autism wellbeing

Our Senses: Olfactory

Our sense of smell is closely related to our sense of taste. Most people can relate to losing their sense of taste when they have a blocked nose or heavy cold.

The olfactory system is linked to parts of our nervous system that manage emotions. Smells can be evocative or repulsive. People rely on their sense of smell to help identify if something is safe or harmful. Smells can help you to calm down or they can be energising.

Some autistic children and young people may experience smells and aromas more intensely than other people and they may react strongly to smells that don't seem to register with other people that much – this can make learning about using the toilet or using a new shampoo really challenging. Other autistic children and young people may be less aware of smells and possibly not notice if they have body odour or there is an unpleasant smell in the room.

Choose aromas that help with sensory regulation. If your child finds certain smells help them to be in the "just right state" where they are neither too lethargic nor too active, keep some available to use when required. It is possible to purchase empty inhaler tubes (similar to decongestant inhaler sticks)that can be made up with drops of essential oils or other fragrances.

- Some children can find strong perfumes and other smells overwhelming. Reducing the amount of fragrances you use may help.
- If your child expresses distress at the way other people smell, don't be alarmed. They may be finding the increase in olfactory processing overwhelming.
- Some children use their sense of smell to help them identify other people or objects. This is because their olfactory processing is more useful to them than their visual processing for example.
- Some children and young people may find sniffing familiar objects reassuring. This can be particularly comforting during times of change or distress. Familiar sensory experiences can feel reassuring when the world appears very unpredictable.