

## Sensory Signals: Understanding & Supporting Your Child's Need for Movement

Have you received a phone call from a teacher about how the child in your care constantly fidgets in class? Or maybe they're tipping back their desk chair in a way that seems dangerous—or bumping into other students in the hallway. At home, does it seem like the child is constantly underfoot or attempting to make bodily contact in whatever way possible? Are they unable to keep their hands to themselves? What you think is attention-seeking behavior may actually be a sensory issue.

Most kids seem to have an endless amount of energy that adults envy. But sometimes this energy doesn't express itself in a way that is appropriate to grownups. Many of the behaviors of kids with sensory problems overlap with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Children who display these behaviors may be labeled hyperactive, when in fact they're seeking sensory input to confirm where their body is in space.

Movement is the first outlet of communication and expression we have as human beings. Some people need to take a walk to emotionally process anger or stress. Adults may join a yoga class or a running club to maintain physical and mental wellbeing. Babies are rocked and swayed to help them on the path to sleep. Movement is fundamental to our experience as human beings.

For a deeper understanding of Sensory Processing Disorder, please check out our [Understanding Sensory Processing Disorder](#) tip sheet. It explains this specific diagnosis in detail.

### Brain Development and the Senses

Although people commonly speak of “five senses,” eight have been identified: touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell, vestibular (balance), interoception (internal needs such as hunger), and proprioception, which controls body awareness.

Optimal brain development depends on young children repeatedly having the right experiences at the right times, within safe and predictable relationships. The lower parts of the brain are the first to organize, beginning in utero

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and continuing until around two years of age. These parts help us stay alive, move, and use our bodies. The middle parts of the brain typically organize between the ages of one and four years. These parts help us feel, connect, and form a sense of belonging and safety. Lastly, the cortex develops, typically between the ages of three and six. This part of the brain is responsible for speech, language, thinking, reflection, and planning. Children's brain development and sensory systems are impacted when they experience extreme loss, trauma, or attachment disruption.

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## A Closer Look at Proprioception

As mentioned earlier, proprioception is the ability to understand where one's body is in space and its relation to other objects in the environment. To understand this sense, give this a try. Raise your hand and arm as if you want to be called on to answer a question. If your proprioception works correctly, you know your hand is above your head, even though you can't see it.

This sense is essential as it plays a significant role in self-regulation, coordination, posture, body awareness, and the ability to focus. Proprioception is the sense that lets us know where our different body parts are, how they move, and how much strength our muscles need to use.

Sensory seeking behaviors may include:

- Seeking out jumping, bumping, and crashing activities
- Kicking their feet on the floor or chair while sitting at a desk or table
- Loving to be tightly wrapped in many blankets, especially at bedtime
- Enjoying tight hugs

Difficulty with movement may include:

- Inability to regulate pressure when writing or drawing. For example, the pressure may be too light to see or so hard that the tip of the pencil breaks.
- Written work is messy and the child may rip the paper when erasing it.
- Pages may be torn while turning the page of a book.
- The child always seems to be breaking objects and toys.
- Simple activities seem to happen with too

much force, such as loud steps while walking, slamming doors, pressing things too hard, or slamming objects down.

If these actions are familiar to you, there are things you can do at home to improve the child's ability to be aware of their body.

## Movement that Helps

Play and movement therapists recommend activities that work children's muscles and apply pressure. Here are some activities you can do with a child at home to build body awareness:

- Put hands flat against a wall and push into the wall while keeping elbows straight.
- Imitate the physical walks of a bear, frog, kangaroo, donkey, or a crab.
- Swing from the monkey bars at the playground.
- Help with household chores such as

sweeping, vacuuming, and picking up toys.

- Jump off a low-height couch or chair while landing on soft cushions.
- Wrap your arms around their body, squeeze tightly, and hold in a hug for 10 seconds.
- Tuck the child tightly in a blanket at night, like a burrito.
- Take classes such as dancing, gymnastics, karate, horseback riding, or aerobics for children.



## Sensory Issues and School

Sensory-seeking behaviors may be confused with hyperactivity, when in fact, the children are seeking input. As stated previously, many of the behaviors of kids with sensory problems overlap with symptoms of ADHD, from trouble sitting still or concentrating to melting down when making

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transitions during the day. Medications are not used to treat sensory processing issues, but occupational therapy exercises are sure to make the child feel better and thereby do better.

Occupational therapists (or OTs) are specialists who work with kids who have sensory issues. The majority of OTs work in schools, although some do have private practices. It is quite common for an OT to see a child in a classroom setting, or they may be pulled out of class for a short time to work on physical activities designed to regulate their sensory input.

You and the child's teacher and OT can discuss changes you can make to help them be more comfortable, secure, and able to focus in the classroom. For example:

- For the child who needs to move a bit, try an inflated seated cushion or a pillow from home so they can both squirm and stay in their seat.
- Some kids are better off if they sit close to the teacher. However, if the child is easily distracted by noise, they may turn around often to see where the noise is coming from.
- The OT can work with them on knowing where their body is in relation to other people and things, as well as the idea of personal space.
- Provide sensory breaks such as walking in circles, jumping on a mini-trampoline, or sucking on sour candy to get the input they crave.
- Allow for fidgets and chewable items.

### **Try and Try Again**

There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to sensory regulation strategies. Every individual is different. You will need to explore what works for the child in your care and you may not always get it right the first time. As you try different strategies, take notes, and monitor their effect. Some

sensory regulation strategies will increase arousal and others will lower it. It's important to find the right mix. And remember, if the child in your care likes tight hugs, the more the better! Not only are you giving sensory input, but you're also showing your love at the same time.



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## Resources

### From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Understanding Your Child's Sensory Signals*, by Angie Voss, OTR
- *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up: Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder in the Adolescent and Young Adult Years*, by Carol Stock Kranowitz, M.A.
- *The Sensory-Sensitive Child: Practical Solutions for Out-of-Bounds Behavior*, by Karen A. Smith, Ph.D. & Karen R. Gouze, Ph.D.
- *Answers to Questions Teachers Ask about Sensory Integration*, by Jane Koomar, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA; Carol Kranowitz, MA; Stacey Szklut, MS, OT; and others
- *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*, by Carol Stock Kranowitz, M.A.

### Tip Sheet

- [Understanding Sensory Processing Disorder](#)

### Additional Resources

- [Calming the body before calming the mind: Sensory strategies for children affected by trauma](#)
- [What is proprioception and why is it important for kids?](#)
- [How Sensory Processing Issues Affect Kids in School](#)
- [Your 8 Senses](#)