

When Life Stinks

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DEAR SENSORY SMARTS,

My 17-year-old child with Asperger's is super sensitive to smell. He can't stand going to the gas station, gets upset around people wearing perfume, and gags around food with strong aromas.

What can I do to help?

From, Father of Stinky Boy

Dear Dad,

Your son is not alone: about one-third of people on the autism spectrum are hypersensitive to smell. *Everything* and *everyone* has some kind of odor which most of us simply block out. This continual odiferous onslaught can be completely overwhelming for a smell-sensitive person like your son.

The olfactory (smell) sense is fascinating. Smell input is the only sensory information that travels directly to the limbic system of the brain, the center of our emotions and memories. That's why nothing taps into our feelings quite like smells. Certain odors are *supposed* to trigger stress responses; smell, our most primitive sense, protects us from smoke, rotten food, and other dangers. The olfactory defensive child may be so stressed out by what he smells that he is sickened by certain scents, gags on aromatic foods, and struggles to shift his attention away from what he smells to anything else.

The first thing you can do to help is to fully tune in to your child's olfactory experiences so you can predict difficult situations and take proactive steps. Common trouble spots include:



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- Supermarkets, restaurants, and holiday gatherings where there are many food smells and a lot of people with assorted odors
- School, with classmates in various states of cleanliness, gym class, the cafeteria, school supplies, industrial cleaning products
 - Hair salons with strong chemicals, scented shampoos and other hair products
 - Swimming pools, especially those indoors where chlorine stays concentrated in the air
 - Zoos with unfamiliar animal scents, carnivals, gas stations, and so on

Sensory Smart Smell Strategies

Odors consist of chemicals that are blown into the nostrils by air currents and then land on hairy olfactory receptors. When enough molecules have landed, an impulse travels up the olfactory nerve tract.

You can "pre-treat" receptors with more tolerable odors that alter the perception of incoming smells. When I work with a smell sensitive person, I present an assortment of high-quality essential oils in a room with good ventilation, ideally one with a fan and an open window so

we can blow intolerable scents out quickly. I play the person's favorite soothing music and make sure the lighting is not overly bright. I prefer therapeutic grade oils from Young Living Oils (youngliving.com), but you can go right to your health food store for others. I put a drop of oil on a cotton ball and the person inhales. If he or she hates the smell, we trash the cotton ball inside a sealed bag and air out the room. Typical choices are vanilla, sweet orange or tangerine, eucalyptus, and rose. I avoid lavender oil since studies now show it can cause hormonal imbalances in young boys.

The person selects his or her favorite essential oil and then gets a bottle. Before going to a trouble spot such as a gas station or grocery store, the person (or a caregiver) puts a drop on a hankie or wristband and inhales it, pulling preferred chemicals up and onto nasal sensory receptors. Then, when presented with noxious odors, the person still smells tangerine or whatever he or she has chosen. One caveat: unless specially formulated, you'll need to dilute most essential oils with a carrier oil such as Sweet Almond Oil before putting an essential oil directly on skin. So if you find you need to put a daub of essential oil on the person's wrist or under his nostrils, make sure it is diluted first. Ideally, you should work with someone who has training in aromatherapy.

A company called Olfactory Biosciences Corp. has a product called NOXO Autism Alleviation™ balm. This balm, consisting of phytochemicals and phytonutrients from plants, flowers, roots and seeds in a soy base, can be applied on the skin under the nostrils to provide relief from environmental odors. Check it out at www.noxoinfo.com/autism.html.

If there are no essential oils or balms available, grab the best smelling item (to you or your child, that is) within reach. In the grocery store, find a fruit your child tolerates, and have him hold that close to his nose while you shop. When eating, if there is one food he likes the smell of, make sure it is served first and stays near him on the table.

Avoid scented products when possible. Many laundry detergents, soaps, shampoos, lotions, and deodorants come in unscented, uncolored versions, usually marketed to people with allergies. Think of your son as having an allergy to smells.

If your child were allergic to a food such as peanuts, you wouldn't hesitate to ask his school or the host of a party to not serve it. Ask people your child interacts with to not wear scented deodorants, perfumes, and hair products.

Get gas before you set out with your child if you can. If you need to fill up on the way, have him walk around the block with

someone if available while you fill up. Or grab an essential oil or balm.

In a restaurant or cafeteria, ask for a table near an open window if one is available - as far away as possible from the kitchen.

Just as you wash your hands to keep them clean, you can rinse out nasal passageways using a saline solution such as Simply Saline or Little Noses Saline Mist.

Dear Sensory Smarts,

I have a 21-year-old young man who is fixated with strong smells. He's obsessed with tipping outdoor bins and lying down to smell the contents. If there is fresh manure on a garden he does the same thing. He will also sniff people wearing strong perfume and stims on the smell of cheese and onion chips. How can I redirect this behavior?

From,

Sick of smelling Mom

Dear Mom,

Odors consist of chemicals that are blown into the nostrils by air currents and then land on hairy olfactory receptors. When enough molecules have landed, an impulse travels up the olfactory nerve tract.

One of the strategies I recommend is to "pre-treat" olfactory receptors with certain odors. While I usually recommend this for a person who cannot tolerate a certain smell, you can definitely try this with your young man because it might provide him with the intense odor input he seems to crave.

Start by getting some Vicks's Vapo-Rub and having him put some around his nostrils. This is a very intense smell that might satisfy his cravings. You can also go to the health food store and pick out an assortment of high-quality essential oils. In this case, you might consider very intense oils such as rosemary, eucalyptus, or patchouli. Then, put a few drops of each on cotton balls and let him see which one(s) he likes. He could then put a bit of the oil (mixed into some sweet almond as a base oil to protect delicate facial skin) and daub it under his nostrils to get the input he craves.

Finally, you might try NOXO Autism Alleviation™ balm (see above). Again, this is for people who are avoiding smells, but it's still worth checking out.

For more on dealing with smell and taste sensitivity and other sensory challenges, please see *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit www.sensorysmarts.com. ■