

**SENSORY AWARE  
CHURCH**

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# PLAN

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- Introduction
- What are the senses?
- What does this mean for church?
- What can we do?
- Final tips & questions



# INTRODUCTION

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- I'm Vikki (she/her)
- I'm a Christian, based in Newcastle Upon Tyne
- I'm an Occupational Therapist – I work with children and adults who are exploring an assessment as to whether they have autism and/or ADHD or other neurodevelopmental conditions
- I love helping churches know more, so they can be accessible
- REMEMBER – there is not a one size fits all – Body of Christ 1 Corinthians





# WHAT ARE THE SENSES

Touch

Smell

Taste

Hearing

Sight

Proprioception

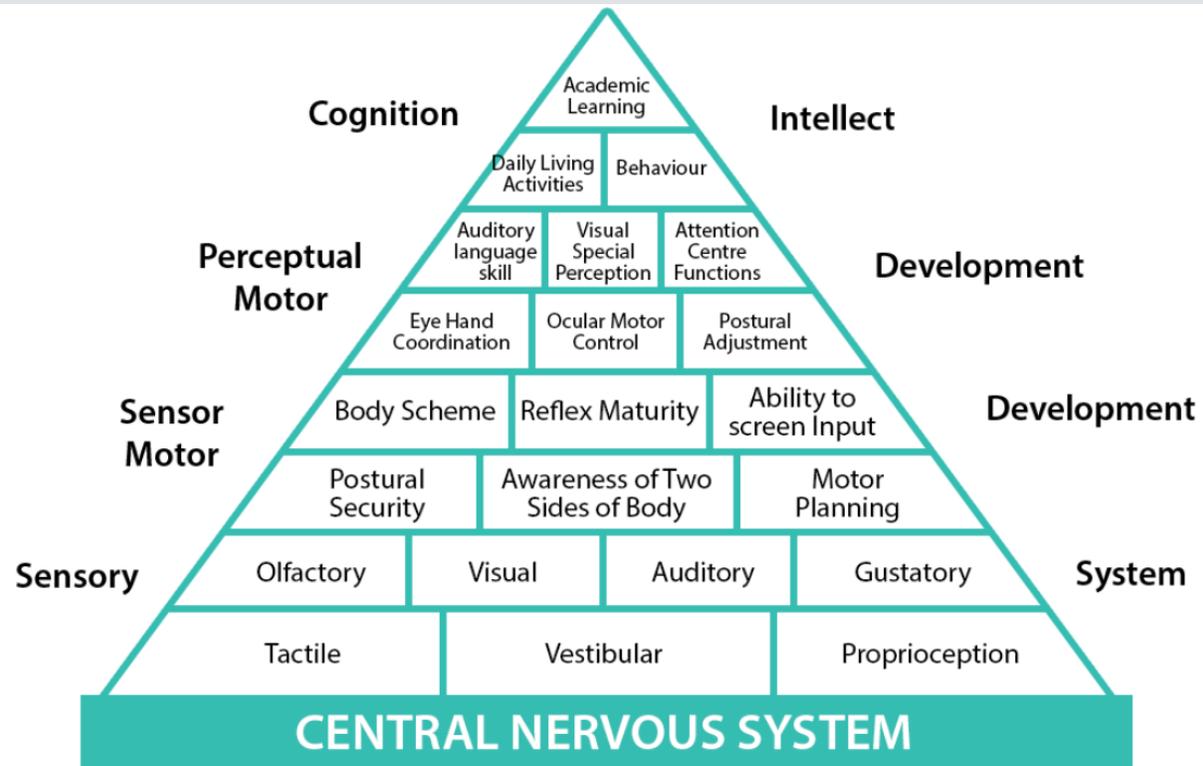
Vestibular

Interoception

WHAT DO WE MEAN?!

What comes to mind when you hear  
'sensory'?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-kUKyfu0as&t=8s>



Pyramid of Learning (Williams and Shellenberger 1996).

# HEARING



## sensitive

Feels too much

Covers ears

Avoids loud spaces

Hear sounds others don't notice

Aware of everything!

Might make a lot of noise themselves

E.g. alone in carpark

## seeking

Love noise

Need noise to concentrate

Might miss/ignore noise

# PRACTICAL TIPS



## Noise levels

- Be aware of background noise
- Offer ear defenders/earplugs (loops or flares) – make it known they are available
- Consider volume of the music (this is tricky to get right)
- Sound proofing boards to reduce echoes
  
- Offer a quiet space
- Small groups
  
- Background music – can be tricky to hear
- Lots of voices – don't share important information/instructions with background noise

# TOUCH



## sensitive

Avoids crowds

Don't like touch/hugs

Clothing can be tricky

Textures of food

Dislike mess/sticky

Can 'over-react to touch'

Can feel painful (impacts on personal hygiene)

## seeking

Like to touch people/things

Seems to want to touch everything

Fidget or fiddle with things

# PRACTICAL TIPS



**Always** ask before a hug – “May I”

Physical space – are there spaces in services where you can have more personal space

Light tickly, or repetitive touch can be more alerting/unpleasant

Don't approach people from behind

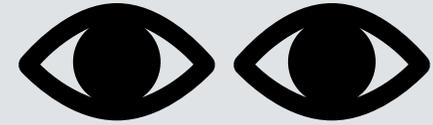
In children's ministry – have non-messy options and/or quick facilities to wash hands

Don't force people if they're uncomfortable – have low/no mess options in craft

Make fidgets available

Trauma and safeguarding considerations

# VISUAL



## Sensitive

Notice visual differences/changes

Squinting or covering eyes

Dislike and irritation of bright or flickering lights (or changing in light)

Prefers blinds/curtains closed

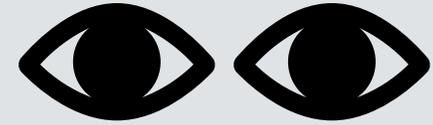
Distracted by movement

## Seeking

Looks for bright lighting/exciting lighting

Looks closely or flicks things in front of eyes

# PRACTICAL TIPS



Visual is often the strongest/most reliable sense

Use photos/pictures to show changes in furniture or layout

Update your website (Social stories) – make sure the entrance is pictured, what the main hall looks like, where there will be coffee afterwards

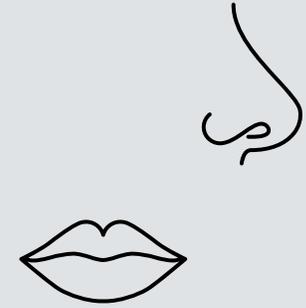
Use visual symbols/bullet points to help show what is happening and when

Visual aids in sermons – bring items linked to the message

Distractions – don't make the space too busy with lots of displays/visuals

Words screen – no moving images, keep it simple

# TASTE AND SMELL



## Sensitive

Restricted diet

Notice and comment on new tastes and smells

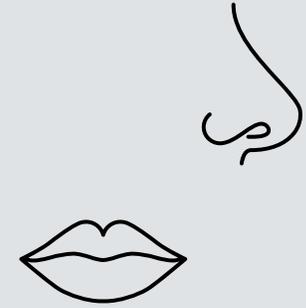
Notice detail others wouldn't

## Seeking

Like to taste strong flavours, new textures

Put things in their mouth

# PRACTICAL TIPS



No pressure at shared mealtimes

Ask if they'd prefer to do bring and share

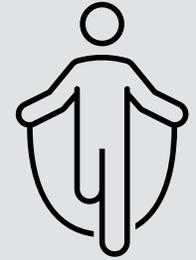
Offer quiet spaces for shared meals

Predictability – let people know the planned meal, ask if that's OK

Don't change communion options without warning

Be flexible, don't expect people to eat shared food – go picnic style

# MOVEMENT (VESTIBULAR)



## Sensitive

Travel sick

Dizzy easily

Dislike head being tipped back

Hate spinning/swings/slides

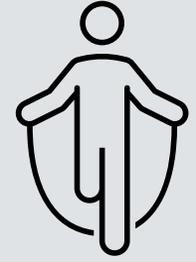
## Seeking

On the go – constantly

Cannot sit still

Fidgeting

Jumping, moving, spinning, climbing



# PRACTICAL TIPS

Move'n'sit cushions

Give children a 'spot' to sit on

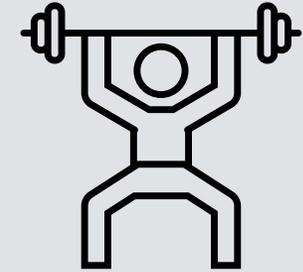
Movement breaks – don't expect people to sit for long periods

Make fidgets easily available

Give options and space for people who need to stand and move

People can feel dizzy with their eyes closed – “if you feel comfortable, lets close our eyes and pray”

# PROPRIOCEPTION



## Sensitive

## Seeking

Bumping or crashing into things

Like a hug/squeeze

Physical rough play

Break things

Knock things over/spill

# PRACTICAL TIPS



‘Heavy work’

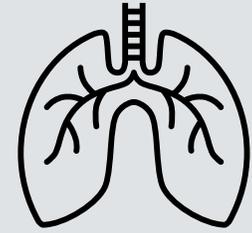
Use your muscles – push against the wall, push through your arms to lift your bum off the seat

Therapy putty to fidget with

Chewing – use chewing gum or a chewy snack

Wiping and cleaning things, lifting chairs, carrying equipment

# INTEROCEPTION



## Sensitive

Very aware of what is happening inside body – can hear heartbeat

Sensitive to pain, temperature

## Low registration

Difficulties distinguishing what is happening – sick/hungry/thirsty

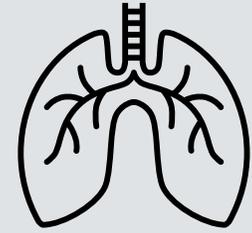
Difficulties in knowing emotions

Forget to eat/drink

Put off going to the toilet

Chronic constipation

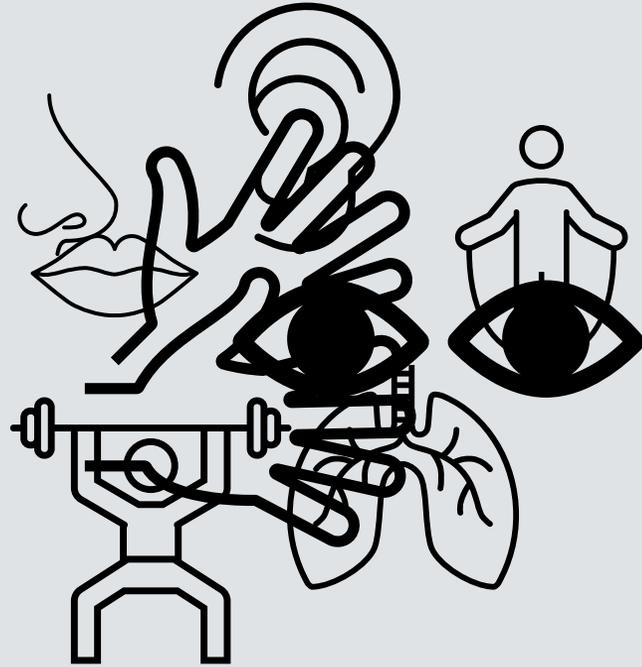
# PRACTICAL TIPS



Talk about what's happening – “you sound cross, shall we turn down the music”

If someone is overwhelmed – reduce language, safe space, don't ask questions

OVERLOAD - [HTTPS://YOUTU.BE/APKNWW8MPAM](https://youtu.be/APKNWW8MPAM)





# HELPFUL LINKS

## Information/organisations

[Through the Roof](#)

[Growing Hope – Free therapy for children with additional needs](#)

[Trauma, Attachment, Faith | Join The Dots](#)

## Resources

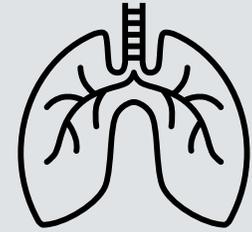
[Buy Hug-A-Lumps Panda Pete 20cm Soft Toy | Teddy bears and soft toys | Argos](#)

[Sensory Direct | Weighted Blankets, Sensory Toys & Equipment](#)

[Loop Engage 2 Plus: Comfortable Conversations – Loop Earplugs](#)

[Home - Grove Books](#)

# WHAT NOW?



Pop any questions and reflections in the chat

Start with who you know – what are the needs of the people in your church?

What's one small change you could make this Sunday to help someone with sensory needs?

Who in your church could you talk to this week to understand their sensory experience better?