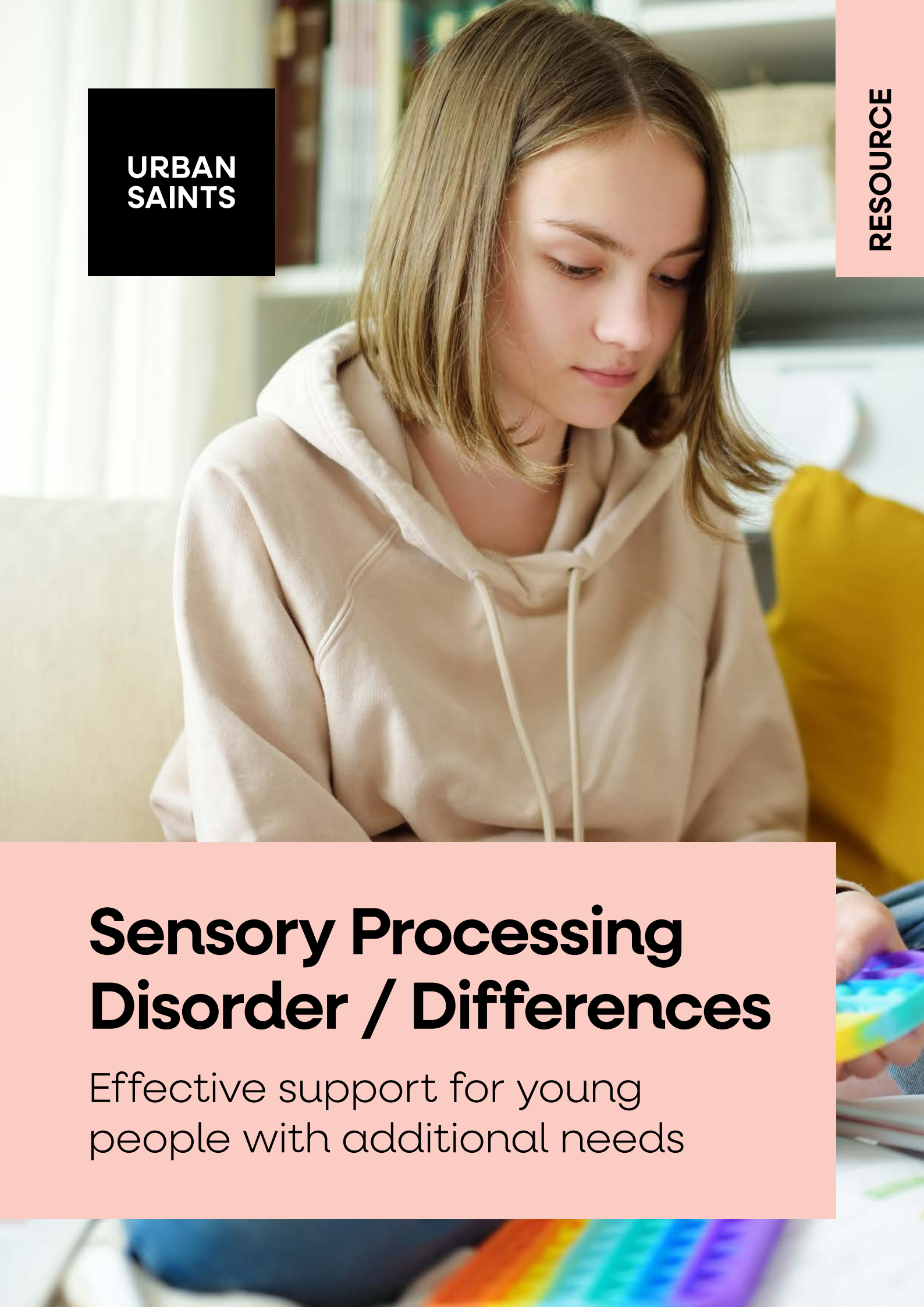


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RESOURCE

Sensory Processing Disorder / Differences

Effective support for young
people with additional needs



What is a sensory processing disorder / difference?

Occupational Therapist Sheilagh Blyth explains...

(Article adapted from the original to fit this guide, along with additional content from Steff Shepherd, qualified Occupational Therapist and children's worker).

Sensory processing (sometimes called sensory integration or SI) is a term that refers to the way the body receives and interprets messages from the senses. Humans have a multitude of senses that help them to gather information about the world around them and people process this information through the nervous system.

This tells an individual to react either with a motor or a behavioural response. *For example, if a butterfly touches someone's arm, the brain would receive a message that they could either feel or see that butterfly.*

How a person reacts to that sensation is dependent on how their body interprets sensations. They could brush the butterfly to one side, scream, wave their hands in the air or stand still in fright. Everyone's reaction can be different.

Sensory integration usually occurs automatically and unconsciously without any effort. Someone with a difficulty may have a sensory processing disorder or difference (SPD).

A young person with SPD may have reactions which can be difficult to understand and explain. Their body is automatically reacting to what is around them by being in a 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze' mode, and

this can be wrongly interpreted as bad behaviour. Every day these young people may feel overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or appear aggressive. Be alert to the overwhelm, anxiety or depression the young person might be experiencing. Offer positive affirmation and opportunity to talk. If you are concerned about the young person's mental health discuss this with your groups safeguarding lead.

Adults will often describe young people with SPD as being a fussy eater, emotional, stubborn, fearful, disruptive and uncooperative.

Young people may find it difficult to make friends, to sit still in class, or to work as part of a group. They may appear disorganised or find certain clothing or clothing labels difficult to wear.



Key issues

Young people usually present with three different types of responses to sensations: under-react, sensory seeking and over-react.

- Young people who appear to under-react may appear withdrawn or be difficult to engage in an activity, they are watchful.
- Sensory seekers need to activate their senses any way possible. This may be by wandering around the room (appearing to be uncertain and bored), swinging their feet or tapping their fingers, twirling their hair, biting their nails, tapping their pencil, or clicking their pen.
- Young people who over-react may appear to be excessively responsive or emotional in reaction to events.



Support strategies for your group

With many different senses, three different ways of reacting, and every young person's response being unique, there is no one solution, but there are some clues we can notice.

- **Parents/carers or youth leaders can help by noticing** if a young person e.g. *needs a quiet place to go to if there is too much noise.*
- **If a young person is constantly fiddling**, fiddle/fidget toys could help their concentration and focus.

To help a young person manage their sensory processing differences both at home and in school or church look at the activity, the environment, and the individuals around them.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Would this activity result in the young person under-reacting, seeking out sensations, or over-reacting?** Is it calming or stimulating? If so, can it be changed? Sometimes 10 minutes on a trampoline can calm one young person but over-excite another.
- **Is the environment set up to help that young person?** Or can they opt out if they need to? A time-out card shown discreetly to a leader can help a young person to leave the activity or be offered an opt-out option while maintaining their dignity. If a young person becomes scared by too much noise, is it possible to create a den or quiet reading corner in the same room so that the young person can still

join in but from a 'safe place'? Or maybe provide ear defenders for the same reasons?

- **Perhaps a young person who under-reacts may benefit from sitting on a wobble cushion or exercise ball to reawaken their senses.** A wobble cushion or exercise ball can also help a young person who is sensory seeking to concentrate by providing the movement they are seeking.
- **Are you dressed appropriately?** Some young people find patterned clothing, dazzling jewellery or bright lipstick too visually stimulating. Others may find the smell of perfume or aftershave too overpowering causing them to be distracted from what they need to do or learn.

As a young person becomes older, sensory diets can be a powerful behavioural tool in helping young people to respond appropriately to their senses. A sensory diet is a personalised activity plan, designed to provide the sensory input they need to stay focused and organised throughout the day.

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Further Information

Sheilagh Blyth is a children's Occupational Therapist and founder of the 'Enable Me Method' which provides books, resources and courses to educators. Her article on Sensory Processing was originally published on 'The Good Schools Guide':

goodschoolsguide.co.uk/special-educational-needs/sensory/sensory-processing

Research shows that young people with additional needs are more likely to be abused than their peers (NSPCC) This increased vulnerability is due to a number of factors including communication differences, increased dependence on caregivers, social isolation and a higher likelihood that warning signs would be missed or misinterpreted. As a youth leader it's therefore important to be especially alert to changes in behaviour and wellbeing and discuss any concerns with a safeguarding lead at the earliest opportunity.



This resource is just one of the many ways we're here to walk with you!

Discover more free tools, training and resources to equip you in discipling young people.

urbansaints.org



This resource has been adapted from our Invited to Belong Team Training Kit.

If you're interested in helping your team become more aware and welcoming of young people with additional needs, you can explore our Invited to Belong Team Training Kit at urbansaints.org/resources

The original content of this resource was created in partnership with **Youthscape** as part of the Invited to Belong resource.