

The Sensory-Sensitive Child
Practical Solutions for Out-of-Bounds Behavior

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Betrayed by Their Senses: Dysfunctional Sensory Integration

“I don’t like that shirt. It’s too spicy on the inside.”

-Sally,

at age 4

Sensory Modulation Difficulties

Tactile Modulation Difficulties

Resists wearing certain materials, certain articles of clothing, long sleeves, or pants

Strips clothes and/or shoes off whenever possible

Is sensitive to waistbands, belts, collars, sleeves, tags

Difficulty with dressing, bathing, hair brushing, nail cutting, or tooth brushing

Touches or pokes others

Big response to touch or imagined touch

Gives high fives that are too hard; hugs too tightly

Craves cuddling (hyporesponsive) or won’t ever let you cuddle (hyperresponsive)

“Crashes” into people, walls, furniture, things

Extremely ticklish

Overreacts to ordinary bumps and bruises, or underreacts to pain

Either craves or completely refuses messy activities such as finger paint and clay

“Fingers” or “mouths” things such as hair, clothing, and objects

Shows peculiar and particular responses to food textures

Has trouble with group situations such as circle time

Auditory Modulation Difficulties

Has difficulty “filtering out” background noise, such as in the classroom

Reactions to certain sounds are too big, frequently covering ears with hands (sirens, dog barking)

Complains that others are yelling, while he/she is yelling

Repetitive noise with hands or mouth

Startles easily to noises not even heard by others

Olfactory and Gustatory Modulation Difficulties

States all food tastes the same

Will only eat bland foods, or eats foods that are basically all white, off-white, tan (bread, potatoes, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken.)

Craves food that is very spicy or very salty

Sniffs people or objects

Does not notice offensive smells (hyposensitive), or has a very big, inappropriate reaction
smells (hypersensitive)
Literally refuses to go near strong-smelling foods (coffee, broccoli)
Dislikes certain people or pets because of their smell

Visual Modulation Difficulties

Difficulty shifting gaze
Difficulty copying (from the blackboard, books)
Avoids visually stimulating environments
Avoids eye contact
Prefers dim lighting
Demands sunglasses
Visually complex tasks are tiring and make him/her irritable
Squinting, rubbing eyes, or getting headaches after reading but not requiring glasses

Vestibular-Proprioceptive Modulation Difficulties (Problems with Balance, Movement, and Body Position)

Poor balance
Difficulty with stairs
Rocking
Hanging upside down
“Floppy” (Slouches, does not sit straight, leans on walls, furniture)
Afraid of heights and/or vigorous, activities
Preference for spinning
Fear of escalators, open staircases
Avoidance of sports or difficulty learning them
“Bumpy” Bumps into things, people

Sensory Discrimination Difficulties

Tactile Discrimination Difficulties

Avoids or has difficulty with fine-motor tasks such as writing, using scissors, zipping, typing shoes
Startles easily when touched from behind
Needs to look at objects to correctly identify or manipulate them

Auditory Discrimination Difficulties

Seems to have difficulty understanding or attending to what is said
Difficulty differentiating and remembering certain sounds or words
Difficulty judging the source of sounds
Difficulty determining location and distance by sound
Any background noise makes it difficult to focus on or recognize some sounds
Does not consistently respond well to verbal requests or commands
Direction has to be given in multi-step fashion (“pick up the towel, wipe off the mirror, and hang the towel back up” instead of “Wipe off the mirror.”)

Olfactory and Gustatory Discrimination Difficulties

Difficulty differentiating smells and tastes without seeing the item

Seems oblivious to the relevance of certain smells (e.g., burning toast)

Visual Discrimination Difficulties

Difficulty determining the relationships between objects

Difficulty recognizing, matching, and categorizing color, shape, texture, and size

Difficulty with visually ordering things

Difficulty following rapid movement with their eyes

Hard time coordinating gross and fine-motor movements (it might be very hard for this child to learn a line dance)

Misperceives meaning of facial expression because it is hard to recognizing symbols and gestures

Depth perception, distance, the amount of space between objects; to this child, parts of life can seem like optical illusions

Hard to determine what is in the visual foreground vs. visual background

Vestibular-Proprioceptive Discrimination Difficulties (Difficulties of Balance, Movement, and Body Position)

Maintaining balance while moving is difficult

Position of body and its relationship to surroundings

Maintaining an upright posture or sitting in a chair for a long period of time

Differentiating right from left after age 7

Enjoying playground equipment or amusement park rides – these kids prefer to have their feet firmly planted on the ground at all times

Motor Planning Difficulties (Dyspraxia)

Deciding what to do and how to do it

Getting started on activities

Translating ideas and images into behavior

Organizing actions to produce an intentional event

Figuring out how to play a new game

Novel motor activities such as riding a bicycle may be difficult

Coordinating tongue and mouth movements, resulting in problems chewing and swallowing, sucking, and blowing

Conveying emotions through facial movements may be difficult

Coordinating eye-hand movements

Recognizing the movement of his own body in relation to the movement of others