

Here Comes the Sun

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DEAR SENSORY SMARTS,

While everyone else seems to be having fun during the summer, my teenage son with autism falls apart. He can't stand summer clothing, hates the sun, gets upset when I put on sunblock, and gets agitated when we try to get him in a pool or lake. Do you have any suggestions?

From, Hot Mama

Dear Hot Mama, Summer months are hard for a lot of kids and adults on the autism spectrum, and especially for those with sensory issues. With extended hours of daylight, heat and humidity, less skin covered by clothing, and the expectation for "fun" outdoor activities, there are tactile, visual, auditory, movement, and other sensory experiences that can be particularly challenging and overwhelming during the summer.

Why is summer so hard from a sensory perspective? Most people with sensory issues struggle with *habituation*, the neurological process by which the brain and body adjust to something new. When you put on socks in the morning, for example, you do not think about those socks once they are on your feet. A person with tactile sensitivity may experience those socks over and over as new sensory input for hours. Add a shirt, pants, breakfast, and toothbrushing, and that's a full morning of arousing sensory experiences bombarding the child before he's even left the house. For this person, any kind of change becomes a big deal and it can take a very long time to reach a daily comfort zone again. On top of this,



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summertime brings with it a different set of challenges.

Tactile and Clothing Issues

For some people, changing clothing styles for summer wear, such as switching from long pants to shorts or skirts, and from long sleeves to tees and tanks, can be a startling. Light touch, which triggers a primitive protective response, is sensed by displacement of hairs on the skin. When a sensitive person used to wearing long sleeved shirts puts on a short sleeved shirt or switches from long pants to shorts or a skirt, the wind generated by walking – not to mention actual gusts of wind – will displace those hairs and increase arousal. Again, most people become habituated to this quickly, but if your loved one continues to struggle, ask an occupational therapist about a desensitization program. Also look for very lightweight, cool clothing that covers legs and arms.

Switching to sandals can be very difficult as well. Water shoes and sneakers with mesh fabric rather than leather or nylon can provide deep pressure to the feet yet allow for ventilation. Sandals with toe guards, such as Keen's or Merrell's,

may be tolerable. Crocs are also a comfortable solution for many kids and adults. If the child (or adult) insists on wearing socks all summer, try the seamless socks available from companies like Smartknitkids.com and Softclothing.net. *

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You may already know that *some* exposure to sunshine is actually very good for you. Many health experts now recommend *short, daily unprotected body exposure* to the sun because the sun is the body's main source of Vitamin D, essential to the immune system. Ask your pediatrician or dermatologist about a safe length of exposure. The key is to never *burn*. For some people, 5-10 minutes of unprotected exposure is all their delicate skin can take while others can safely do 20-30 minutes. The face should always be protected by a wide brimmed hat and the eyes, susceptible to damage by the sun, should always be protected outdoors by optical-quality sunglasses. If you will be out for an extended period, the safest strategy is to wear a hat and natural fiber clothing that covers the arms and legs and sunscreen on any exposed skin.

Many kids and adults have a hard time tolerating sunscreen, feeling it's too slimy and stinky. An unscented spray-on sunscreen, such as Neutrogena Fresh Cooling Sunblock or Neutrogena Waterguard Kids, is non-greasy, and does not need to be rubbed in. Spray it on indoors where the wind won't blow away half the product, and let it dry before going outside so nothing sticks to it. If you do need to rub on sunscreen, use firm strokes, providing a quick, calming massage. If your child is in the sun daily, putting on sunscreen can be a part of your sensory diet of activities.

Please do your homework about the chemicals in sunscreen. Physical barriers such as titanium dioxide and zinc oxide (the one that looks like white paint) are considered safer than products that contain Benzophenone-3 or Oxybenzone. It is hard to find commercial products that do not contain these questionable chemicals. Healthier sunscreens such as Kabana Green Screen and Badger Sunscreen are worth investigating. The EWG Skin Deep database (ewg.org/skindeep) is a great way to check out the ingredients in the products you are using.

If the bugs are biting, you may have no choice but to use insect repellent. There are several all-natural formulations that do not contain toxic DEET, such as Burt's Bees Herbal Insect Repellent and EcoSMART Organic Insect Repellent. These products contain essential oils like citronella and rosemary that bugs can't stand. Of course, you may not be able to tolerate the smell either, so instead keep skin covered with long sleeves and long pants, avoid scented body or hair products which attract bugs, patch any holes in window screens, and avoid being outside at dawn and dusk when bugs are most prevalent.

Fun in the Water

Water can be a marvelous source of sensory input, providing even, sustained deep pressure. Sensory seekers usually love it, but water can be very difficult for those who are oversensitive.

Select swimwear carefully. Look for styles that have flat seams

without annoying ruffles or tight waistbands. Remove tags, labels, and itchy threads. Some girls dislike wet nylon on their tummies and may prefer a two-piece suit, while others want their tummies protected against sun and wind. A boy may prefer a snug Speedo-style racer or prefer loose boxer style trunks. Hanna Andersson (Hannaandersson.com) has a wide selection of sensory-friendly bathing suits for kids and a few for adults. Put on the bathing suit at home so your child can acclimate to the feeling before having to also deal with sand, sun, or chlorine. If traditional swimwear is intolerable, try Lycra bicycle clothing that provides deep pressure over more of the body.

To avoid abrupt changes in temperature, take a shower prior to going into the pool or ocean, ideally at a temperature that is around the midpoint between the air and the water. If there's no shower available, wet feet, legs, shoulders, and chest, and then head before actually stepping into the water.

Chlorinated pools smell bad, and public pools, especially those indoors, can be unbearably noisy. Swimmer earplugs dampen the noise and swimmer noseplugs close off the nostrils. Opt for outdoor pools and those that use chemicals such as bromine rather than stinky chlorine. Try giving your child goggles so he can see underwater. Pool toys like beach balls and diving rings add goal-directed fun and may distract from sensory discomfort.

You may want to work with an aquatic therapist, who is often an occupational or physical therapist. Check out the Aquatic Resources Network at aquaticnet.com.

I've been teaching kids how to snorkel. This is a great way to teach breath control, which is so important for calming and self-regulation. Once kids get the hang of it, they can go deeper underwater for more intense hydrostatic pressure. I start by having the child wear a mask and snorkel mouthpiece while sitting in a chair. Then we practice breathing underwater in a bathtub. Next, we progress to a swimming pool. Finally, when a child is ready, start in calm water, such as a clear lake or lagoon. Stay in shallow water for a while so the person can stand up and remove the snorkel, especially since seeing fish is highly stimulating. Snorkeling can be a great, lifelong hobby and there are many snorkeling and scuba diving programs for people on the autism spectrum.

There are also wonderful therapy programs in which people with autism and other special needs have an opportunity to swim with the most appealing therapy assistants on the planet: dolphins! Island Dolphin Care (islanddolphinscare.org) in Key Largo, FL and Dolphin Human Therapy in Grand Cayman (dhtgc.com) are two such programs worth checking out. Scholarships may be available for your family.

Find additional tips and suggestions for handling summertime, special event, and environmental challenges, in *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* or at sensorysmarts.com. Got a question? I'd love to hear from you: email me at Lindsey@sensorysmarts.com

*For more ideas on sensory-friendly clothing choices, see my column in the July/August 2010 issue of *Autism Asperger's Digest*. This article is also available as a download at sensorysmarts.com. ■