



Sensory Processing: Implications for Behavior and Learning Overview

Many times families are faced with the challenges of raising children with a sensory processing disorder. A sensory processing disorder can affect a person's ability to work, learn and participate in family and community life. There are many behaviors that arise from sensory difficulties, and it is important for families to learn how to make environmental modifications to accommodate an individual's sensory challenges.

We all require a certain amount of sensory input to maintain life functions. Everyday we are exposed to thousands of sensory experiences that come to us through our senses of sight, taste, hearing, touch, smell, movement and proprioception. Homeostasis is maintaining a balanced sensory system in response to external events so that we can demonstrate an appropriate level of alertness allowing us to respond appropriately to our environment.

Most of us are able to tune out the things that are unimportant to what we are currently engaged in and tune into the things that are necessary for us to respond appropriately to our environment. However, for some who experience sensory challenges, this can be very difficult. Not everyone has the same response to various types of sensory input and, as a result, those responses may impact how we behave.

Some individuals have more extreme sensory processing challenges. They do not filter routine experiences in the same way that others do. As a result, these individuals may interpret sensory experiences as overwhelming and painful. These individuals have a low threshold for sensory experiences. Other individuals may seem relatively unresponsive to these things, such as those who don't appear to notice when they are injured. Those individuals have a high threshold for sensory experiences. Still others may have difficulty modulating their responses to input, so that their behavioral responses are unpredictable from hour-to-hour and day-to-day.

If your child is having difficulty with sensory processing, you should request an occupational therapy assessment that specifically assesses the child's sensory processing skills. Consultation with an occupational therapist can help to provide you with appropriate strategies based on your child's individual needs and strengths. The occupational therapist should be able to make recommendations for intervention strategies and environmental modifications. The occupational therapist may also suggest direct individual intervention, a sensory diet that can be implemented by family and/or school personnel within the daily activities, and/or home and classroom environmental modifications. With accurate assessment and careful consideration, any of these approaches can be helpful for improving your child's behavior and participation at home and in the classroom.