



CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE CHILD CARE

Tip Sheets

Sensory Processing Disorder

Sensory processing disorder (SPD) is a condition in which the brain has trouble receiving, organizing, and responding to information from the eight senses. This misinformation can interfere with our sense of security and safety. If a child does not feel safe and secure, their ability to learn and enjoy the world is affected.

The Eight Senses

1. Sight (visual)
2. Smell (olfactory)
3. Taste (gustatory)
4. Hearing (auditory)
5. Touch (tactile)
6. Vestibular (balance and equilibrium/sense of position and movement)
7. Proprioceptive (joint and muscle sense)
8. Interoceptive (sense of internal organs)

Sensory System Responses

Sensory processing disorder occurs in 5–16% of typically developing children. Children may be oversensitive to sensory input, under sensitive, both, or even have a typical response for others. Responses can shift over time, especially after a life change such as sickness, lack of sleep, or stressors at home.

When children do not have the words to express their uncomfortable feelings brought on by SPD, they may communicate through their reactions and behaviors that something is amiss and that help is needed to function successfully.

Sensory Over-Responsive Behaviors

Children with Sensory Over-Responsivity (SOR) may experience hypersensitivity to sensations such as visual stimuli, sounds, touch, movement, tastes, or smells. Behaviors might include:

- Irritability, fussy, and moody emotions
- Responding too much, too frequently, or too long to sensory stimuli
- The inability to control impulses/behavior (getting aggressive, jumping out of seat, frequently blurting things out)
- Being excessively cautious (afraid to try new activities/foods, meet new people, etc.)
- Short attention span, difficulty concentrating, and/or easily distracted by every sight, sound, smell, and movement
- Feeling unsociable, avoiding group activities, or having difficulty making friends
- Getting upset by transitions and unexpected changes (may experience severe anxiety or be uncooperative)
- Low frustration tolerance (becoming upset at the slightest thing or quickly giving up on difficult tasks)
- Difficulties with self-regulation, maintaining optimal arousal level, and mood stability
- Significantly irritated by- and uncooperative with activities of daily living (difficulties getting dressed, going to bed, eating, etc.)

Sensory Under-Responsive Behaviors

Children with Sensory Under-Responsivity (SUR) may be less sensitive to- and less aware of sensory stimuli than most of their peers.

Resulting behaviors may include:

- Passive, quiet, withdrawn demeanor
- High pain threshold
- Not noticing when touched
- Unawareness of need to use the bathroom
- Difficulty engaging- or uninterested in activities, the world, or social interactions
- Preferring sedentary activities
- Excessively slow response to directions
- Lack of motivation or drive
- Remarkably low energy and activity level
- Motor coordination difficulties and problems with muscle tone (may appear clumsy, slouch, or rest head during table time; or have frequent accidents or injuries)
- Motor planning difficulties (difficulty with sports, balance, utensils, riding a bike, clapping, getting dressed, etc.)
- Poor eye-hand coordination (difficulty with handwriting, cutting/drawing a straight line, catching a ball, or tying shoes)
- Unable to calm oneself down after an activity or get oneself going for an activity
- Mild to severe learning disabilities and/or difficulty learning and generalizing new concepts and skills
- No dominant hand for writing by age 5; frequent switching of hands while cutting, drawing, writing, eating, or throwing a ball
- Difficulty relating to others or understanding own actions, motivation, and behaviors
- Significant social skill behavior problems (difficulty sharing; may isolate, be overpowering, aggressive, or bossy in order to regulate/control sensory environment)
- Significant self-esteem issues (overly sensitive to criticism, change, and stressful situations)

Sensory Craving Behaviors

Sensory craving individuals seem to need much more sensory stimuli than most people. Sensory craving children may:

- Be constantly talking and/or on the move
- Be constantly touching objects or people
- Engaging in risky behaviors
- Like crashing, jumping, roughhousing, excessive spinning, swinging, rocking
- Seek vibration
- Watch spinning objects
- Have trouble turn taking in conversation
- Have excessive energy and activity levels

Additional Behaviors

Children with a combination of sensory system responses may exhibit the following behaviors:

- Arousal level may fluctuate minute-to-minute or day-to-day

Additional Resources

STAR Institute

www.spdstar.org/basic/your-8-senses

Understanding Sensory Processing Issues

www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/understanding-sensory-processing-issues

For more information, visit
www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

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