

BACKGROUND

Children with sensory processing challenges often face significant barriers in healthcare environments due to overwhelming stimuli. The benefit of sensory tools in improving the clinical experience for patients, families, and healthcare providers is well documented in emergency care settings but literature in primary care settings is lacking (Litwin & Sellen, 2023; Roy et al., 2024). Sensory tools were implemented in our emergency department and acute care settings within the last 5 years; however primary care settings were not determined in scope at the time. Recognizing this gap in care for the large population of pediatric patients with sensory needs, a group convened to explore implementation of sensory tools in primary care clinics.

OBJECTIVES

The goals of this effort were to:

- Increase staff recognition of children with sensory needs.
- Improve cooperation and comfort during clinic visits and procedures.
- Create a more supportive clinical environment.

METHODS

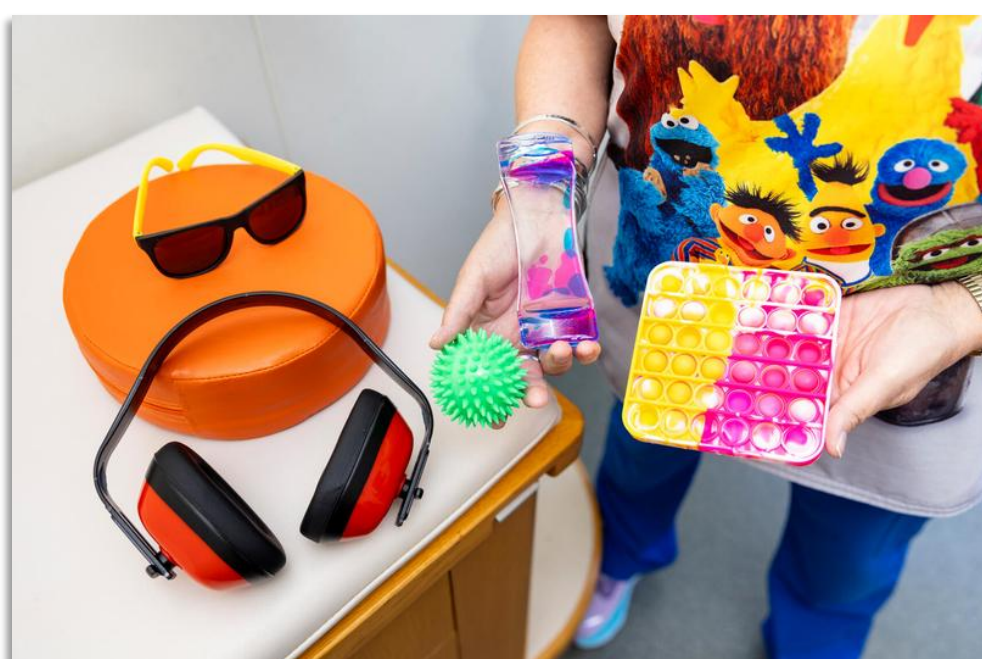
To assist staff with identifying children with sensory needs, a patient self-report tool for accommodations within the electronic health record was enhanced to add sensory needs.

With input from Child Life Specialists and subject matter experts in Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics (DBP), a list of sensory tools was collated for ordering. Items included: sunglasses, headphones, fidget spinners, chewy tubes, vibrating cushions, pop-it mats, and more.

Carts were procured for each clinic, and tools were organized by sensory need, such as touch, movement, oral, olfactory, auditory, and visual sensitivities.

Education on the variety of sensory needs and available sensory tools was provided to unlicensed rooming staff and nurses within the primary care clinics.

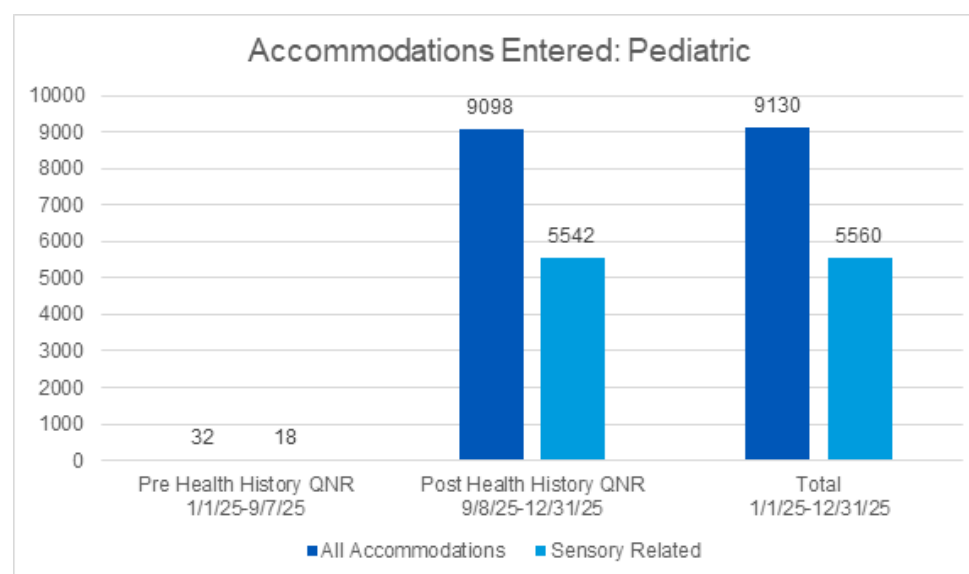
A friendly competition between clinics was created to track and encourage use of the sensory tools.



©2026 Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research

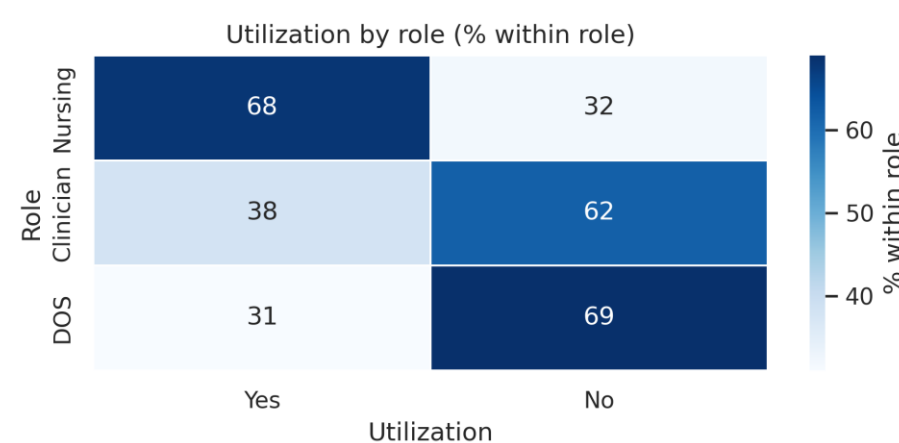
RESULTS

FIGURE 1



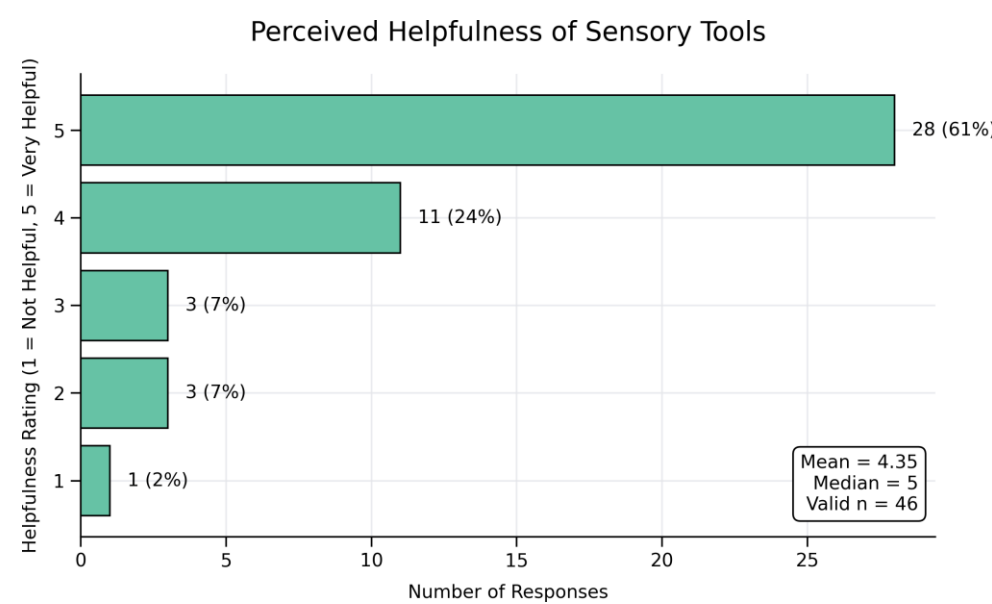
This Bar Graph shows a comparison of documenting necessary accommodations to support patient care. This compares before and after the implementation of a patient questionnaire, which includes sensory related accommodation needs, that is sent to the patient's online account.

FIGURE 2



This Utilization Heatmap is based on a self-reported survey with 82 respondents identifying if they have used sensory tools since implementation.

FIGURE 3



This Bar graph depicts the rating of helpfulness in utilizing the sensory tools for all survey respondents that reported using sensory tools for pediatric patients (n = 46).



DISCUSSION

Implementing sensory tools in primary care clinics may significantly enhance the clinical experience for children with sensory needs. By making these tools a standard part of clinical practice, nurses can better meet the needs of all patients with sensory needs and foster a more compassionate, patient-centered healthcare experience.

Staff have shared powerful anecdotes underscoring the success and impact the sensory tools have brought to the primary care setting:

"I had a great experience with the vibrating pillow with an autistic child. The pillow calmed him down and distracted him so well from the vaccine he was receiving. His mother was so impressed...that she immediately purchased one for home use."

"I love having these sensory toys. They are a huge benefit to have for our children while they are here as patients."

The sensory tools are a highly utilized resource, although at times are used for basic pediatric distraction and not always targeted to a sensory need.

The planning team has made a continued effort to keep the tools in the forefront of the practice with a goal to eventually make them a standard of care and not an exception.

CONCLUSIONS

- Navigating a healthcare environment that is filled with sensory stimuli can be distressing and challenging for children with sensory-related needs (Horwitz, 2025).
- Identifying patient sensory needs is one of the biggest challenges. Utilizing a self reporting tool has greatly increased awareness of the unique sensory needs.
- Implementation of sensory tools in the Primary Care setting has positive outcomes for both patients and caregivers alike.

REFERENCES

1. Horwitz, J.M. (2025). Sensory-informed care: Supporting children with processing differences. *Pediatric Nursing*, 51(6), 306-310. <https://doi.org/10.62116/PNJ.2025.51.6.306>
2. Litwin, S., & Sellen, K. (2023). Designing a Sensory Kit to Improve the Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Pediatric Emergency Department. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 53(9), 3369-3379. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-022-05651-7>
3. Roy, M. A., Kinlin, C., Estes, M., & MacEachern, S. J. (2024). Improving patient-centred care in the emergency department: Implementation of a Sensory Toolkit for children with autism. *Paediatrics & Child Health* (1205-7088), 29(4), 199-204. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxae010>