

**The impact of the Sensory Protocol on functional and behavioural performance of children with severe sensory defensiveness, behavioural disturbance and intellectual disability.**

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**Introduction**

Many children with intellectual disability have styles of sensory processing that prompt severe defensive responses (withdrawal, anxiety), thereby reducing their ability to participate in daily home and school life. There are few studies that provide empirical support for commonly used sensory interventions in managing difficult behaviour (self-injury, stereotypy) that appears to be sensory based, and none that utilise a randomised controlled design.

**Objective**

To determine whether the Sensory Protocol (sensory diet and therapressure) improves functional and behavioural outcomes for children with severe sensory defensiveness.

**Method**

A randomised controlled study was employed. 30 child participants (6 - 12 years), each with a nominated carer/parent were randomly allocated to either an experimental intervention (Sensory Protocol) or a control intervention (Behavioural Support). Independent reliability checks were done throughout the project to assure intervention fidelity. Instruments used to measure relevant variables prior to and at the conclusion of eight weeks of intervention included: Short Sensory Profile; the Developmental Behaviour Checklist; Parent Interview; and Parent Sensory Protocol Diary. Four Goal Attainment Scales were negotiated at the start of each intervention phase and used to measure functional change based on the child's individual situation. Two of the goals related to functional performance and two related to behaviour.

**Results**

There was significant difference in functional and behavioural change between the two interventions in several variables measured. Parents using the Sensory Protocol intervention indicated a significantly greater reduction in problem behaviours.

**Conclusion**

When applied with caution, in context, and with appropriate training, the Sensory Protocol can contribute to successful functional and behavioural outcomes for children with severe sensory defensiveness.

**Contribution to Practice**

Evidence to support the use of therapressure and sensory diets in the everyday life of children with challenging behaviours that are linked to sensory processing disorders. This research prompted an ecological, client and family centered approach to measuring outcomes.