

Sensory Processing Issues FAQ

(adapted from understood.org and childmind.org)

If you're familiar with the term "sensory overload," you have an idea what sensory processing issues are. Sometimes called sensory processing disorder (SPD) or sensory integration disorder, these issues happen because the brain has trouble organizing information from the senses.

Children with sensory processing issues can be oversensitive to sights, sounds, textures, flavors, smells and other sensory input. This can make a trip to the grocery store, birthday parties or wearing certain clothes an overwhelming experience for them. Other children with sensory processing issues are undersensitive to information they receive through the senses. This can lead to other problems. Sensory processing issues can impact a child's social skills and cause difficulties at school.

What are sensory processing issues?

A child's brain receives a steady stream of sensory information—from the smell of cookies baking to the feeling of shoes rubbing against her feet. Most children can "tune out" or "filter" that information as needed. They can deal with unexpected sensations, such as a loud crash on the playground.

But children with sensory processing issues may be oversensitive or undersensitive to the world around them. When the brain receives information, it gives meaning to even the smallest bits of information. Keeping all that information organized and responding appropriately is challenging for them.

All children can be finicky or difficult at times. But children with sensory processing issues can be so emotionally sensitive that doing simple daily tasks is a constant challenge. Certain fabrics or tags in clothing might irritate them. On the other end of the spectrum, they might have a high tolerance to pain and not realize when they're in a dangerous situation.

There's growing awareness of sensory processing issues, but it remains controversial in medical circles. It doesn't appear in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), the guide used by doctors and therapists to diagnose learning, behavior and attention disorders.

Also, difficulty with sensory processing is not one of the 13 disabilities covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, children with symptoms may be eligible for special education services if they're found to have another issue, such as a learning disability, that is interfering with their educational progress.

How common are sensory processing issues?

There hasn't been enough research into sensory processing issues to know how many children (teens and adults as well) have them. Some studies suggest that as many as five to 16 percent of school-age children are affected.

What causes sensory processing issues?

There are no large-scale studies on sensory processing issues, so the causes are not known. But researchers are starting to use brain-imaging techniques to look into biological reasons. One recent study out of UCSF pointed to connections between certain areas of the brain that may affect how sensory

information is processed. But there's not enough scientific evidence yet to draw firm conclusions.

What are the symptoms of sensory processing issues?

Symptoms of sensory processing issues can range from mild to severe. Here are some common symptoms:

Hypersensitivity: Hypersensitive (or oversensitive) children may have an extreme response to loud noises or notice sounds that others don't. They may dislike being touched, even by adults they know. They may be fearful in crowds, reluctant to play on playground equipment or worried about their safety (being bumped into or falling)—even when there's no real danger.

Hposensitivity: Hyposensitive (or undersensitive) children lack sensitivity to their surroundings. They might have a high tolerance for or indifference to pain. They may be “sensory seeking,” meaning they have a constant need to touch people or things—even when it's not appropriate.

They may also have trouble with personal space or be clumsy and uncoordinated. They might be constantly on the move and take risks on the playground, accidentally harming other children when playing.

Some children with sensory processing issues show signs of both hypersensitivity *and* hyposensitivity. They may react in one or both of the following ways:

Extreme response to a change in environment: Children may be fine in familiar settings but throw a temper tantrum in a crowded, noisy store. These tantrums can be scary for parents and children, since children who are oversensitive might have trouble stopping once they get started.

Fleeing from stimulation: Children who are undersensitive might run away from something that's too stimulating. Or they might run toward something that will calm them down. For example, they might zip across the playground toward a familiar teacher without paying attention to the other children they're jostling.

What skills are affected by sensory processing issues?

For children with sensory processing issues, dealing with sensory information can be frustrating and confusing. Here's how it can affect certain skills:

Resistance to change and trouble focusing: It can be a struggle for children with sensory processing issues to adjust to new surroundings and situations. It can take them a long time to settle into activities. They might feel stressed out when asked to stop what they're doing and start something new.

Problems with motor skills: Children who are undersensitive to touch may avoid handling objects. This is a problem because playing with and manipulating objects is a crucial part of development—one that helps children master other motor-related tasks like holding a pencil or buttoning clothes. They might appear clumsy due to poor body awareness.

Impaired social skills: Oversensitive children may feel anxious and irritable around other children, making it hard to socialize. Undersensitive children, on the other hand, may be too rough with others. Other children might avoid them on the playground or exclude them from birthday parties.

Poor self-control: Children who feel anxious or overstimulated may have trouble controlling their impulses. They might run off suddenly or throw a noisy new toy to the side without playing with it.

Who can help?

Occupational therapists (or OTs) are the specialists who work with children who have sensory issues. Your child may be referred to an OT at his school or one who is in private practice (some health insurance companies cover this service). OTs engage children in physical activities that are designed to regulate their sensory input, to make them feel more comfortable, secure, and able to focus. This treatment plan is sometimes called a “sensory diet” or “sensory integration therapy”.

Children with sensory issues are all different and therefore one approach does not work for every child. There are no scientifically sound studies proving that occupational therapy for children with sensory processing challenges is effective. Complicating matters further, many children with sensory processing issues have other coexisting developmental or behavioral conditions. In spite of the lack of scientific evidence, many parents find that these therapies and exercises help children to feel and function better.

How are sensory processing issues diagnosed?

Because sensory processing issues are not in the DSM-5, they technically cannot be “diagnosed.” But that does not mean there isn’t a way to find out if your child has sensory processing issues. In addition to consulting with your child’s physician and an occupational therapist, you might be recommended to pursue a comprehensive assessment with another medical specialist, such as a developmental pediatrician, child psychiatrist or neurologist to rule-out other conditions or disorders. You might also be recommended to seek an assessment with the school district for possible learning problems.

Are children who have sensory processing issues autistic?

Not all children with sensory processing issues have autism spectrum disorder, but many of them do, and autism is one of the things doctors are looking for during their assessments. Sensory issues can also be found in those with ADHD, anxiety and other developmental delays—or with no other diagnosis at all.

How do I know if treatment is working?

Work with your child’s OT or primary physician to find ways to measure therapy outcomes, to get a better sense of whether it’s helping. You can create a scale of behaviors to compare how your child is doing before and after treatment, and some specific goals you’d like to work towards, such as the ability to focus better, to stay calm in a loud room, or have fewer meltdowns.

What can you do?

Parenting a child with sensory processing issues is no easy task. Your child may be inflexible, difficult, or easily frustrated. She may be unable to control her behavior at all. Yet there are ways you can support your child and make life easier for her and the family. Here are some ideas to try:

Keep track of your child’s behavior issues. Start taking notes about the behaviors and symptoms



you're seeing in your child and when they occur. You might also ask your child's teachers about behaviors and symptoms they've noticed at school. Knowing the patterns can help you anticipate tough situations for your child. All this information will be helpful to the specialists who will evaluate or treat your child.

Provide safe and appropriate outlets. Help your child learn what things are "safe" to touch. Provide places where she can go to feel safe yet included in play with peers or siblings. You can also coach her on ways to "escape" situations before things get out of hand.

Use your knowledge to avoid sticky situations. For example, if noisy toys and machines cause your child anxiety, ask other children not to play with loud instruments and toys around her. Be mindful when using everyday machines, such as pressure cookers and vacuum cleaners.

Get advice from experts. In addition to an occupational therapist, parenting coaches and behavioral therapists can provide tips and suggestions on how to deal with a variety of behavior concerns.

Connect with other parents. You may feel alone when dealing with your child's issues, but there are other families in similar situations. Connect with parents like you in your community. They can provide support and advice along the way.

Do your best to be positive. Your love and support of your child goes a long way.