

UNDERSTANDING SENSORY PROCESSING CHALLENGES

When people struggle to manage all the information their brain and senses are taking in, their responses may not match the activity happening.

What do we mean by sensory processing challenges ?

Sensory challenges occur when your body's senses are either overloaded or underloaded and so you feel stress and other negative responses.

The senses affected include the traditional five senses:

- Sight (visual)
- Sound (auditory)
- Smell (olfactory)
- Taste (gustatory)
- Touch (tactile)

as well as three other sense systems:

- Vestibular, which is the sense of our head movement in space
- Proprioceptive, the senses felt from our muscles and joints
- Interoceptive, the senses we get from the physiological/physical conditions in our body.

When any of these systems are not working properly, it can lead to a child having challenges at home, at school, or even at play. Responses to sensory challenges include emotional, behavioral, social, attentional, or movement problems.

Sensory Processing Disorder affects how 1 in 20 people process sensations in their daily environment, according to the STAR Center Foundation.



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Understanding the signs: being oversensitive, under-sensitive, or craving

If a student is oversensitive it means they are responding too much, too soon, or for too long to sensory stimuli most people find quite tolerable.

If a student is under-sensitive it means they are unaware of sensory stimuli, have a delay before responding, their responses are muted or they respond with less intensity compared to others.

If a student is sensory craving, it means they are driven to obtain sensory stimulation, but getting the stimulation results in disorganization and does not satisfy the drive for more.

What might this look like at home?

Some common signs:

- Trouble with eating
- Overly sensitive to touch, smells, noises, etc.
- Overly sensitive to certain clothes or textures
- Difficulty with focus
- Clumsy or unsure of how to move their body
- Awkward or not sure of where they are in relation to other people or things
- Difficulty with making friends (overly aggressive or passive/withdrawn)
- Gets stuck on tasks and struggles to transition
- Speech lacks fluency and may stumble with words

What are some possible strategies we can use?

Physical Accommodations

- Identified space for them with clear boundaries shown. For example, set aside a certain seat at the kitchen table and use a place-mat or tape lines help them see their space
- Alternative seating equipment, such as yoga ball, rocking chair, etc.
- Weighted blankets or lap pads. You can use multiple blankets to achieve the pressure sensation of a weighted blanket
- A crash/quiet corner
- Allow for active breaks. For example, have them go up and down your stairs for an item, have them help with gathering up items around the house, etc.
- Allow child to chew gum or candy
- Having a spot that holds their tools to either increase their energy or help them focus, such as fidget spinners, soft items, chewy items, earbuds, etc.

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Visual Accommodations

- Number line or poster to look at
- Keep walls and boards organized to minimize distractions and provide a learning space designated for their homework
- Organize storage space with labels and pictures
- Adjust lighting
- Post a daily schedule, either with or without pictures
- Have sunglasses available to cut down on the brightness of the lights

Auditory Accommodations

- Break directions down into steps and allow extra time
- Link verbal directions to visuals of some kind. For example, give the child a photo of what a clean room looks like so they know what to do.
- Warn child when possible of any loud noises before they occur
- Have noise canceling headphones IPSAD/Headphones

Organizational Accommodations

- Give visual cues before transitions between activities at home, such as a timer that changes colors or a chart
- Link transitions with schedule
- Give them their own area to neatly store materials
- Model the directions

What might this look like at school?

In school, sensory processing challenges can look like children struggling with communicating, working with peers, entering the school building, or other possible behaviors. The key is to look at the behavior as the child's way to communicate that something is hard for them, then try to discover the sensory need underlying that behavior.

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What are some possible strategies we can use?

Possible Physical Accommodations

- Carpet squares for child's individual space or tape if using a shared desk
- Alternative seating equipment such as pillows on the floor, yoga ball, etc.
- Weighted blankets or lap pads
- A crash/quiet corner or opportunity for active breaks
- Allow child to chew gum or candy

Visual Accommodations

- Number lines
- Organized storage space with labels and pictures
- Post a daily schedule with or without pictures
- Allow child to wear sunglasses to cut down on the brightness of the lights

Auditory Accommodations

- Break directions down into steps and allow extra time
- Link verbal directions to visuals
- Warn child when possible of any loud noises before they occur
- Use noise canceling headphones IPSAD or Headphones

Organizational Accommodations

- Give visual cues before class transitions such as a timer that changes colors or a chart
- Link transitions with schedule
- Allow child to have their own area to neatly store materials
- Model the directions

What might this look like out in the community?

Going out in the community may be challenging for several reasons. We have little or no control over how many people are in a store, what kind of music or noises may be heard, or how bright the lights are. Restaurants and food courts may have a lot of different smells, and trying new foods can be challenging for many children, regardless of sensory issues.

A child who is struggling with sensory processing may hold their ears or resist going into or staying in a location. They may look sad or may be bouncing around. The ways that children respond vary from person to person.

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What are some possible strategies we can use?

- Talk with your child before leaving about places you plan to go
- Make a list of where you are going and what you are getting
- Try a test run: Visiting different community locations without any pressure to get items
- If eating is a challenge, try ordering take-out from a restaurant you'd like to try later. Letting your child eat it at home relieves the pressure of trying new food and a new location at the same time.
- When you are ready to eat at a restaurant, allow your child to bring something to help keep them occupied for part of the time.
- Allow your child to wear a weighted vest under their shirt when going out
- Bring earplugs or headphones to be used if noise is a concern

How are Sensory Processing challenges diagnosed?

- You can talk with your pediatrician about getting an evaluation from a developmental pediatrician.
- If your child is school age, submit a letter requesting a sensory evaluation to your school district's CSE chair.

How do I talk with my child's school team about supports at school?

Start by talking with your child's teacher to better understand what they are observing with your child. They can let you know what they see in terms of behavior, activities, and interactions with peers and teachers.

If your child does not have or does not qualify for an IEP or a 504 Plan, you can request "compassionate accommodations" to support your child at school.

If your child has an IEP or a 504 Plan, the sensory accommodations can be included in part of that plan.

Still have questions?

Contact us at (585) 546-1700 or starbridgeinc.org/contact-us

