

Sensory integration therapy for children with autism and sensory processing difficulties: the SenITA RCT

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Children with autism often experience problems with processing sensory information (e.g. noise, touch, movement, taste and sight), and this can lead to problems in daily life. This study was designed to see if sensory integration therapy can help children with these difficulties. Sensory integration therapy is a type of face-to-face play-based treatment that is delivered by occupational therapists. We compared sensory integration therapy with the type of treatment normally offered to children with autism (i.e. 'usual care'). We recruited children and their carers from Wales and England. Children could take part in the study if they had an autism diagnosis, had sensory processing difficulties and were in mainstream primary education. The children taking part in the study were randomly split into two groups. Sixty-nine children were given sensory integration therapy and 69 children carried on with their usual care. The sensory integration therapy involved 24 face-to-face sessions in an occupational therapy clinic, followed by two telephone calls with the carer. The sensory integration therapy lasted for 26 weeks. We collected information on the type of care being given to children in the usual-care group. Carers of each child were asked questions about their child's behaviour 6 and 12 months after starting the study. Some carers also completed an interview to talk about what it was like taking part in the study.

Therapists delivered the sensory integration therapy well. Carers and therapists said that they saw some improvements. However, sensory integration therapy was not significantly better than the usual care and is a more expensive option. We cannot say that sensory integration therapy is helpful for all children with autism and different sensory processing difficulties; however, it might be helpful for some children to focus on specific problems. Future work could focus on which children and problems it would help the most.

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This report

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