



Understanding Your Child's Sensory Needs

What Is Sensory Processing?

Sensory processing is how the brain receives, organizes, and responds to information from the body and the environment. This information helps children understand what is happening around them and participate in everyday activities such as playing, eating, dressing, sleeping, learning, and spending time with others.

Every child processes sensory information differently. Some children notice sensations very quickly, while others need stronger or more frequent sensory input before they notice it.

Our Eight Sensory Systems

Sight (Visual): What we see

Sound (Auditory): What we hear

Touch (Tactile): What we feel on our skin

Taste (Gustatory): What we taste

Smell (Olfactory): What we smell

Movement (Vestibular): How our body responds to movement and changes in head position

Body awareness (Proprioception): Information from muscles and joints that tells us where our body is and how much force to use

Internal body signals (Interoception): Sensations such as hunger, thirst, needing the bathroom, pain, temperature, or a fast heartbeat

How Sensory Differences May Look

A child may be sensitive to sensory input and:

- Cover their ears around everyday sounds
- Avoid messy play or certain clothing
- Become overwhelmed in busy places
- Dislike grooming, movement, or certain foods

A child may seek additional sensory input and:

- Move, climb, crash, spin, or jump frequently
- Touch objects or people often
- Chew on clothing or toys
- Prefer strong hugs, loud sounds, or intense movement

A child may notice sensory information less easily and:

- Seem unaware of a messy face or hands
- Use too much or too little force
- Misspoken directions
- Take longer to respond to body signals

A child can show different responses depending on the sensory system, activity, environment, fatigue, hunger, stress, or time of day.

Sensory Behavior Is Communication

What looks like refusing, avoiding, fidgeting, crashing, or “acting out” may be a child communicating:

- “This feels like too much.”
- “I need more information from my body.”
- “I do not feel organized or safe yet.”
- “I need help returning to a comfortable level of alertness.”

When children are overwhelmed, they may not yet have the skills needed to explain or manage what they are experiencing.

How Families Can Help

Observe before reacting.

Notice what happened before, during, and after the child’s response.

Adjust the environment.

Reduce unnecessary noise, visual clutter, bright lighting, or uncomfortable clothing when possible.

Offer choices.

Let the child choose between two manageable options, such as headphones or a quiet room.

Prepare for challenging situations.

Use pictures, simple explanations, routines, and warnings.

Include familiar movement and play.

Walking, pushing, pulling, climbing, dancing, rocking, or other preferred activities may help

some children feel more organized. Sensory activities should be selected according to the individual child's response.

Respect the child's communication.

Do not force a child to tolerate distressing sensory experiences to make them "get used to it." Exposure in small increments is ok; just be ready with supports if needed.

When to Seek Additional Support

Consider speaking with your child's pediatrician or an occupational therapist when sensory differences regularly interfere with:

- Eating or sleeping
- Dressing, bathing, or grooming
- Play and social participation
- Learning or attending school
- Family routines or community activities
- The child's safety or emotional well-being

Occupational therapists consider how sensory processing affects a child's participation and can help families develop individualized strategies for daily routines.

Remember

The goal is not to eliminate every sensory preference. The goal is to understand what your child's nervous system may be communicating and help them participate in daily life with greater comfort, safety, and success.

This handout provides general education and is not intended to diagnose a sensory or developmental condition.

Sources

American Occupational Therapy Association. *Sensory Integration Approaches for Children and Youth in Occupational Therapy.*

American Occupational Therapy Association. *Translating Ayres Sensory Integration® Into Everyday Life.*

American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. *Occupational Therapy* and family resources on stress, play, and regulation.

Shropshire Community Health NHS Trust. *Children's Occupational Therapy Sensory Information.*