



Facilitating Relationships... Promoting Independence

Making Sense of Sensory Processing

[Reprinted from NMTSA Functional Cadence Newsletter, Spring 2010]

Sarah Studebaker, MME, MT-BC, NMT Fellow

Sensory processing refers to how we use the sensory information we take in from our own body and our environment. When all of this information works together, it gives us a picture of what is happening around us and helps us to navigate through our world accordingly. Take a moment to consider the following scenario.

Imagine you are setting the table for dinner. You count out the dishes, select the appropriate utensils, and place them all on the table. You pull the salt and pepper out of the pantry and place them on the table. The kitchen timer goes off to alert you to pull dinner out of the oven and place the items in a serving dish. It smells terrific.

Now imagine the same scenario from a different perspective of someone that processes sensory information differently. Your hands fumble around for the right utensils, and somehow you end up with all spoons on the table. You drop and break a couple of plates because your foot caught the leg of one of the chairs. You have a hard time finding the salt and pepper in a pantry full of so many things. The kitchen timer hurts your ears. You spill some of the casserole on your hands, the smell overwhelms you, and you bump your elbow on the countertop on the way to the table.

No two sensory systems are created equal; each one of us is unique. However, there are a few common tendencies to look for when breaking down sensory processing issues.

Some individuals are hyposensitive (or under-reactive), meaning their sensory system cuts off some sensory messages. Someone who is hyposensitive might appear passive, react slowly, seem to prefer to be still, etc. Still be on the lookout for lots of over-active behaviors as well because they might be trying to overcompensate for the lack of sensory input that is getting through.

Other individuals are hypersensitive (or over-reactive), meaning there is just too much sensory input getting through. Someone who is hypersensitive might be overly protective, be constantly on their guard, avoid certain activities, prefer sameness, etc. But be on the lookout for shutdown behaviors as well because they might overcompensate for this overload by shutting down, tuning out, or withdrawing from activities.

So, how can you go about helping someone develop better sensory processing skills?

STOP. When you have looked at a behavior through the same eyes for so long, allow yourself the split second to stop long enough to try it differently this time.

THINK. Put on a new set of eyes. Put yourself in their shoes. Ask Why...? How come...? Is it possible...? Still not sure what to think? Educate yourself. Talk with your therapists. Read up on sensory issues (see recommended selections below).

TRY. Don't be afraid to roll up your sleeves, try a few things, and see how it goes. Evaluate. Whether it works or not, learn from it and try again.

For more information and further ideas, the following books are wonderful resources and are currently available in our Parent Empowerment Center. See your therapist if you're interested in checking out a book.

Raising A Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook For Helping Your Child With Sensory Integration Issues by Lindsey Biel and Nancy Peske.

The Out-Of-Sync Child Has Fun: Activities For Kids With Sensory Processing Disorder by Carol Stock Kranowitz.