

Understanding Sensory Processing Disorder

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

- While everyone is oohing and ahing at the fireworks display, your child screams with eyes closed and hands over their ears.
- You get a call to pick your child up from a classmate's birthday party because they "had a meltdown" when their friends sang "Happy Birthday."
- Your child cries and fights you every morning while getting dressed because their socks "hurt."
- Your teenager leaves school without permission because the pep rally was "too loud and chaotic" and they "just couldn't take it."

These are just a few of the many examples of how everyday experiences, even enjoyable experiences, can be excruciating for someone with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD).



What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), also known as Sensory Integration Dysfunction (SID), is when your sensory system (taste, touch, hearing, sight, and smell) is out of balance or not regulated. Simply put, this happens when the sensory system either gets too many sensations to process at once or not enough. It causes difficulty in organizing and using sensory information in the brain, resulting in difficulty processing everyday situations. It impacts everything from movement to emotions, attention, social skills, and other responses to sensory input.

Children with SPD can't rely on their senses to give an accurate picture of what is happening around them and don't know how to respond appropriately. For example, a routine school fire drill can be a terrifying experience for a child whose brain isn't correctly processing the associated sound and movement involved in a fire drill. Without recognizing a child has SPD, the child's fearful and frantic reaction to the fire alarm can be mistaken for "acting out for attention."

Hypersensitivity vs. Hyposensitivity

A child with Sensory Processing Disorder can be either hypersensitive or hyposensitive. Hypersensitivity occurs when a child is oversensitive to certain sensory inputs, while

hyposensitivity occurs when a child is under-sensitive to them. Children who are hypersensitive will often avoid the sensation altogether because it is overwhelming, while a child who is hyposensitive might seek it out because it is soothing.

Children may be hypersensitive to some sensations and hyposensitive to others. They can also be overly sensitive one day and under-sensitive to the very same sensation the next. For example, a child may crave spicy foods one day and be unable to tolerate them the next.

A child with SPD may have difficulties in one or more of the following areas:

- Sensory exploration

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- Emotional regulation
- Social interaction
- Motor skills
- Cognitive abilities
- Speech-language development
- Eating habits
- Grooming and dressing

For example, a child with SPD may be oversensitive to the sense of touch. This can result in an overreaction to any type of everyday physical contact, such as an accidental bump in the lunch line. The inappropriate response or avoidance of physical contact can become socially isolating.

In contrast, a child under-sensitive to touch may make excessive physical contact with people and objects. The child may touch other children too forcefully or inappropriately by biting or hitting.

Evaluations

You may be wondering how to determine if your child has sensory processing issues and when you should seek a diagnosis or therapy. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do sensory issues get in the way of your child engaging in everyday activities or tasks? For example, does your child have an extreme reaction to everyday functions like combing their hair or showering?
- Have teachers noted that your child is easily overwhelmed when the classroom is active or loud?
- Is your child frequently covering their ears or eyes?
- Will your child seek out quiet or dark places to calm?
- Is your child always moving and “crashing” into people and things without awareness?

As you may have already noted, the behaviors above could also be characteristics

of several other issues. The good news is there are various ways to have your child evaluated for SPD. You may want to start with your child’s pediatrician, who can refer you to an occupational therapist. Other resources may include a birth-to-three program for younger children or your local school district.

Private mental health and social service agencies might also provide occupational therapy (OT) services or referrals.

What Can You Do?

In addition to working with a professional who provides SPD therapies, there are things parents can do to help children with SPD manage.

Discuss your child’s sensory challenges with teachers, coaches, and even family members so that they can better understand and respond appropriately. Provide a written list of strategies that help your child. For example, seating a child in the front of the classroom may reduce the amount of visual stimulus and make it easier for teachers to watch for signs of sensory overload.

If a child appears fearful or has an extreme reaction to an activity, avoid “forcing” participation and examine the sensory issue at play. What may seem like no big deal to a regulated person may be terrifying for a person with SPD.

Provide a sensory-sensitive environment. For schools, is there a quiet place with dim lighting where an overwhelmed child can retreat? At home, is there a safe space with sensory-rich activities for a child needing to jump, push, lift, pull, or crash?

Other Sensory Tools

Fortunately, there are now a variety of sensory products available for people with SPD, including:

- Noise filtering earplugs

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- Weighted blankets
- Pressure brushes
- Compression clothing
- Clothing without irritating seams or tags
- Textured chew tubes
- Balance discs
- Ball chairs
- Fidget footbands

Your child's occupational therapist can recommend tools for their particular challenges.

Every Little Bit Helps

One Wisconsin foster and adoptive parent said that her daughter didn't qualify for an SPD diagnosis, but they were still able to get a referral to see an occupational therapist.

"The OT was great," she said. "She had some simple and seemingly commonsense activities that my daughter could do to help her at school and home. I was surprised that I had not thought about them myself and amazed to see how much they helped."

She went on to say that she talked to the school, and they were also agreeable about letting her daughter chew gum in class, for example, or take a break when feeling overwhelmed.

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) can be challenging to diagnose since it can be mistaken for many other issues, such as ADHD or even Oppositional Defiance. Although there is no "cure" for SPD, effective interventions exist. With a proper understanding, as well as early and consistent intervention, you can help your child find ways to better manage the day-to-day challenges.



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*, by Carol S. Kranowitz
- *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, by Carol S. Kranowitz
- *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up: Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder in the Adolescent and Young Adult Years*, by Lucy Jane Miller
- *Sensory Sensitive Child*, by Karen Smith & Karen Gouze
- *Understanding Your Child's Sensory Signals*, by Angie Voss

Additional Resources

- [Understanding Sensory Integration](#)
- [Treating Sensory Processing Issues](#)
- [7 Tips for Talking to Your Child's Teacher About Sensory Processing Issues](#)
- [Sensory Processing FAQ](#)