

What is “Stimming” and Why is it Important? Gavin Bollard

Does your special needs child frequently rock, bob their knee, make annoying humming noises, squint or smell strange things that they shouldn't? These behaviours are sensory stimulation or stimming and they're not simply normal. For a child on the autism spectrum, they're an essential part of coping with life.

Providing Feedback to Our Senses

Stimming involves supplying feedback to the senses. There are five commonly discussed senses; sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. There are also a few extra senses including equilibrioception (balance), interoception, and proprioception (your body's position). Then of course, there are internal mental registers which seem able to receive stimulation of their own.

You'll find that stimming behaviours address one or more senses, for example humming sends signals to both auditory and tactile senses (hearing and touch).

Sensory Overload

People on the autism spectrum often suffer from sensory overload. Note that sensory in this context applies to more than just the five senses. For example, hearing bad news or a sudden change of plan may not seem “sensory” to us but to the person on the spectrum, it's an internal mental overload – and it causes a lot of stress.

Stimming as a Stress-Reducer

Stimming provides feedback which can distract and reassure a person on the autism spectrum. By rocking for instance, a person on the spectrum may engage their mental, proprioception, equilibrioception and tactile senses in other work which prevents them thinking about an issue which is affecting them. This is the reason why you'll notice an increase in stimming behaviour when your child is under stress.

Stimming Because it Feels Good

Of course, most stimming behaviours occur naturally without any intention on an individual's behalf to use them to deal with particular stress. A child may stim simply because it feels good. They may also be completely unaware that they are stimming.

These behaviours can be quite annoying at times as they draw unwanted attention to your child in the form of bullying and they can often be damaging too. One of my son's worst stims involved chewing on his shirts. The behaviour has only recently stopped – and he's twelve. You can imagine our disappointment at finding every one of his shirts chewed with no possibility of handing them down to his younger brother.

Reducing Stimming

- Unfortunately, there's little you can do to stop stimming, though making the child aware of a stim is a good first step.
- Where possible, you can try to encourage your child towards less obvious stims, but be careful. I know parents who just wanted their children to stop nail-biting and when a new stim emerged it was far more obvious and dangerous. Sometimes you just have to accept the small things.
- The next time you see your child stimming, try to think about the senses that are being used and the issues which need calming. It could be something that is on your child's mind or it could simply be that your music in another room is too loud.

Stimming is normal and we all do it. Perhaps we don't do it to the same extent as people on the autism spectrum but maybe that's just because we've found other, “more civilised” ways to stim. Listening to music, chewing gum, smoking, playing with our pens and tapping our fingers are all forms of stimming and they help to make us feel calm.