

Sensory Processing & Stimming

What is stimming and why do we do it?

Stimming, short for self-stimulatory behaviour, is any repetitive action, movement, or sound that a person does to help regulate their body, emotions, or sensory experiences, or to focus on a task. Many people – both children and adults – stim. For example, some adults may tap their foot or fingers, twirl their hair, or fidget with objects such as a necklace or pen. For most adults, these behaviours are subtle, so they often go unnoticed.

For some children, particularly those with disability or developmental delay, their stimming may be more noticeable.

Examples include hand-flapping, rocking, spinning, humming, or repeating certain words or phrases. The purpose of these behaviours in children is the same as it is for adults – to regulate their emotions or sensory needs, feel calm, or focus on a task.



Remember, stimming is a natural behaviour used by people of all ages – not just those with disability or developmental delay.

Understanding stimming in children

Unless a child's stimming is unsafe or they are hurting themselves or others, we shouldn't stop them from doing it. Here's why:

- **It's a form of self-regulation** – Stimming helps children manage feelings such as excitement, stress, or overwhelm. It can help them calm down or feel more in control.
- **It supports sensory needs** – Some children stim to get the sensory input their bodies need or to block out overwhelming sensations.
- **It's part of their identity** – For many children, stimming is a natural and comforting behaviour – not something that needs to be “fixed.”
- **Stopping it can increase distress** – Trying to suppress stimming can make a child more anxious, dysregulated, or even lead to meltdowns.

How stimming can support sensory processing

Regulates sensory input

Many people stim to manage sensory overload or underload.

- When the environment is too intense (too bright, loud, or busy). rhythmic or predictable stimming can help filter out overwhelming input and restore a sense of control
- When sensory input is too low, stimming can increase sensory stimulation – helping the brain stay alert and engaged.

Calms the nervous system

Repetitive movements or sounds can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes calmness and reduce stress or anxiety. For example:

- Humming can create soothing vibrations in the body.
- Rocking can slow breathing and heart rate.

Improves focus and self-regulation

Some people find that stimming helps them focus attention or organise their thoughts, especially during tasks that require concentration or in socially demanding settings.

For example:

- Fidgeting can channel excess energy and reduce distractions.
- Doodling can help maintain attention during listening tasks



Communicates emotional or sensory states

Stimming can also be a form of communication – a way to express excitement, frustration, or discomfort when words are hard to find – verbally or using alternative communication methods. Recognising stimming as communication helps others respond supportively rather than trying to suppress it.

Supports identity and comfort

For many people, including neurodivergent people, stimming is a source of joy, self-expression, and grounding. Allowing and respecting stims helps affirm neurodiversity and supports wellbeing.