



Sensory Guidance for SENDCo's, HOY & Pastoral Support - Secondary

Delivering Targeted Support Using the Tameside Sensory Needs Toolkit

This guidance supports secondary SENDCos, Heads of Year and pastoral teams to move from identifying sensory differences to delivering structured, consistent and collaborative targeted support.

In secondary settings, sensory needs may present through:

- Attendance concerns
- Subject avoidance
- Transition difficulties
- Fatigue or end-of-day escalation
- Withdrawal or masking
- Low-level disruption or disengagement

Targeted support should be:

- ✓ Collaborative
- ✓ Time-limited
- ✓ Predictable
- ✓ Proportionate
- ✓ Focused on access to learning

The stages of targeted support are outlined below. Each stage builds on the previous one and should not be skipped.

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Stage 1: Strengthen Universal Support First

Before moving into targeted planning, ensure:

- ✓ **Universal classroom strategies are embedded across subjects**
- ✓ **Environmental adjustments have been considered in different spaces (classrooms, corridors, dining hall, PE, practical rooms)**
- ✓ **Predictability and routines are clear across the timetable**
- ✓ **Staff understand how sensory differences may present in adolescents**
- ✓ **Behavioural indicators have been reviewed through a sensory lens**

In secondary settings, sensory needs may present differently. They may look like:

- Repeated lateness or corridor avoidance
- Refusal of certain subjects or rooms
- Persistent low-level disruption
- “Attitude” or shutdown in specific lessons
- Social withdrawal at break/lunch
- Head on desk, hood up, AirPods in
- Escalation at transition points
- Increased behaviour at end of day

These behaviours are not automatically sensory - but they may be regulation signals.

Targeted support builds on universal practice — it does not replace it.



Sensory OT Insight:

“In adolescence, sensory distress is often masked or misinterpreted as defiance, disengagement or lack of motivation. Before escalating behaviour systems, pause and consider whether the environment, transitions, or cumulative sensory load may be contributing.

Small adjustments across the timetable can significantly reduce escalation.”

Stage 2: Complete the Observation & Screening Checklist

Use the Sensory Screening Checklist to identify patterns - but ensure the young person is part of the process.

1. Share and explain the purpose of the checklist to the young person.
2. Invite them to complete their section independently where possible.
3. Complete parent/carer and school perspectives.
4. Compare responses together.

The dual (or triple) perspective is essential.

In secondary, presentation often differs across:

- Subjects
- Teachers
- Social contexts
- Times of day
- Home vs school

Look for:

- ✓ Sensory themes
- ✓ Timetable patterns
- ✓ Transition triggers
- ✓ Masking indicators
- ✓ Early signs of dysregulation

The checklist is not a diagnostic tool - it identifies functional patterns to guide support.



Sensory OT Insight:

“Secondary students are highly aware of peer perception. Some may under-report difficulties; others may minimise or normalise distress. Create space for honest responses without fear of consequence.

When patterns differ between home and school, this is information - not contradiction.”

Stage 3: Listen – Complete the ‘My Sensory Profile’ (Voice of the Young Person)

Use the Sensory Profile worksheet to explore:

- ✓ What feels manageable
- ✓ What feels overwhelming
- ✓ Times of day that drain energy
- ✓ Early body signals
- ✓ What already helps

This stage should be completed by the young person with support from a trusted adult.

The aim is not interrogation. It is understanding.

Why this matters in secondary:

Adolescents:

- Need autonomy
- Value being heard
- Are developing self-awareness
- Benefit from understanding their own regulation

The young person’s voice builds:

- ✓ Ownership
- ✓ Trust
- ✓ Engagement
- ✓ Shared responsibility

Support is more effective when the young person understands what is changing and why.



Sensory OT Insight:

“Young people may not use sensory language. They may describe experiences as “annoying,” “too much,” “weird,” “awkward,” or “I just hate it.” These words matter.

You do not need to correct the language - you need to understand the meaning.

When a young person can identify early body signals, escalation often reduces.”

Stage 4: Identify Three Priorities (Collaboratively)

Work with:

- ✓ The young person
- ✓ Parents/carers
- ✓ Key staff

Use both:

- ✓ The Sensory Observation & Screening Checklist
- ✓ The 'My Sensory Profile' worksheet (Voice of Young person)

Agree three focused priorities.

Keep it specific.

Ask collaboratively:

- What has the biggest impact on access to learning?
- Where does distress escalate most often?
- What feels most urgent to the young person?
- What change would make the biggest difference right now?

Examples:

- Corridor transitions
- Lunchtime overwhelm
- End-of-day fatigue
- PE changing room distress
- Morning arrival anxiety

Priorities should not be exclusively school-focused.

Balance:

- One school-priority area
- One home-impact area (if relevant)
- One young-person-priority area

This supports shared ownership.



Sensory OT Insight:

“In secondary settings, adults often prioritise behaviour, attendance or academic outcomes. The young person may prioritise transitions, social spaces, or fatigue.

When priorities reflect only adult concerns, engagement drops.

When young people see their experience represented in the plan, implementation improves.

Targeted support works best when it feels collaborative - not imposed.”

Stage 5: Select Strategies to Trial

Use the Strategies Library (Secondary) within the Tameside Sensory Needs Toolkit.

Select supports that:

- ✓ Link directly to the three agreed priorities
- ✓ Fit realistically within the secondary timetable
- ✓ Can be delivered consistently across subjects
- ✓ Are tailored to the young person - not generic

Consider:

- **Timing (before, during or after escalation?)**
- **Predictability (is it built into routine?)**
- **Staff capacity (who is responsible?)**
- **The young person's preference and consent**

Strategies are only effective when:

- ✓ They are consistent across staff
- ✓ They are delivered at the right time (preventative, not reactive)
- ✓ The young person understands their purpose
- ✓ They are reviewed and adjusted when needed

In secondary settings, inconsistency across lessons can undermine impact.

Involving the Young Person – How to Frame It

Young people should know:

- **What is changing**
- **Why it is changing**
- **When it will happen**
- **Who is responsible**

“You mentioned that corridor transitions feel overwhelming. Let’s try leaving two minutes early for the next few weeks and see if that reduces stress.”

“You said the dining hall feels too loud. Would you prefer sitting in a quieter area or having access to a short reset space before afternoon lessons?”

“You’ve noticed you feel drained by period 5. Let’s build in a structured reset before that lesson.”

The aim is shared problem-solving - not compliance.



Sensory OT Insight:

“Strategies in secondary schools fail most often because they are:

- *Inconsistent across teachers*
- *Reactive rather than preventative*
- *Not understood by the young person*
- *Too vague to implement*

Before agreeing a strategy, ask:

- *Can this be delivered reliably across the timetable?*
- *Is it realistic within subject expectations?*
- *Who is responsible for prompting or monitoring it?*
- *Does the young person feel comfortable using it?*
- *Is it discreet and socially safe?*

Adolescents are highly aware of peer perception. A strategy that increases visibility or stigma may not be used.

If a strategy feels unrealistic, adapt it collaboratively.

It is better to implement one strategy well and consistently than five inconsistently.

Build gradually.”

Stage 6: Create the 1-Page Sensory Passport

Summarise clearly and concisely:

- The three agreed priorities
- Tricky times of day
- Early body signals
- Agreed strategies
- What adults will do
- What the young person will try

Keep it simple. Keep it usable.

The passport should:

- Be accessible and easy to read
- Reflect the young person's language where possible
- Be specific rather than generic
- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Be realistic within a secondary timetable

Avoid lengthy explanations. Focus on clarity.

Consistency matters more than perfection.

Include:

For each priority area:

- ✓ When the difficulty is most likely to occur
- ✓ What early signs may look like
- ✓ What support will be offered
- ✓ Who is responsible
- ✓ How the young person can access support
- ✓ What success looks like

Where appropriate, include:

- Exam or classroom considerations
- Transition adjustments
- End-of-day or homework support
- Discreet signals or agreed phrases

Share the passport with:

- ✓ Key subject teachers
- ✓ Tutors / HOY / pastoral staff
- ✓ Parents/carers
- ✓ The young person

The young person should have access to their own passport



Sensory OT Insight:

“By the time the passport is created, patterns should be clear.

The passport is not a detailed report - it is a working summary that makes support predictable.

*In secondary settings, **clarity across multiple teachers is crucial**. If one lesson applies support and another does not, regulation becomes less predictable.*

When identifying tricky times, be precise:

- Morning arrival
- After lunch
- Period 5
- Practical subjects
- PE changing rooms

Link each priority directly to agreed actions.

When recording strategies, specify:

- How often they are used
- How long they last
- Whether adult prompting is required
- Whether the young person can self-initiate

Be clear about adult responses during dysregulation. Agree brief, consistent phrases or approaches. Calm, minimal language is often more effective than lengthy explanations.

Ask the young person:

- What helps in difficult moments?
- What makes things worse?

Knowing what to avoid is as important as knowing what to implement.

The passport should remain a live document - reviewed and adapted as patterns evolve.”

Stage 7: Review & Next Steps

Targeted support is only effective when it is reviewed thoughtfully and collaboratively.

Reviewing allows schools to:

- **Reflect on what has actually been implemented**
- **Consider impact across the timetable**
- **Make evidence-informed adjustments**
- **Avoid repeated cycles of “start again”**

Use the [Progress & Review Log](#) within the Tameside Sensory Needs Toolkit to structure this process.

Include the young person in the review conversation wherever possible.

When reviewing targeted support, consider:

- Were agreed strategies implemented consistently across subjects?
- Were they delivered at the intended time of day?
- Did all relevant staff understand their role?
- Has feedback been gathered from the young person?
- Has parent/carer feedback been considered?
- Has sufficient time (6–8 weeks) been allowed for patterns to stabilise?

Review should focus on patterns over time - not isolated incidents.

In secondary settings, look across:

- **Different teachers**
- **Different subjects**
- **Transition points**
- **End-of-day fatigue**
- **Social spaces**

What progress may look like:

Progress is not always fewer behaviours.

It may include:

- ✓ **Reduced escalation or quicker recovery**
- ✓ **Smoother transitions between lessons**
- ✓ **Increased willingness to enter specific subjects**

- ✓ Improved attendance or punctuality
- ✓ Greater emotional safety with staff
- ✓ Increased self-advocacy or use of strategies
- ✓ Improved engagement in one priority area

Sensory sensitivity will likely remain.

Progress is increased capacity, regulation and participation.

If progress is limited:

Before escalating, consider:

Consistency

- Were strategies delivered reliably across the timetable?

Timing

- Were supports preventative, or introduced after escalation?

Match

- Do strategies still align with the identified priorities?

Volume

- Were too many strategies introduced at once?

Environment

- Are universal barriers still present (noise, unpredictability, transitions)?

Young Person Voice

- Does the young person feel the strategies are helpful or socially safe?

Sensory OT Insight:

“When reviewing impact, look beyond behaviour alone. In adolescence, sensory differences may sit within a broader neurodivergent profile. Sensory supports are not designed to “cure” sensitivity - nor should they.

A young person may continue to experience sensory challenges. Meaningful progress may instead look like:

- Quicker recovery after stress
- Greater confidence accessing support
- Increased attendance or participation
- Reduced cumulative overload across the day
- Improved trust and collaboration with adults



A neuro-affirming approach recognises that the aim is not to “fix” sensory traits, but to reduce distress and increase access to learning.

Escalation decisions should be based on impact on safety, regulation and participation - not the continued presence of sensory sensitivity itself.”

Implementation Guidance

How long should strategies be trialled?

Strategies should be trialled for a minimum of 6–8 weeks, unless there is clear evidence they are increasing distress.

In secondary settings, this allows time for:

- Consistency across multiple teachers
- Routines to embed across the timetable
- The young person’s nervous system to adapt
- Patterns to become clearer across subjects
- Reduced novelty effects

Avoid judging impact too early, particularly during:

- **The start of a new term**
- **Exam periods**
- **Changes in timetable or staff**
- **After school holidays**

Stability over time is a more reliable indicator than short-term improvement.

If a strategy appears to be working, avoid removing it too quickly. Consistency often reflects that support is effective. Before making changes:

- ✓ Speak with the young person first
- ✓ Gather feedback from parents/carers
- ✓ Check consistency across lessons
- ✓ Use a gradual, stepped reduction
- ✓ Ensure the young person understands what is changing and why

In secondary settings, sudden removal can feel unpredictable and may impact trust.

The goal is increasing independence - not testing whether the young person can cope without support.

Sensory OT Insight:

“If support has helped a young person feel safer or more regulated, removing it abruptly can reintroduce unpredictability.

Where possible:

- ✓ *Fade support gradually*
- ✓ *Increase self-initiation opportunities*
- ✓ *Replace adult prompts with cues*
- ✓ *Agree clear review dates*



Independence develops through scaffolding - not sudden withdrawal.”

Embedding strategies into daily routines

Strategies are more effective when they are:

- ✓ **Predictable**
- ✓ **Discreet and socially safe**
- ✓ **Built into routine**
- ✓ **Consistent across subjects**

In secondary settings, strategies must work across multiple classrooms and teachers - not just one environment.

Consider:

- ✓ Building strategies into the timetable (e.g. start-of-lesson routine, end-of-day reset)
- ✓ Using agreed phrases across staff
- ✓ Providing discreet visual or verbal cues
- ✓ Ensuring tools move with the young person (not stored in one room)
- ✓ Normalising regulation language across tutor groups or year teams
- ✓ Linking strategies to predictable moments (arrival, after lunch, before period 5)

Accessibility matters.

If a strategy requires the young person to ask publicly or explain themselves repeatedly, it is unlikely to be used.

For example:

Instead of:

“Do you need to calm down?”

Use:

“Let’s all take two minutes to reset before we start.”

Instead of:

“Go and get your ear loops if you need them.”

Use:

“For those with focus tools, you can use them now if you need them while concentrating”

Instead of:

“You can leave if you’re overwhelmed.”

Agree:

A clear, consistent signal and a known reset space

Strategies embedded in whole-class routines reduce stigma and increase uptake.



Sensory OT Insight:

“A strategy is only helpful if it can be accessed easily and consistently across the timetable.

If it relies entirely on the young person remembering to ask (particularly if they present more passively) adult prompting and routine embedding will be essential.

In secondary settings, discretion and social safety matter. A strategy that increases visibility may reduce use. The most effective strategies are those that feel ordinary.”

Supporting Young People Who Mask

Some young people appear regulated in school while releasing distress at home.

Masking becomes more common in adolescence, particularly where social belonging and peer perception are highly valued.

Parents and carers are often the first to notice:

- Increasing anxiety
- Emotional intensity after school
- Withdrawal or shutdown
- Heightened fatigue
- Growing reluctance to attend

Masking requires sustained effort. Over time, this can contribute to increased anxiety, low mood and burnout.

Masking and Mental Health

When sensory needs are masked, the nervous system may remain on high alert throughout the day. This can present as:

- **Persistent anxiety without a clear trigger**
- **Physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, racing heart)**
- **Irritability or emotional overwhelm at home**
- **Sudden school refusal**
- **Increased social anxiety**

Importantly, the young person may not be able to identify the “thought” behind the anxiety.

They may say:

- *“I don’t know why I feel like this.”*
- *“I just feel stressed.”*
- *“School makes me anxious.”*
- *“Everything feels too much.”*

In these cases, anxiety may be driven by cumulative sensory load, unpredictability, social processing demands or sustained effort to appear regulated- rather than a specific cognitive worry.

This does not mean the anxiety is imagined. It means the source may be physiological (sensory) as well as psychological.

Young People Who Mask May:

- ✓ Avoid drawing attention to themselves
- ✓ Decline support even when needed
- ✓ Present as compliant but highly fatigued
- ✓ Withdraw socially at break or lunchtime
- ✓ Experience end-of-day “collapse”
- ✓ Struggle to articulate what feels wrong
- ✓ Report anxiety without being able to explain why

Masking does not reduce need. Though it can often delay recognition or supports being in place early.

Support does not require a diagnosis to begin.

In Secondary Settings, Continue To:

- ✓ **Use the Voice of the Young Person tools**
- ✓ **Explore body signals as well as thoughts**
- ✓ **Reduce cumulative sensory load where possible**
- ✓ **Prioritise predictability across the timetable**
- ✓ **Monitor fatigue and end-of-day patterns**
- ✓ **Embed regulation strategies within universal practice**
- ✓ **Check in discreetly with trusted staff**

Whole-class normalisation of regulation language reduces stigma and increases psychological safety.



Sensory OT Insight:

“When anxiety appears “out of nowhere,” consider whether the young person’s nervous system has been managing sustained sensory and social demand throughout the day.

For some adolescents, distress is not driven by a single worry, but by cumulative overload.

Addressing predictability, transitions and environmental load can reduce anxiety even when no clear “thought” is identified.

Masking may protect social identity in the short term - but without adjustment, it can increase mental health vulnerability over time.”

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What if parents and school views are very different?

Differences are common - and valuable.

Young people often present differently across environments.

Use this as information:

- Is masking occurring in school?
- Is fatigue showing at home?
- Are routines, expectations or sensory demands different?
- Is distress delayed until the young person feels safe?

Look for patterns rather than deciding which view is “correct.”
Both perspectives matter.

2. What if we identify more than three priorities?

Stay focused.

Targeted support works best when it is specific and manageable.

Begin with the three areas that:

- ✓ Have the greatest impact on safety
- ✓ Most affect access to learning
- ✓ Are most urgent for the young person

Additional areas can be reviewed later. Trying to address everything at once often reduces consistency.

3. What if staff feel the strategies are “too much”?

Consistency is more important than quantity.

It is better to:

- ✓ Implement one strategy well
- ✓ At the right time
- ✓ With shared understanding across staff

Rather than introduce multiple changes that are not sustained.

In secondary settings, clarity across teachers is more powerful than volume.

4. What if the child refuses the strategy?

Refusal is information.

Check:

- **Do they understand why it is in place?**
- **Was it chosen collaboratively?**
- **Does it feel socially safe?**
- **Is it discreet enough for a secondary context?**

Revisit the Voice of the Young Person and adjust.

Support should feel collaborative - not imposed.

5. What if there is no immediate improvement?

Strategies require time and consistency.

Ask:

- **Has the strategy been implemented as agreed?**
- **Has it been delivered preventatively?**
- **Are early signs of overload being recognised?**
- **Is adult response consistent across subjects?**

Allow 6–8 weeks before deciding a strategy is ineffective (unless distress increases).

Review patterns over time - not isolated incidents.

6. What if things improve quickly?

Do not remove support too soon!

Stability often reflects that the strategy is working.

If the long-term goal is increased independence:

- Fade support gradually
- Replace adult prompts with cues
- Agree review dates in advance

The aim is scaffolded independence - not sudden withdrawal.

7. How do we know if we need to escalate?

Consider escalation if:

- Strategies have been implemented consistently for 6–8 weeks
- They have been reviewed and refined
- Distress continues to impact safety or learning
- Patterns remain significant despite adjustments
- Specialist advice is required

Escalation should be based on impact on regulation and access - not the continued presence of sensory sensitivity alone.

8. What if the child appears calm in school but distressed at home?

This may indicate masking or cumulative overload.

Discuss with parents/carers:

- After-school fatigue
- Emotional intensity at home
- Sleep disruption
- Increased anxiety or withdrawal

Distress primarily seen at home does not mean school is unaffected.

When school reduces sensory load, increases predictability, and embeds preventative strategies - families often report reduced meltdowns or emotional intensity at home.

9. How do we avoid this becoming a behaviour plan?

Keep the focus on:

- ✓ Safety
- ✓ Regulation

- ✓ Predictability
- ✓ Access to learning
- ✓ Adult consistency

The aim is to support the nervous system - not manage compliance.

When regulation improves, behaviour often improves as a secondary outcome.

10. How often should the passport be updated?

Review after 6–8 weeks.

Update if:

- Priorities change
- New patterns emerge
- The young person's needs shift
- The school context changes (timetable, exam period, transition)

Keep it live - *but avoid constant rewriting.*

11. How do we ensure consistency across multiple teachers?

Secondary settings involve multiple classrooms and teaching styles.

To increase consistency:

- Keep the 1-page passport brief and practical
- Share agreed phrases across staff
- Embed strategies into routine (start/end of lesson)
- Include key points in staff briefings
- Ensure tutor/HOY reinforce the same approach

Consistency means predictable adult responses

12. What about supply teachers?

To reduce disruption:

- Include key sensory information in cover notes
- Highlight 1–2 non-negotiable supports

- Ensure strategies are embedded in routine
- Support the young person to self-initiate where possible

If support only works with one adult or in one classroom, it is unlikely to generalise.

13. What if staff awareness varies across departments?

Focus on:

- Practical adjustments rather than heavy theory
- Shared language around regulation
- Linking sensory needs to access to learning
- Clear examples of impact

When sensory-informed practice becomes part of everyday routines, consistency improves.

14. What if strategies look like “special treatment”?

Fair is not always equal.

Many strategies (predictability, structured movement, clear expectations) benefit multiple students. When regulation strategies are embedded class-wide, stigma reduces.

The aim is equitable access to learning.

15. What if the young person won't use strategies in front of peers?

Adolescents are socially aware.

Check:

- Is the strategy discreet?
- Is it embedded in routine?
- Was the young person involved in choosing it?
- Can it be adapted to feel less visible?

A strategy that feels socially unsafe will not be used.

16. How do we support during exams?

Exams increase cognitive and sensory load.

Plan preventatively:

- Seating
- Noise
- Predictable routines
- End-of-day fatigue
- Clear transitions

Exam stress amplifies existing regulation needs - it does not create them!

17. How do we know if it's sensory or "just behaviour"?

Look for patterns:

- Time-of-day links
- Environmental triggers
- Improvement with predictability
- Cumulative fatigue
- Physical signs of overwhelm

Sensory-related dysregulation reflects nervous system strain - not intent. The screening checklist helps identify functional patterns rather than assumptions.

18. How do we support a young person who feels anxious but can't explain why?

In adolescence, anxiety may not always have a clear "thought."

Consider:

- Cumulative sensory load
- Social processing demands
- Masking effort
- Unpredictability
- Interoceptive awareness

Addressing environmental load and predictability may reduce anxiety even when no specific worry is identified.