

◆◆◆ OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

SENSORY TEMPERAMENT - "Sensory Seeking"

There are many children for whom sensory seeking is a major component of who they are; it is an important part of the child's sensory temperament. (Many children with low registration become sensory seekers to bring their level of arousal higher, and 'low registration' information should be reviewed if appropriate for your child.) Sensory seekers look for sensory input in all aspects of life. Thoughts and actions will be interrupted by the sensory world around them which seems to call out to them to touch, look, listen, feel, move, and explore. Children with sensory seeking tendencies tend to have high neurological thresholds, and they become sensory seekers in an effort to counteract these thresholds.

People who seek sensory input are happiest in an environment with a lot of input. Areas with lots of bright colours, things to touch, sounds, opportunities to move, etc. help to keep a child alert. Aspects of the environment we want the child to attend to should be as salient as possible, so they stand out from the (bland) background. People who are sensory seekers can always see sensory opportunities around them. They tend to be creative and original, although we may not appreciate this. What looks to me and you like a sofa might look like a high beam to a sensory seeker. What we see as a high dresser might be a high launch pad for a big jump. Sensory seekers are not looking to cause trouble, they simply see the world differently than we do. The goal of a sensory seeker is to find ways to increase intensity and duration of sensory input to keep level of arousal high.

If we can discover what types of input the child seeks, those types of input can be built into the child's activity schedule. For example, if a child likes to move/fidget a lot, sitting on a chair ball or movin'sit cushion might be helpful. Having things to fidget with is helpful when the child is required to be still. Keeping the child's materials on the other side of the room allows movement opportunities during and in between tasks. In between tasks, the child might go down the hall for a drink or up some stairs and back again. More intense movement breaks would be scheduled every hour or so. A child who seeks visual input can have short frequent breaks to spin a top, look through a kaleidoscope, gaze at a fish tank or screen saver, and then get back to work.

Adding gravity and heavy work increases and changes the input the nervous system receives. Gravity (adding weight) and heavy work (pushing, pulling, etc.) helps to calm the nervous system so satiation to the sensory seeking may occur.

A common misconception is that we can motivate children to do what we want them to do by reinforcing that with something they desire to meet an innate sensory need. This is like asking a hungry child to complete a challenging task before they can have food; it is counterproductive, disrespectful, and in some forms this constitutes abuse. Just because a child has different sensory needs (i.e. cannot sit as long) does not mean the child's learning should be sacrificed because their needs are different than those of many of their 'typical' peers.

Sensory seeking opportunities can include all sensory areas, and may end with a calming form of input:

Tactile: touching objects, fidget items, wash hands, wash desk with shaving cream, wear jewelry. Ending with touch that is deep, hard, smooth tends to be more calming.

Visual: spinning tops, mobiles, watching fast movement or sports, make target materials bright against a dull background, let child climb high and watch activity. Input that is more subdued and more consistent tends to be calming.

Proprioceptive: jump, push things, bounce, wall pushes, crab walk, chair push-ups, squeeze hands, provide touch pressure, carry things. Input that involves pushing, pulling, lifting, dragging, hanging from arms, etc. tends to be calming.

Vestibular: add movement with pacing, rocking, or spinning; provide movement in linear, lateral or orbital planes, rocking chair, beach ball seat, swings, stairs, walk across room. Input that is smooth and rhythmical tends to be calming.

Auditory: sing, hum, repeat directions, (wait up to 20 seconds between a comment or request to allow time for processing), expand the vowel in a word to increase attention to the key word, use action words, play music in background (lively music, marches, etc.) headphones. Input that smooth, rhythmical, low pitch, mellow tends to be calming.

Oral: sip drink, chew objects, provide cold or crunchy snack, water bottle, chew straws. Input that is warm, sweet, chewy tends to be calming.

Olfactory: smell or sniff objects, make a smell kit or play a game with identifying smells. Sweet, light smells tend to be calming.

Examples of sensory activities to end sensory sessions with in order to promote calming:

- deep pressure massage, back rub using comfort touch
- joint compressions
- stretches
- snuggling in a sleeping bag, bean bag chair, large pillows
- blanket wrap (neutral warmth) or swaddling for a younger child
- firm pressure and skin to skin contact (squeezes to head, trunk, shoulders, hands)
- slow rocking or swaying - rocking chair, in adults lap or arms, on tummy in a head to heel direction (rhythmic motion)
- child uses palms to press together or against temples
- seeking out quiet area
- slow swinging- back and forth - in a blanket or rocking chair, swing
- lycra/spandex clothing, neoprene vest, weighted vest or collar
- lavender, vanilla, banana or other soothing smells
- sucking or heavy chewing
- hideout, fort or quiet corner
- progressive muscle relaxation
- white noise or quiet music with a steady beat
- bear hugs (child faces away from you)
- hugging a teddy bear, giving self hugs, cuddling and warm backrubs
- reduced noise and light levels (turn off the TV, radio and lights)
- warm or tepid bath

With children who have low registration, be careful not to calm the nervous system too much or the child may become lethargic. It can be challenging to balance when to provide lots of alerting and organizing sensory input, and when to encourage calming input to help the child come down from sensory seeking or to be ready to do focused work. Each child is different. Considering the child's complete sensory profile is very helpful, as is consultation with an occupational therapist who has experience with sensory processing.

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