

Sensory Processing Problems in Infants and Young Children

Picky, Irritable, Fussy, Quirky, Active, Uncontrollable, Risk-taker, Reserved, Loner, Frustrating.these are a few of the words that parents and caregivers may use or have used to describe their child who is exhibiting signs of a Sensory Processing Disorder. Formerly known as Sensory Integration Dysfunction, Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) is a common and widely misunderstood problem that affects the behaviors of infants, children and even adults. Sensory Processing is the process of the brain taking in sensory information (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, position in space, and movement) from the environment and interpreting it for use. SPD is the inability to perceive or make 'sense' of this sensory information. When the sensory input we are exposed to is 'miscommunicated' it can affect how we behave, how we interact with and relate to others, how we learn, how we feel about ourselves and how we function in our everyday lives to name a few. Things that may seem simple; getting dressed, taking a bath, combing hair, washing hands, sitting on a chair, eating a meal, giving or accepting a hug or affection from another person, going shopping in a store, playing with another child...can be difficult to nearly impossible.

In infants signs of SPD can include the following:

- Having significant periods of irritability or inconsolability (crying without being able to calm down)
- Being overly inactive without moving arms and legs
- Becoming rigid when held
- Being easily startled by very small amounts of noise or light
- Lack of eye contact with others (including parents)
- Lack of smiling at others (including parents)
- Preferring to be left alone rather than being held, cuddled or talked to
- Difficulty eating
- Difficulty getting to sleep and/or staying asleep
- Fussy or irritable in public or crowded places

In toddlers signs of SPD may include:

- Difficulty paying attention (when background noise or activities are present)
- Sensitivity to textures on their hands, face and/or feet (becoming upset when messy, or when touching or tasting different textures)
- Craving or seeking out touch (uses a lot of pressure or force when touching or handling objects or people)
- Has little strength or energy to play and move in daily activities or tires easily
- Has an excessive craving for swinging, jumping, roughhousing or moving around (can't sit still)
- Has a fear of movement (avoiding playground or balance activities, afraid of stairs)

- Bumping into walls or other objects without realizing it
- Gets hurt often without complaint or noticing
- Frequently walking on toes
- Has poor posture (wobbles when they move)
- Difficulty coordinating to hop, run, or jump as compared to other children their age
- Difficulty using both hands together
- Withdrawing from a crowd or hides when new people enter a room
- Low tolerance for texture in foods (a picky eater)
- Gags or vomits on foods
- Strong dislike for brushing teeth
- Pockets food in mouth for a long time before swallowing
- Bites or chews on non food objects (or bites others or self frequently)
- Craves hard, crunchy foods
- Poor sleep habits
- Has tantrums or meltdowns in public places
- Gets upset when having hair cut or washed
- Dislikes bathtime
- Avoids wearing certain clothes
- Difficulty on transitions or changes in routines

While most babies and children will exhibit some or all of these symptoms at times, it is when the behaviors are more consistent (happening frequently or more) and they affect daily living and functioning that a disorder may be present. Therapy, particularly and Occupational Therapist who is trained in Sensory Integration, helps to address SPD and helps that person to learn from, tolerate and 'understand' the sensory information around them better. The therapist will help to identify what behaviors are 'typical' or what could be as a result of a Sensory Processing Disorder. The therapist will also help to tailor activities that can be done with the child to help their bodies improve their response to the sensory information around them; thus lessening the 'negative behaviors' that they may be exhibiting.