



Humber Sensory Processing Service

Community Services for Children
aged 0-18 years



Strategies for managing smell

The sense of smell is also known as the Olfactory system. The Olfactory system helps us detect smells in the environment and determine if they are pleasurable or noxious. Our sense of smell is strongly linked with our sense of taste and although we are able to smell when born, the ability to distinguish between a pleasant and unpleasant smell is not immediate and our response to smells must be learnt.

Once we detect a smell, that signal is sent to the brain. It is the only sensory system that has a direct pathway to the brain; therefore, smells can give immediate information about the environment around us. The signal is also sent to the part of the brain that is responsible for identifying taste information, as well as the parts of the brain responsible for learning, and memory. This can prompt an emotion or feeling to go along with that particular scent. Think about the smell of your favourite meal or baked treat, flowers, that newborn baby smell, or the smell of your favourite perfume – these smells probably evoke happy and positive emotions/memories. The sense of smell can also help detect potential danger – such as something burning, gas leaking, or if food has spoiled. Thinking of these smells can bring up negative thoughts, fear, or danger.

Differences with processing smells

We all have our preferences with smell; however, smells can be difficult to process for some children and can elicit strong reactions. A child may avoid certain smells or situations altogether. This child may become overwhelmed in a situation where scents are too strong, and they may struggle to focus due to a distracting scent. These are often smells that others do not notice but for the child, the smells are overpowering and ‘too much’.

A different child may seek out certain smells or situations that have a lot of smells, as their brain is telling them that it’s ‘not enough’. This child may sniff everything, including people and non-edible objects. Often this child does not notice smells in their environment.



Strategies to manage smell

Introduce any new smell technique at a quiet time for your child. If your child is able to understand, talk about the plan and agree how to practice this. Help them to choose a smell that can help them to stay calm. Many techniques will need to be familiar before your child can respond by calming. Offer other regulating input proactively to help your child to cope with smell input.

Use caution with essential oils and scents in general with children. Not all scents are safe for kids.

- Offer alternative scents to mask unwanted smells. Some children find the smell of a parent or loved one's perfume or body spray to be reassuring and calming – you can spray these onto handkerchiefs or a teddy so that the child can carry and use discreetly throughout the day to help them be calm and feel safe.
- Offer a soft handheld fan so that the child can 'blow away' unwanted smells.
- Avoid using too many different smells. Try to limit the number of smells, such as floral disinfectant, pine toilet freshener, musk perfumes, as these can add together and make an environment that is challenging and unpleasant.
- Use unscented toiletries.
- Certain smells such as the smells involving the toilet can be challenging to children, you can use social stories to help a child accept smells such as toilet smells. Prepare your child before they go into environments that have challenging smells.
- Try calming scents to soothe or relax – such as vanilla, floral or chamomile.
- Try alerting scents to stimulate or alert – such as peppermint or citrus.



- Incorporate opportunities to explore the sense of smell in daily routines. Try things like scratch and sniff stickers, scented markers, scented Playdough and scented lotions.
- A sensory scented bin can be a good way to allow your child to explore scents, an example would be to use dry rice and add a couple of drops of essential oils. Be aware of allergies and a little goes a long way!
- Try a scent matching game such as follow your nose; you can set this up yourself using scents such as spices and lotions.
- Be aware that exploring scents can be overstimulating. Offer regulating input before and after – such as the use of proprioception and deep pressure input.
- Introduce preferred smells as part of the personal care routine.

Strategies and accommodations for school

If the child is sensitive to smells:

- Ask cleaning staff to use fragrance free cleaning products.
- Use un-scented toiletries.
- Seat the child away from the rubbish bin or other objects that may produce strong odours.
- Be aware that if you have a scented object, the child may act adversely to that particular smell.
- Keep rooms well ventilated, especially when using strong smelling materials.
- Allow the child to sit beside open window.



Teach the child appropriate coping strategies:

- Cover nose with a tissue.
- Inform teacher that smell is unpleasant, either verbally or using a visual cue.
- Provide the child with a scent they prefer. The child could use this scent to mask unpleasant smells and odours as a coping strategy.
- Allocate the child a chair beside an open window in the dining hall and placed at a distance from the kitchen.
- Encourage the child to eat part of lunch in the dining hall and then allow him/ her to move to another room after a few minutes, or when the smells become overwhelming.
- Allow the child to eat lunch in another room; numbers of children in this alternative room could be limited in order to control the smell of different foods.
- Allow the child access to preferred smelling foods, either from the school canteen or a packed lunch.
- Ensure the child has access to regulating input through their day including proprioceptive and deep pressure input.

If the child is seeking smells:

- Offer opportunities to explore smells within their day including scented stickers and markers or scented dough. This may offer a 'brain break' for the child.
- Have access to smells, for example sprayed on a handkerchief or on their cuffs.

