

Tips for dealing with Sensory Processing Disorders

Even though we all know every child develops at their own pace and in their own way, we are generally aware that children reach certain milestones and behaviors at a particular age. As any parent of a child with developmental or learning disabilities will tell you, there is a point when you realize your child's growth and development are falling too far out of line with their peers. Often, this goes hand-in-hand with increasing difficulty in managing your child and helping them manage their own behavior. It's time to consider some very challenging questions.

A 2004 study estimated that 1 in 20 children was, at that time, affected by Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD); by 2009, another study produced a significantly higher estimate of 1 in 6 children. If you are concerned about your child's behavior, the following information will help you determine if sensory processing could be an issue.

What are Sensory Processing Disorders?

"Sensory Processing" refers to how we receive, interpret, and respond to the information received by our nervous system. It explains our instinctive responses to, say, walking into a drafty room (we might close a window and put on a sweater) or biting into an unexpectedly sour apple (pucker up!). When our sensory processing is disordered, we have difficulty interpreting and responding to our environment. Concentration is compromised and education, when approached in traditional ways, is likely to be ineffective.

SPDs fall into three broad categories:

1. Children with **Sensory Modulation Disorder** may experience strong negative responses to sensations that do not usually bother others or, alternatively, might have little or no response to sensations that would cause others to respond.
2. **Sensory Discrimination Disorder** describes when a child has trouble differentiating the characteristics of stimuli, such as speed, intensity, duration, or timing.
3. **Sensory Based Motor Disorder** can be in the form of **Postural-Ocular Disorder**, which refers to poor functional use of vision, along with difficulty controlling posture or other physical movement; or **Dyspraxia**, which describes difficulty with planning, sequencing, and executing unfamiliar actions.

At its most basic, though, Sensory Processing Disorder describes a diminished ability to receive, interpret, and respond to—to use—our seven senses.

What are the seven senses?

No, that's not a typo. Sure, we all know the five senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. As important and magnificent as these abilities are, our physiology doesn't stop there. Thanks to our **vestibular sense**, we comprehend our own body's movement. This is how we orient ourselves (up, down, left, right, horizontal, vertical), and how we experience the relationship between our bodies and other objects. Every time you catch a ball or walk on a sandy beach, you are using your vestibular sense. Our **proprioceptive system** enables us to properly coordinate our physical responses. Our proprioceptive ability provides the muscle memory and sequencing needed to, say, drive a car or do a cartwheel.

What are common symptoms of SPD?

Children with SPD do not necessarily have another developmental or learning disability, such as ADD, nor does it mean they are on the autism spectrum, although SPD can be an added factor when those diagnoses are present. In fact, SPD is often found to go hand-in-hand with giftedness. Many gifted children learn from their senses as well as their intellect, but their exceptional ability to learn can be countered by an inability to control their response to stimuli.

Whether present with another developmental or learning challenge, with giftedness, or on its own, SPD affects your child's well-being and presents a unique parenting challenge.

If you are not sure about your child's ability to process sensory information, consider the questions listed in the stories below. More than a few "yes" answers suggest that you might want to pursue further inquiry with your pediatrician or an SPD specialist.

Under-responsive Child

Kathy has always been on the clumsy side, often dropping her toys, her sippy cup, or whatever else she is trying to hold. She also falls a lot. It worried her mom when, the other day, she fell and caught her head on the edge of the coffee table and didn't cry, even though a nasty bump came up. Kathy's dad has tried playing catch with her in the yard, but she is unusually slow to react to the oncoming ball. In fact, after a few tosses, Kathy was staring into space and seemed completely disengaged with their game. Later, though, when Dad was doing some yardwork, Kathy happily helped rake the leaves for more than an hour.

Here are some questions Kathy's parents should ask:

- Is Kathy unaware of a messy face, hands, or clothes?
- Does she sometimes not know when she has been touched?
- Does she not notice how things feel, and often drop items?
- Does she not notice or object to being moved?

- Is she unaware of falling, and protect herself poorly?
- Does she show no response to injury?
- Does she lack inner drive to move or play, yet become more alert after pulling, lifting, and carrying heavy loads?
- Does she respond slowly to approaching objects?
- Does she stare at, and look through, faces and objects, or stare into bright light?
- Does she ignore ordinary sounds but “turn on” to exaggerated musical beats or extremely loud, close, or sudden sounds?
- Is she unaware of unpleasant odors, or seem unable to smell food?
- Does she eat very spicy food without reaction?

Over-responsive Child

Brendan’s parents are concerned. Brendan is quiet and somewhat introverted, and can often be seen covering his ears, especially when he’s in a noisy playground or family gathering. He holds his hands over his eyes when going outside on a sunny day, and reacts strongly to smells, such as ripe bananas, that don’t seem to bother anyone else. He can become distraught over seemingly minor sounds, itchy clothing, or crowded environments.

Here are some questions Brendan’s parents should ask:

- Does Brendan avoid touching, or being touched by, objects and people?
- Does he overreact to getting dirty, to certain textures of clothing or food, to light, or to unexpected touch? Does something as seemingly simple as the seam in a sock or nail trimming cause great distress?
- Does he avoid moving or being unexpectedly moved?
- Does he become anxious about falling or being off-balance?
- Does he get motion sickness?
- Is he rigid and uncoordinated?
- Does he avoid the more physically-challenging playground activities?
- Does he become overexcited with too much to look at, or overreact to bright light?
- Is he inattentive to desk work, yet ever alert and watchful?
- Does he try to close out, or complain about, otherwise normal noises, such as vacuum cleaners?
- Does he object to odors that others don’t notice, such as a ripe banana?
- Does he gag easily or otherwise object to certain food textures and temperatures?

Sensory-Seeking Child

Sarah's mom and dad call her their little "tough cookie." She loves to roughhouse with her cousins, often daring them to follow her in trying dangerous stunts with their tricycles and scooters. They often have to ask her to turn the television volume down, and to clean up the toys that are always all over her room. She is a lovable child who is always on the move, although if you're not careful, she is liable to knock you over with one of her signature "bear hugs."

Here are some questions Sarah's parents should ask:

- Does Sarah wallow in mud or rummage through piles of toys without purpose?
- Does she lick, taste, or chew on inedible objects?
- Does she rub against walls and furniture, or intentionally bump into people?
- Does she crave fast or spinning movement (without getting dizzy)?
- Does she move constantly, or does she like getting into upside-down positions?
- Is she a daredevil, taking bold physical risks?
- Does she crave bear hugs, wanting to be squeezed and pressed?
- Does she seek "heavy work" and vigorous playground activities?
- Is she attracted to shiny, spinning objects and bright, flickering light?
- Does she welcome loud noises and TV volume, and crowded places with noisy action?
- Does she speak in a booming voice?
- Does she seek strong odors, and is she often found sniffing food, people, and objects?
- Does she prefer very spicy or hot foods?

Tips for helping kids with sensory issues

There is good news for parents whose children have Sensory Processing Disorder. As the body of research grows, so does the list of strategies—recommended by experts and tested by parents—that you can use to help your child overcome SPD. Here are just a few:

Daytime Sensory Integration

Look for everyday opportunities to help your child practice experiencing new sensory inputs through touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight, as well as their vestibular and proprioceptive senses, such as:

- Plenty of outdoor play builds muscles and burns excess energy. Try a variety of activities such as walking, jogging, swinging, biking, skating, jumping, and more, to see what your child likes best.
- Listening to music helps block out other, distracting noises—and when bad weather prevents playtime outside, you can always have an indoor dance party!
- Grocery shopping offers lots of opportunities to build motor skills, including pushing the cart, loading and unloading the car, putting items away.

- Ditto for household chores such as meal preparation, vacuuming, raking, helping with garden work.
- Table play, such as drawing or finger painting, puzzles, threading, crafts using rice or sand, and making shaving cream sculptures, can help strengthen your child's sense of touch as well as their fine motor skills.
- Playing dress-up with clothes made of different fabrics and textures
- Playing a taste game with foods of different flavors and textures
- Massage, particularly at "transition" times when they are moving from one activity to another, can help your child reorganize her/his senses.

Away-From-Home Strategies

Plan ahead as best you can to introduce-- and help your child adjust to-- new people, places, and situations. For example, visiting a new school on a quiet day before the first day of class can help to ease the transition.

Depending on your child's unique sensory issues, one or more of the following items may be helpful to have on hand when you are away from home:

- Weighted lap cushion, vest, or stuffed toy
- Stretchy resistance bands
- Body sock
- Small blanket
- Rubik's Cube
- Play dough or Silly Putty
- Stress balls
- Bubble wrap
- Scarves or fabric scraps
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- MP3 player with music or audio books
- Chew toy or chew necklace
- Whistle or harmonica
- Puzzles, books, coloring books, doodle pads, and crayons
- Activity books
- Small chalk board or MagnaDoodle
- Calming essential oil spray or aromatherapy inhalers
- Scratch-and-sniff stickers

Sometimes discipline will be needed, but make sure you're responding to negative behavior that is your child's choice, not the result of an inability to deal with sensory stimuli.

Have an exit strategy, too, for those times when your child simply can't deal with a situation. Having a plan for leaving a party or family gathering will help you keep your own emotions on stable ground, which will ultimately help your child calm down as well.

Bedtime Sensory Integration

Bedtime is all about transitioning from daytime activities to restfulness. The child with SPD may need a little sensory encouragement to ease into a calm, relaxed state that leads to sleep.

- Movement to prepare the body for the transition to sleep, such as rocking in a chair, rolling on an exercise ball, or playing “row boat.”
- A warm bath with bubbles, Epsom salt, or soothing aromatherapy bath oil.
- Watching fish in an aquarium, even on a DVD or app, or a lava lamp, can be soothing.
- White noise through a machine, app, or even an electric or ceiling fan will block out distracting sounds.
- Warming blankets in the dryer before bedtime, cozy plush animals, or a warmed rice pillow will help create the sensory signals that lead to sleepiness.
- A weighted blanket, bear hugs, or pillow squishes provide physical pressure that your child might find comforting.

Additional resources

Bridgeway is happy to offer field-tested strategies to help you and your child overcome the challenges of SPD so they can learn, play, and grow. Contact us today to learn more about our programs and how we can help at 800-863-1474.

Below are links to additional resources for parents with SPD children:

Sensory input techniques to calm and focus your child

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4i258YX-6Do>

Sensory processing disorder workshop

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAzw-Af_MnA

Sensory processing needs and strategies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fw7HXfeYZmq>

Sensory processing difficulties

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3l11oViyOg>

Contact information

Jessica Parnell—mom, homeschool evaluator, teacher, and president of Bridgeway Academy—is happy to provide additional guidance and support. With more than 20 years of experience as a homeschool professional, Jessica has worked with hundreds of children and families who seek alternative approaches to education. Jessica knows there is no such thing as a “cookie-cutter child,” and is committed to teaching in a way that inspires children to reach for their unique potential. Jessica graduated from Kutztown University with a Bachelor of Science in Education and a Masters in English and is currently pursuing a degree in Neuroleadership.

You can contact Jessica at Jessica@polyweb.net.