme loss, trauma or attachment disruption. They can become 'stuck' over-experiencing or under-experiencing their senses. This affects how they move, play, communicate... in fact all aspects of their everyday lives.

This creative live remote training will introduce participants to the eight sensory systems; giving an overview of what they are, how they develop and what happens when there is early disruption. It will explore what happens in the sensory systems when children are responding to their environment from the survival (fight, flight, freeze or collapse) part of their brain. Participants will be offered a range of hands-on ideas and practical tools to support children at home, in the classroom and in other settings. This is a real 'how to' training which will help any adult supporting a child with sensory disruption to regulate and settle their brain and body.

