RIVERSIDE SCHOOL POLICY

Sensory Policy

Supporting students' sensory needs across the school day

APPROVED	REVIEW CYCLE	NEXT REVIEW
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Introduction

Sensory processing is a person's ability to organise and process incoming sensory information from our senses. Sensory modulation is a person's ability to interpret sensory input and to respond appropriately.

At Riverside we appreciate the continuous need to interpret and respond to sensory experiences. The aim is to support students' sensory needs across the school day, in a variety of ways.

We are all familiar with the five basic sensory systems: sight, sound, taste, smell and touch (tactile). These basic senses or 'far senses' respond to external stimuli from the environment. However, less familiar sensory systems exist within our bodies called:

1 **Interoceptive**	Sensory system of the internal organs (e.g., heart rate, hunger, digestion, state of arousal, mood, etc.).
2 **Vestibular sense (balance)**	Processing information about movement, gravity and balance, primarily through the inner ear. It provides information about the speed of our movements, maintains and regulates postural tone, triggers balance reactions and gives us a postural core. It also helps us to maintain a stable visual field and adequate spatial awareness.
3 **Proprioceptive sense (body awareness)**	Processing information about body position received through the muscles, ligaments and joints. It allows us to control the speed and force of movement and plan movement efficiently, allows us to use our bodies without visual cues, and is vital for fine motor dexterity.

The brain locates, sorts and orders sensations, somewhat like a traffic officer directs traffic. This is necessary if a person is to move and learn. Tactile, vestibular and proprioceptive processing is at the core of the sensory systems, leading to the five basic sensory systems.

For certain students, such as those who are autistic, the processing of sensory experience may be atypical or delayed. The slightest change or difficulty with processing such information can influence how we manage daily living skills, academic progress and social interactions.

Autistic individuals often struggle with processing everyday sensory information. Their senses may fluctuate between being over-sensitive, under-sensitive, or a combination of both, varying from one moment to another. These sensory differences significantly influence their emotions, behaviours, and overall quality of life. As each person will process and modulate sensory information differently, these experiences are unique to each individual. Something that may be comforting and pleasant for one person is uncomfortable and unpleasant to another; a hug, bright lighting or eating particular foods.

The school's Occupational Therapist provides sensory training for all school staff with recommendations for:

- Environmental adaptation and resources.
- Universal and targeted sensory strategies provided by the class teams with guidance from the school occupational therapist.
- Specific individual sensory plans, developed and monitored by the occupational therapist and delivered by the class teams.

Too much sensory information

At times, behaviours exhibited by autistic individuals may not immediately appear connected to sensory differences. Those who struggle to process everyday sensory information can undergo sensory or information overload. Excessive stimuli can trigger stress, anxiety, and even physical discomfort, leading to withdrawal, distressed behaviour, or meltdowns.

In instances of meltdowns or non-responsiveness, refraining from judgement is crucial. There are actionable steps we can take to provide support. Often, minor adjustments to the environment can yield significant improvements. A sensory profile can aid in identifying necessary changes.

Three key considerations include:

1. **Awareness**
   Assess the environment for potential stressors and adjust as needed.
2. **Creativity**
   Introduce positive sensory experiences to counterbalance overwhelming stimuli.
3. **Be prepared**
   Tell the person about possible sensory stimuli they may experience in different environments.

Universal strategies are embedded in the school curriculum to prepare and support students' learning and development. For example, calming/alerting movements prepare students, lighting is adjusted between dim and bright, and student positioning/location in the room is used to aid focus and maximise engagement.

Initial factors we consider

Lighting: natural and artificial | Sound | Furniture: size in relation to students | Temperature | Space and number of people | Décor: colour of wall paint and displays | Location of students and staff in the room

Strategies we may implement

- Use of blinds to dim the natural light, gel covers on ceiling lights to diffuse lighting
- Use of music to calm and alert students as appropriate
- Use of soft furnishings to diffuse sound
- Zoning of classrooms
- Changing the size of the furniture to accommodate taller or smaller students
- Managing the heat/cold from radiators or open windows and students' alertness
- Use of physical boundaries or open space to enable students to feel secure
- Limiting the displays according to students' stimulation needs
- Dial displays up and down as appropriate
- Position identified students away from windows/opening doors to reduce distractions

Assessing and managing needs

At Riverside we have a multi-disciplinary approach to students with sensory processing difficulties. This team is made up of Occupational Therapy, Speech & Language Therapy, Physiotherapy, the School Nurse and school staff.

The Occupational Therapy Service offers different tiers of intervention including whole school and class specific intervention/training.

All classes receive input from the OT through a referral process. Class teams and the OT work collaboratively to develop strategies to best meet students' sensory needs.

> Before interventions begin, the OT and class teacher will ensure that basic sensory strategies have been tried and that other factors impacting on behaviour and learning have been addressed, e.g., appropriate Behaviour Profiles in place and referral to CAMHS-LD considered.

Environment Learning Walk

In order to monitor and measure the impact of interventions we carry out a Learning Walk that focuses specifically on Environment and Sensory Processing. The Learning Walk is used to identify both what is working well and what areas need to be developed. This exercise gives a whole school view of how individual needs are met from a sensory perspective. To best cater for all of our learners' sensory needs we strive to maximise our learning environments and ensure that they enhance functional use, encourage independence and are flexible to be both stimulating and grounding.

The environments cover all areas of the school that the students engage with. The Environment Learning Walk is carried out by the OT, SLT as well as a colleague from the leadership team, a teacher and a teaching assistant. This is to represent the whole school community in order to gain a whole school perspective and to deepen the information gathered and shared. The information gathered from the Environment Learning Walk then feeds into the Sensory Development Plan.

Resources

Shared working protocols lay out which resources the school and Whittington Health are responsible for providing. Resources can include:

1. **Large pieces of equipment**
   e.g., swing, bikes, sensory room equipment.
2. **Individual pieces of equipment**
   e.g., ear defenders, chewy tubes, move-n-sit cushions.
3. **Assistive devices**
   e.g., pencil grips, adapted scissors, slanting boards.
4. **Changes to the environment**
   e.g., blinds, lighting, wall coverings, shelves, seating.

Training

The Occupational Therapists and other members of the MDT can offer a range of informal training where necessary on a range of different subjects. School staff are informed regularly of more formalised training programmes, e.g., Sensory Integration courses, and attend at the discretion of the leadership team or as part of an identified need in their continuing professional development.

February 2026

Appendix 1: Sensory Profile template

Name **D.o.B**	Photo
Sensory Profile	
Riverside School	
Tactile Touch	
Gustatory Taste	
Visual Sight	
Auditory Hearing	
Olfactory Smell	
Vestibular and Proprioception Balance, muscles and body awareness	
Interoception Pain, heat/cold, hunger/thirst, toileting	
Sensory Diet	
Within lesson sensory/movement activities	
Sensory/movement activities outside of class	

Appendix 2: Sensory Processing Pathway

Riverside School Sensory Processing Pathway

Training: yearly whole school and termly twilight

School staff and/or parents concerned about a student's behaviour

Referral is screened

Referral accepted
Assessment to be completed within 4 weeks. Self-injurious behaviour is prioritised; assessment and intervention strategies provided within 7 days.

Referral declined
Referrer signposted to general strategies on the teachers' drive and recommendation to attend twilight training sessions. No further action.

Assessment process

- Sensory profile completed with the student (where appropriate), by school staff and family/carers.
- Classroom, playground and lunch hall observations.
- Liaison with speech and language therapists and other members of the multidisciplinary team.

Initial trial to include direct and/or indirect occupational therapy

- Strategies and routines
- Environmental modifications
- Targeted training for class team and family/carers

Summary report
Recommendations for direct/indirect therapy discussed with the student (where appropriate), class teacher and family. Class teacher to include targeted sensory strategies and routine in the student's profile.

OT review after 6 weeks
Class teacher to monitor.