Oversensitivity

This may be referred to as being hypersensitive (over-sensitive). Individuals who are hyper-sensitive may be overwhelmed by colors, textures, smells, sounds, touch (i.e. light touch, touch initiated by another person, or unexpected touch). During your story time a child that is hypersensitive may: cover her eyes or ears, hold his nose, gag, scream, refuse to move or seem frozen, frequently tune out or withdraw, or refuse to participate in specific movement or craft activities. They may seem to have intense, out-of-proportion reactions to challenging situations and unfamiliar environments.

Accommodations:

Pre-Story Time:

- Ask parents as they sign up if there are any sensitivities you should be aware of
- Invite parents to bring comfort items, noise cancelling headphones, hats, sunglasses, gloves/mittens, weighted blankets, etc. if they feel it would help their child
- Give parents advance notice of what will occur during each storytime so they can be prepared for any triggers

During Story Time:

- Environmental:
  - Lighting:
    - If possible- dim lights or use natural lighting, try to avoid fluorescent lights because the flicker rate may be a distraction for audience members
    - Give verbal warnings before changing the lights in order to give children time to prepare themselves
  - Flooring:
    - If your storytime room has a busy or colorful carpet, roll it up and put it away before sensory storytime. Consider if other potentially distracting items should be removed from the room (i.e. large stuffed animals, busy pictures, etc.)
    - Textures- Is the audience expected to sit on a cold floor? If so, offer cloth squares for seating (this will also help them see and feel personal space boundaries); Provide alternative surfaces for children to sit on even if flooring is carpet (ex: provide smooth or furry fabric to sit on)
  - Acoustics:
    - Be aware of environmental noises that may distract your audience (ex: ticking clock, whirring fan, buzzing computers, etc.)
    - Give verbal warnings before starting any music or noisy activity to give children time to cover their ears or step away from the group
  - Scents: Avoid perfume and colognes; heavily scented shampoos, conditioners, deodorants, and scented lotions
  - Refuge: You can make a hideaway/calming/safe zone/chill out area in the rear of your story time space; this will be a place where kids can calm themselves down when they start to feel overwhelmed/over-stimulated
    - You can fill your refuge with- stuffed toys for cuddling and hugging, sunglasses to dim visual stimulation, earmuffs to muffle noise, objects that are velvety, silky, or smooth for rubbing, etc. (Remember to sanitize items after each story time)
- Maintain a friendly, welcoming environment – allow children time to process new experiences at their own pace (ex: give children the option to watch as other children engage in activities; do not attempt to “force” them into a sensory experience

- Activities:
  - Offer many options for interacting with textures, smells or sounds; use containers when possible (i.e. sandwich baggies, plastic condiment squeeze bottles, and clear Tupperware,
  - Try diluting scents on cotton balls or washcloths,
  - Offer wooden/metal/soft plastic utensils or paintbrushes for indirect touch
  - Keep any items for smelling in bags or squeeze bottles so children can dictate how much they are exposed to

- Interactions:
  - Keep in mind that some participants may not want to be touched unless they initiate it so give them the choice; ex: open your arms and WAIT (instead of moving toward them as if you are going to hug them); avoid pats on the back/shoulder, and reserve high fives unless child initiates
  - Model different interactions; ex: show children how to finger paint as well as paint with a sponge or brush; avoid saying “See it’s ok...” or “Everyone else likes to” because these may lead to increased anxiety and lowered self-esteem; replace these with descriptive statements about the materials, ex: “This is squishy and dry.”
Undersensitivity

This may be referred to as being hyposensitive (under-sensitive). Individuals who are under-reactive may need to experience a more intense level of the stimuli in order to register the sensation (ex: this child may stomp versus walk or slump and fall out of chairs). During your story time a child that is hyposensitive may seem clumsy, have difficulty imitating movements, be compelled to touch, chew on, or lick interesting surfaces or textures, may seem overly forceful when playing with other children (ex: squeezing hard during hugs, slapping a hand for a high 5, shoving, etc.), and seem indifferent to pain or dangerous situations. This child may enjoy physical activities like jumping, spinning, shaking head back and forth, crashing into walls or peers, or covering oneself with paint or marker.

Accommodations:

Pre-Story Time:

- Invite parents to bring fidget items, a small sensory ball, weighted vest, or textured blanket along with them to story time

During Story Time:

- Environmental:
  - Lighting:
    - If possible dim lights or use natural lighting, try to avoid fluorescent lights because the flicker rate may be a distraction for audience members
  - Set-Up
    - Remove any excess clutter in the room (ex: stacks of unused chairs, rolling book carts, empty tables) to prevent risky climbing or exploration
    - Provide alternatives to typical seating (ex: bucket chairs, soft blankets, copier box lined with a thin blanket, stuffed animal cuddle buddies, beach towels, etc.)
  - Refuge: You can make a hideaway/calming/safe zone/chill out area in the rear of your story time space; this will be a place for kids to find the stimulation they may be seeking safely
    - You can fill your refuge with outlines of shoes for jumping on, chalkboard or dry erase markers for scribbling, hand prints on the wall for pushing, a beanbag chair to “crash” into, squishy balls for squeezing, a heavy box for pushing, a texture book with sandy, bumpy, crinkly, gritty and etc. pages (Remember to sanitize items after each story time)

- Remember that although some behaviors may seem willful, purposefully defiant, annoying or obstinate they may have a sensory root and the individual is responding to his or her own set of internal struggles. The individual not trying to be rude or disrespectful.

- Activities:
  - Incorporate movement into routines (ex: use lots of actions as you read stories so children can imitate); think about providing informal “stretching breaks”

- Interactions:
  - A good rule of thumb is: Praise everything! Talk to the child about what he or she did right, not what they left undone
  - Practice patience- it may take children a long time to respond verbally
    - if you ask a child a question give them TIME to answer (try spelling out 3 Mississippi's before you repeat the question or prompt them with an answer)
    - some children are nonverbal and communicate through sounds and sign language only. In our experience, sometimes the sounds can be difficult to interpret - what may sound like distress to you may actually be an expression of delight
  - Gentle reminders work better than strict demands- Assume that children are trying their best and remember that your goal is for them to have a positive experience so avoid teasing or pressure instead state your specific instructions
High Distractibility or Impulsivity

Individuals may find it challenging to keep their attention focused and stay on task. They may have a difficult time following through with multiple step directions. A child with high distractibility may exhibit some of these characteristics during your story time: seems to be daydreaming, is easily distracted during a task or listening activity, or loses props. Children that are impulsive may appear to be impatient. They may answer before being called on, skip others in line, grab items from someone else’s hands, climb shelving, jump off chairs or tables, run on stairs, spin, crash, head butt, or throw themselves into the floor, peers, walls, etc.

Accommodations:

Pre-Story Time:
- Limit the number of participants- Try pre-registration to control the number of children attending
- SAFETY! Plan your story time with safety in mind, you need to be able to supervise activities as well as being energetic and sympathetic to each child’s individual needs
- You might want to require that a caregiver be present for each child in attendance for safety reasons. Story time guidelines could include a specific rule stating: “moving around is acceptable, but for the safety of others, behavior that may endanger others is not allowed.”

During Story Time:
- Environmental:
  - Use an enclosed room if possible to help reduce distractions
  - If your story time room has a busy or colorful carpet, roll it up and put it away before sensory story time.
  - Consider if other potentially distracting items should be removed from the room (i.e. large stuffed animals, busy pictures or wall art, etc.)
  - Think about how much visual stimulation the environment provides:
    - Windows- Close the shades or cover with tissue paper to make more opaque
    - Doors- Close during story time
    - Avoid fluorescent lighting when possible- natural light is best from a high window, dim overhead lights if possible
  - Use a treasure chest or opaque container to store any props or books that are not the immediate focus; cover activity centers or craft supplies with a tablecloth until it is time to use them
  - Create an environment with SAFETY in mind- This may mean removing tables with sharp edges, closing the door to the room, substitute large items in place of smaller ones (ex: instead of using beans in a craft use large pom-poms, use masking tape instead of staples, only use hot glue guns if a staff member or volunteer can be stationed with it at all times, etc.)
- Be Flexible: Be prepared to adjust your expectations (it will be less stressful for you if you don’t EXPECT your audience members to sit still, keep their hands in their laps, etc.), open yourself up to the idea that children can benefit from your story time even if it looks like they are not attending to you directly
- Structure:
  - Picture schedule: Use a visual schedule to help guide participants through the activities
    - Start with all activities displayed and remove them as they are completed OR
    - Start with a blank template and announce the next activity by adding it’s picture
  - Routine: Is there enough consistency from week to week in your story time routine so children can predict what comes next but are still excited about “new” experiences?
- Use nametags so you can address each child by name during activities and when praising
- Use REAL pictures and objects when possible (in your felt-board or PowerPoint try to find photos instead of clip-art to help children make the cognitive connection between what they are seeing in your story time and what they see in their daily lives)
- Activities:
  - Pass out props as children need them and recover them before moving on to the next activity to reduce distraction
- Interactions:
  - Reward instead of reprimand- notice when children are behaving well and praise them for it immediately
  - Voice your expectations- provide specific instructions in simple steps so children know what you expect them to do (i.e. Do you want them to stay seated, stand up, raise their hand or call out answers, etc.)
  - You may find that it takes some children multiple story times before they begin to participate or settle down enough to stay seated. Neither parents nor the library staff should give up or get discouraged - for most of these kids, story time is a new experience and it takes a lot of time to get used to.
Difficulty with Transitioning

These individuals experience difficulty changing from one activity or situation to the next as well as from one emotional state to another. A child in your story time may show signs of having a difficult time with transitioning when the group goes from an alert, active state (ex: acting out the Hokey Pokey) to a calm, rested state (ex: sitting down to listen to the next story). This child may struggle with calming down and may not be able to regulate his or her physical state as quickly or smoothly as peers (ex: rate of breathing, muscle activity, etc.). He or she may need additional time to disengage from an activity.

Accommodations:

Pre-Story Time:

- Number of Transitions- How frequently are your audience members expected to transition from one activity to another? Are they expected to transition from high energy and movement activities to sitting quietly and still?
- Keep as much of the environment the same as possible. Avoid changing locations and if you need to change locations bring familiar objects to the new room to help ease the transition.

During Story Time:

- **Structure:**
  - Picture schedule: Use a visual schedule to help guide participants through the activities
    - Start with all activities displayed and remove them as they are completed OR
    - Start with a blank template and announce the next activity by adding it’s picture
  - Routine: Is there enough consistency from week to week in your story time routine so children can predict what comes next but are still excited about “new” experiences?
- **Activities:**
  - Give advance notice before an activity is going to end or change (ex: We will begin cleaning up in 3 minutes so finish your crafts now; **First** we’ll sing Itsy Bitsy Spider and **then** we’ll read the book Color Zoo, etc.)
  - Give verbal warnings before starting any music, making any loud/high pitched noises or changing lights which gives children time to cover their ears or step away from the group to the Refuge area
- **Interactions:**
  - Be ready for behaviors which may fall outside of social norms (i.e. screaming when excited, withdrawing from a crowd, flapping hands, rocking in order to soothe oneself, etc.); remember to set an example with your own emotions by remaining calm and relaxed
Social or Emotional Challenges

Individuals who find it challenging to regulate their emotions may have a difficult time adjusting their emotions and behavior in response to the demands of their surroundings. They may find it challenging to regulate involuntary reactions (i.e. heart rate, respiration, etc.) and voluntary reactions like rocking, hand flapping, or rubbing surfaces. They may give only poor or intermittent eye contact and chew on t-shirt sleeves, shoelaces, hair or other non-edibles. These actions may assist the child in soothing or exciting oneself. They may withdraw from 1-on-1 or group interactions due to feeling “stupid,” “weird,” anxious, or unsure. They may have a flat affect (meaning they do not show a wide range of emotional expressions). During your story time they may have frequent and intense tantrums as they are unable to regulate their emotional states easily.

Accommodations:

Pre-Story Time:

- **Selection:**
  - Do story times that you are excited about so you can be enthusiastic!
  - Look for books that show a variety of emotions so you can discuss and model different feelings

During Story Time:

- **Environmental:**
  - **Refuge:** You can make a hideaway/calming/safe zone/chill out area in the rear of your story time space; this will be a place kids can go to gather themselves
  - You can fill your refuge with: outlines of shoes for jumping on, hand prints on the wall for pushing, a beanbag chair to “crash” into, squishy balls for squeezing, stuffed toys for cuddling and hugging, sunglasses to dim visual stimulation, earmuffs to muffle noise, etc. (Remember: If you provide comfort or fidget items, clean them after every storytime.)

- **Activities:**
  - **Participation:** It’s important to let parents know that their kids do not have to participate at all or do things “correctly.” Some parents may attempt to push their kids to do things or correct them when they feel their child hasn’t done something right (ex: We ask children to pick out a felt shirt in the color of the shirt they are wearing and put it on the felt board. Few kids choose the right color, and it really seems to bother some of the parents)
  - Consider having the kids participate in “Clean Up Time,” you’ll be helping them practice valuable skills such as team work, sorting, personal responsibility, etc.; parents and caregivers will appreciate their children getting the extra practice
  - **Collaborative Projects:** try some large group projects (i.e. crafts that several kids can work on at the same time), some examples are: decorating a large mural, sorting objects by color, etc. These activities will allow them to work next to or in cooperation with peers

- **Interactions:**
  - Many of our participants have difficulties with gauging personal space (they are “close talkers” so to speak). Be prepared for this close interaction, and gently remind them (without touching) to stand at arm’s length from others.
  - **Expectations:** Be sure to let caregivers and parents know what your expectations of them are because they can’t know when you want them to intercede and when you prefer they handle a situation unless you let them know (ex: if it is okay to stand up and walk around during a story, where is the best place to do that?; if your child needs to take a break from story time is it ok to step outside? Let them know if they can rejoin the group when they are feeling more calm and secure, etc.)
  - Be Flexible: Release the idea that a child must sit and look only at you in order to benefit from your story time. It is okay for children to stand up, tap their feet, chew on their sleeve, look around the room, etc.; even if a child does not appear to be responding to you- they are indeed getting something out of the experience.
  - Be ready for behaviors which may fall outside of social norms and be open; accept that these behaviors may be a form of self-soothing and don’t stop your storytime to single them out unless they are endangering themselves or someone else