



Humber Sensory Processing Service

Community Services for Children aged 0-18 years



Advice for busy public spaces



Going to busy public spaces, such as supermarkets or town centres, can be overwhelming for those with sensory processing differences. Think about some of the things you experience when out and about: the bright lights in stores, the noise from talking or music, people brushing past in crowded areas, and various smells from stores, people, or food. There may also be large displays designed to grab your attention. All this sensory information can be quite overwhelming, but there are strategies available to help make these outings easier for you and your child. It is important to take the time to work out which methods work best for you.

Before

- **Pre-visit the location:** If possible, visit the location beforehand to familiarise both yourself and your child with the environment. Take note of the busiest and quieter times and identify any potential quiet spaces where your child can take a break if needed.
- **Discuss expectations:** Talk to your child about how busy the space might be so that it doesn't come as a surprise. Take the time to answer any questions or address any concerns they may have, ensuring they feel heard and understood.
- **Plan the journey together:** When planning a day out, involve your child in the process. Go over the route together, using images or Google Maps to help them visualise the journey. This can provide a sense of predictability and control.
- **Engage in proprioceptive activities:** Before heading out, engage your child in proprioceptive activities, which can help regulate their sensory input. (Refer to the proprioceptive activities document for specific ideas.)
- **Pack calming items:** Bring along items that help your child feel calm, such as their favourite stuffed animal, body sock, or fidget toys. Involve your child in selecting and organising these items, as this can help them feel more prepared and in control.
- **Teach calming techniques:** Prepare your child with breathing and calming techniques that they can use if they start feeling overwhelmed. Techniques like deep breathing or counting down from 10 can be very effective.



- **Provide structure:** Give your child plenty of notice about the upcoming outing. Stick to a schedule, using 'now and next' can be helpful. Allow them to have input in the planning process, which can help them feel more in control and less worried.
- **Create a signal:** Develop a simple signal or code word with your child that they can use if they feel overwhelmed and need to take a break. This can help them communicate their needs discreetly and efficiently.

During

- **Provide sensory breaks:** When your child feels overwhelmed, find a safe and quiet place where they can take a break to regulate their senses. This could be a designated quiet area, a restroom, or a calm corner away from the crowd.
- **Use calming sounds:** Calming sounds can help your child regulate their emotions in an uncomfortable situation. Play soothing music or nature sounds through headphones at a low volume.
- **Use ear defenders:** Ear defenders can help reduce overwhelming noise. For something more discreet, try in-ear defenders or earplugs if your child is comfortable with these.
- **Wear sunglasses:** If your child is sensitive to bright lights, wearing sunglasses can help reduce the intensity of the light and make the environment more comfortable for them.
- **Bring discreet sensory toys:** Small, discreet sensory toys can provide a calming distraction. Items like fidget spinners, stress balls, or small textured toys can be very effective.
- **Utilise weighted items:** If your child is able to sit down, consider using a weighted lap pad or a weighted teddy bear to provide calming deep pressure input.
- **Encourage self-regulation:** Some children can initiate self-regulating breaks on their own, which is great. If your child can't do this yet, help them by prompting these breaks when needed.
- **Be proactive:** If you notice your child is reaching their breaking point, don't wait to act. Leave the situation if necessary to prevent your child becoming overwhelmed.

After



- **Reflect on the event:** After the busy outing, take time to reflect with your child on their experience. Discuss how they felt during the event, what went well, and what could have been done differently. This reflection can help them process their emotions and learn from the experience.
- **Celebrate small wins:** Throughout the day, celebrate the small victories your child achieves. Whether it's successfully using a coping strategy or handling a challenging situation, acknowledging these accomplishments can boost their confidence and make them more likely to try again.
- **Recognise the effort:** Going out into unfamiliar and stimulating environments can be a significant challenge for children with sensory difficulties. Recognise the effort your child put into the outing and let them know you understand this.
- **Provide comfort:** After returning home, create a calming and comforting environment for your child to decompress. Offer their favourite snacks, engage in soothing activities like reading or listening to music, and allow them time to relax and recharge.
- **Encourage communication:** Encourage your child to express their feelings and experiences openly. Validate their emotions and give reassurance that it's okay to feel overwhelmed at times. Open communication creates trust and helps strengthen your relationship with your child.

