

Understanding Sensory Integration

Occupational therapy (OT) often helps children with sensory integration. Sensory integration is how the brain sorts and understands information from our senses. This helps us learn about and interact with the world. Some children have trouble with this process, which can make daily activities challenging.



What Are the Senses?

Sensory integration actually involves 7 senses instead of the traditional 5:

1. **Vision:** Seeing and understanding the environment
2. **Hearing:** listening and making sense of sounds
3. **Taste:** Flavors and textures of food
4. **Smell:** Noticing and distinguishing smells in the environment
5. **Touch:** Perceiving touch, pressure, texture, temperature, and pain.
6. **Vestibular:** Keeping our balance and moving smoothly
7. **Proprioception:** Knowing where our body is and how it is moving.

Challenges in Sensory Integration

When sensory input is not processed correctly:

- **Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD):** Difficulty making sense of sensory information.
- **Sensory Seeking:** Craving sensory input
 - Examples: Talking loudly, getting messy, excessive movement
- **Sensory Avoidance:** Being very sensitive to sensory input and trying to stay away from it.
 - Examples: Not liking certain clothes/tags touching them or not being able to focus with outside sounds around them

These challenges can make it hard for a child to focus, learn, socialize, and do everyday activities.

Occupational Therapy and Sensory Integration

OTs help children with sensory integration by using different activities & strategies.

- **Sensory Diet:** A special plan and timeline of activities to help manage a child's sensory needs. Playing with sand, playdough, water table, swing, trampoline
- **Therapeutic Play:** Fun, play-based activities that give sensory input in a structured way. An obstacle course, swinging, heavy work (ex: lifting heavy objects or game of tug-of-war).
- **Environmental Changes:** Changing the child's surroundings to reduce or add sensory input to meet the just right challenge. Changes in lighting, adding or taking away music, sitting in a different chair (ex: office chair that spins or rocks).

How Caregivers and Parents Can Help

As a caregiver, you have an important role in helping your child's sensory needs:

- **Observe:** Watch how your child reacts to various sensory activities
- **Collaborate:** Talk to your OT about what you see to help plan the best activities.
- **Create a Sensory-Friendly Environment:** Give your child opportunities to explore different sensory activities (different textures, smells, sounds, and movements).
- **Be Patient:** Understand that it may take time for your child to improve, and celebrate small successes along the way!



Understanding sensory integration is important for helping children who have trouble with sensory information. By working closely with OT and using strategies at home, caregivers can help children learn important skills to manage their sensory experiences.

For more information and personalized help, don't hesitate to contact your child's OT.