

O.T. Works, Inc.

The Therapy Playce
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What is Sensory Processing?

Everyday, we receive a great deal of information from our senses. We use this information to organize our behavior and successfully interact in the world. Our senses give us information about the physical status of our body and the environment around us. Think of the senses - sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Yet, there are two more senses which are just as essential to survival. These senses are: balance and movement sense (our vestibular sense) and muscle and joint sense (our proprioceptive sense). Our vestibular sense is the knowledge of our head position in relation to gravity and movement. Our proprioceptive sense is our internal awareness of the position of our joints and muscles in space.

Our brains must organize all this information and figure out what to do with it so that we may function in everyday situations - in the classroom, on the playground, at home, and during social situations. It is truly amazing that one brain can manage input from all these senses simultaneously, and create a response to the demands of the environment. Here is a simple example of the use of sensory processing, using most of the senses.

The teacher says "please put on your coat."

Hearing - the child must focus her attention on the teacher, and hear and understand what the teacher is saying.

Vestibular - the child must safely walk over to her coat.

Seeing - the child must see the coat and make a plan for how to begin. Proprioceptive - the child must feel where her arms are to put them through the sleeves of the coat.

Touch - the child must feel that the coat is on her body properly, and feel with her fingertips to be able to zip, snap or button his coat.

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What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

Sometimes one or more of these senses are not being processed or interpreted properly. A child with poor feedback about touch, movement and gravity, and body position struggles with basic tasks that other children do with ease. For these children, the pull of gravity, the sounds around them, or the touch of other children are perceived as something unpredictable, inconsistent, or threatening. These children do not feel the usual security, safety, and fun that other children experience. This also makes learning a challenge.

When there is a sensory processing disorder, a number of problems in learning, motor development or behavior may be observed:

Sensory Problem

Overly sensitive to sights, sounds, touch or movements

Under reactive to sensory input.

Poor vestibular or proprioceptive sense.

Overall poor organization of responses to input.

Signs or Behaviors

Distractible, withdraws or acts out when touched, avoids textures, certain clothes, foods. Fearful of playground equipment. Sensitive to loud noises. Tries to control situations.

Seeks out intense input, like body twirling, falling and crashing into objects, mouthing objects. May not respond to pain or body position. Always on the move, may be slow to get going, fatigues easily.

May have poor balance, difficulty learning new motor task or game, may appear clumsy, awkward, or stiff.

May be impulsive, distractible, unsafe. Poor planning of task, does not anticipate result of actions.

May struggle with a new situation or following directions. May get overly frustrated, aggressive or withdraw when they encounter failure.