

# MARC'S SENSORY OASIS

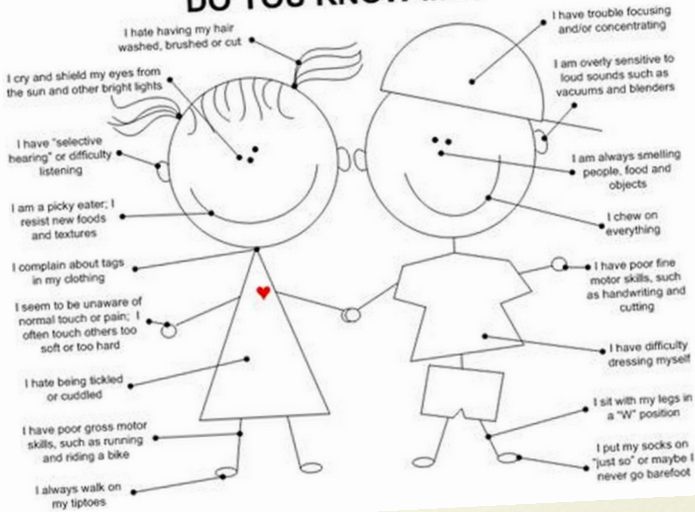
Sensory-based Occupational Therapy

[www.otmarclandry.com](http://www.otmarclandry.com)

## SENSORY SENSITIVE

CHILDREN ARE PRECIOUS!

### DO YOU KNOW ME?



NOT EVERY CHILD HAS EVERY FEATURE!

So, you have a sensory sensitive child ?!

### Being **SENSORY SENSITIVE**

is no longer a rare occurrence only associated with certain diagnoses or conditions. You may have thought that there was something wrong with your parenting, or maybe that your child was sent here to punish you! It often seems like that whatever you do does not help a

child who is sensory sensitive, and adults can feel helpless and frustrated. Don't make the mistake of believing that your child's behavior is planned and chosen; it is often the result of sensory overload and is not under conscious control at all! (More about that later.) Being **SENSORY SENSITIVE** is a fact of life for many children, and this

affects everyone around them as well.

Don't get me wrong! Yes, being sensory sensitive can be like standing naked inside one of those loud and terrifying automatic carwashes. At these times it seems like sensory sensitivity is a curse, a burden, and something you could do without! But there is another side! Being sensory sensitive also is a blessing and

brings with it many gifts, once it is accepted and understood! When **SAFE** and **GROUNDED** (very important concepts for these guys), sensory sensitive individuals are the first to notice details that others will surely miss! They will also see connections quicker than most people, as they learn to associate sensory input with objects, people, and activities.

# "And That's OK!"

They learn to perceive cause and effect and see between the lines, and remember details that others quickly forget, when they are safe and grounded. Some of the brightest minds owe their accomplishments to their sensory sensitivity and ability to notice and connect details. Having someone like this on your team is a great asset when you are planning an event or campaign, as they will forget no details and will get it right! Children who are sensory sensitive often know what it is like to be in a hostile world, and to feel pain and be victimized just by virtue of living in this world. As such, these guys have the potential to be superior empaths who are acutely aware of how another person feels in a less than ideal situation. When they see it modeled using that empathy to support others and build relationships, they excel in this as well.

A few hundred (or thousand) years ago, being sensory sensitive would lead someone to be very successful in life and to be highly regarded in the community. But in this day and age, everything is moving too fast and is too loud, too bright, and TOO MUCH! We (in most of the first world) live in a world of sensory overload, where everything must be done yesterday and so

everything must be rushed through, compromising details and connections. If you realize that the pace and overload of this world are broken and not conducive to health or success, then you are halfway there, and your sensitive child is a gift to teach you how to slow down and simplify your life, and bring it back to a world of processing and integrating sensory input and social relationships. Trying to rush through a day with a sensory sensitive child is going to frustrate all involved, and lead to greater sensitivity and greater challenge in the long run. Promising your child that you were going to his/her favorite park and then dealing with a massive meltdown because you forgot to mention that you had to stop at the ATM machine first. What works is to slow your life down a little bit, explicitly thinking about and planning every little part of the day, to minimize surprise and sensory overload. This does not mean that you can never deal with spontaneous things that come up, but it means you have to build a foundation of trust and predictability first! Then you can calmly throw something out there, like "I am sorry honey, but I have to make a quick stop at the bank on the way to the park. After we go inside and see the person at the counter, then we are going to get back in

ADULTS WERE INVENTED TO KEEP  
KIDS SAFE!

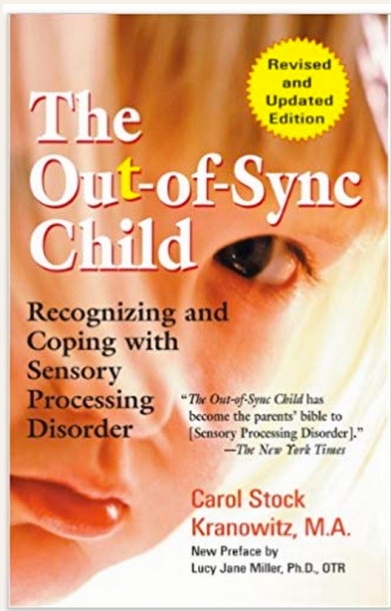
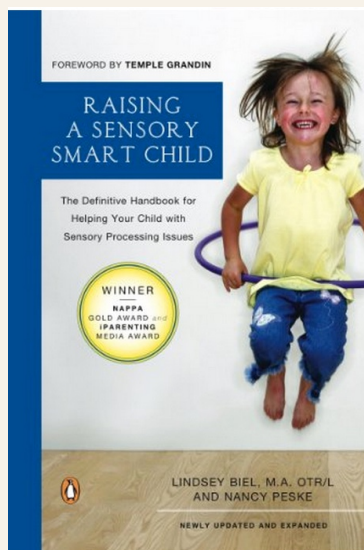
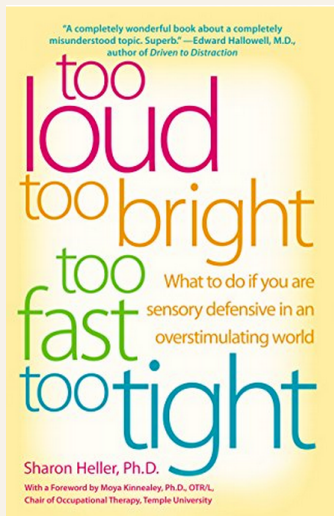
## Safe House!

The "Just Right" Sensory Challenge and the SAFE PLACE The just-right challenge means that you need to stretch the child's limits and help him/her tolerate greater sensory variety, but this must be done within the context of feeling safe and grounded. When done best, the child doesn't even notice the challenge, until you point it out. If the child is avoidant of walking barefoot on grass, get her really involved in painting on an easel. Shift the easel so it is on the edge of lawn and pavement. When really engaged, the child steps forward, slightly stepping on the grass. Re-focus on the art project, and soon the child will stop stepping back onto pavement and tolerate the grass. Often, this happens subtly, and you may need to call attention to the fact that "you are standing on the grass! Doesn't that feel nice and soft?"

Whether tolerating a sensation or building a new skill, coming up with the "Just Right Challenge" is a powerful tool and should be practiced by any parent. REALLY pays off with desensitization.

To raise a sensory sensitive child and do well at it, you have to learn to shift into being a

Read Up!



## Sensory Sensitive People Notice Everything!!

the car and go to the park, and I am sure we are going to have fun with the ... and I have your favorite snack; this will be fun!"

This might sound overwhelming in your life right now, but this is actually a great way to help you to slow down a little and notice how full life is. It'll help you learn to pay attention to more details of the sensory world around us. It'll also help you to communicate better with others about the flow of your day and all the little things that are part of "getting it all done". Simply doing your "thinking" out loud will greatly help those around you to find life more predictable, even when it feels like chaos!

If you are a type A parent who is always busy, always internally distracted (driven), your sensory sensitive child is here to tell you that your life is out of balance and you have to slow down and smell the roses, so to speak. We all live in a sensory world, and the more connected we are to the sensations around us, the more connected we are to the world, and this gives rise to a feeling of being grounded, of belonging, and of being a part of it all, rather than just a "human-doing" rushing through a bunch of obstacles to get something done.

"Human-Being" instead of a "human-doing". It is critically important to slow down enough to allow your little one to process all the extraneous details in the environment, BEFORE s/he will be ready to process what you want with good attention. Others will not notice the crooked light, the ceiling fan not working, or the little child with the Moana shirt. But, until your child sorts out ALL of the input around the target, s/he will not be able to focus, retain, or feel positive about the target; that is why you are there, so help this process along and do not dismiss it. When reviewing sensory details, I use a lot of "...and that's OK" to show the child that even when there is something amiss or something out of place, very often "that is OK"; it is not your place to "fix" extraneous details, just to notice them and move on.

**It is important that you become the calm/grounded force that your child needs.** I have known many frazzled parents who never themselves feel safe and grounded because they live such a frazzled and busy life. They say, "I can't be that force in my child's life, that's not me!". With love, knowledge, and practice, YES YOU CAN! And "Fake it till you make it" may be necessary here. Start a

little at a time. You will miss things and you will not be perfect, but the process will calm your child and improve your skills. If something catches your child's attention, give a brief and positive explanation, and end with "that's OK". Early on, let the child guide you. If s/he looks at something more than briefly, talk about it and help them to store it in working memory as an interesting tidbit that does not pose an immediate threat. With some situations, you might get a lot of information from non-verbal cues. If junior puts his hands over his ears or covers her eyes, then you know what sense needs to be addressed first. Sometimes, stepping back is in order, and sometimes sensory strategies can help (noise reducers, sunglasses, etc). If you follow your child's lead and review what s/he attends to, your child will learn that you are his/her anchor and that you will always help him/her to understand the sensory world around

you, and that the child is SAFE with you as a sensory protector. You will likely need to back off or leave an environment for a reason you would have never imagined, but always try to do so in a positive way. If your little one does not walk into the new daycare you want him/her to love, don't allow it to feel negative. Instead, review what you processed and expand a little. For example: "Well, that slide and that sandbox sure looked like fun, maybe we can stop by another time when it is quiet and play on them!" or "I noticed that you watched those kids playing with the blocks, that looked like fun, didn't it? And that boy looked very kind; I think I like him!" And don't let the child notice your exasperation; this can be hard to do but you will learn.

You see, as your role as sensory defender becomes established, you will be able to help your child to feel safe and grounded. I don't know how many

times I can say this! EVERYTHING is connected and affected by the STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM, and I can write a whole newsletter on that, if I haven't already!

A way of stating everything I've just said is that your role in supporting a sensory sensitive child is to help them to process information around them in a somewhat systematic way that allows that input to be classified as a known entity that does not threaten my safety at this time. So, you must not gloss over things too quickly, as this can leave them classified as "unknown" or "scary". In my opinion, always leave the target (that you want the child to enjoy or desensitize to) until last. If you go through this process with the child, then they can attend to the target without fear or anxiety, meaning they will learn and remember better.

If you are in a new environment and you want the child to attend to what a nice dance class/judo

class/gymnastics class this would be, allow the child to lead the process. S/he will likely do a full scan of the environment. When s/he attends to things aside from the target, note what it is, offer explanation and support, and allow the child to move past that **at his or her own pace**. This is important if what is attended to is to be classified as "safe". Eventually, help the child, if necessary, to shift to another feature of the environment. It's a balance between allowing the classification process to complete and not feeding obsessive or anxious thinking, but a loving adult will find this balance.

When a child is not given the time to fully desensitize to the environment, then attention to the target will be impaired as there will be many extraneous sensory intrusions which interfere. Each sensory intrusion often starts with a deep belief that this is dangerous and is out to get me. "What the

hell is this and what does it mean to my survival?" **THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT POINT!!** MOST sensory sensitive children do not feel **SAFE** when surrounded by too much stimulation or new environments. THIS fact puts the stress response system on **HIGH ALERT**, ready to jump into survival mode. Some people refer to this as **DEFENSE MODE**, and this becomes part of life for sensory sensitive people. When I am in defense mode, I am literally swimming in stress hormones, including cortisol and epinephrine. Almost nothing that presents itself to me will be accepted. I want to push everything away from me, because I perceive it as an attack/demand/intrusion. In Defense Mode, language processing fails, and will not kick in again until stress hormones start to clear out. Neither explanations, setting limits, or discipline have any effect in Defense Mode. The only thing that can help at this

time are calming strategies and sensory reduction. Sensory calming strategies were discussed in these newsletters, but feel free to contact me if you need me to expand on this. Sensory reduction is exactly what it says, reducing as much input as possible, and **includes reducing language processing demands**. Only after time to clear stress hormones will you have your child back. Things that can help sensory reduction to be more effective are: familiar music/scripts, movement, small fidgets, and anything that the child can hyper-focus on, like a book or video game. When there are sensory reducing options in the environment,

children will learn to seek them out and use them when they need to. When sensory reduction opportunities are not present or not allowed, you may see hands over eyes/ears, climbing under tables, burying head in you (or anything), or a variety of less mature sensory reduction strategies. Screaming/singing too loud also helps block out noise and is often a desperate attempt to stay out of Defense Mode.

If you recognize that your child is sensory sensitive, your life will become a balance of encouraging the child to move forward and experience more, and providing the safe harbor and calm anchor that make it all possible.

Sensory sensitive people want to explore the sensory world as much as anyone else, and perhaps more. Sensory enrichment is absolutely the best medicine, given the child has enough control to feel grounded and confident. But in many environments, these

people need more time to process the environment before they can focus and perform. As long as they have time to explore the environment, and the environment is not ever changing, then sensory enrichment in itself can be grounding and calming.

Whether on vacation, at home, or visiting family, help your child to find a quiet sensory reduced area to decompress. When you see signs of overstimulation or your child can tell you it's too much, find a way to get away and reduce the sensory load. Try to make sure that what is coming is expected and linear, but try to get away from overstimulation while the child is still in control. And review the 2 newsletters cited above with regard to sensory calming.

Sensory sensitive individuals, by nature of noticing so much, are at risk for perfectionism, anxiety, and OCD type issues.

I will discuss strategies to minimize this risk in another newsletter (remind me). The best way to support these guys is to help them learn that they can gradually desensitize to new or unpleasant things, they can learn to find well prepared and supported ways to face their fears and get through them. Help them learn that this is a part of life and that they have the tools to break things down and manage small steps.

Any attention that you give to strategies to relieve/reduce stress and improve the ability to relax and be grounded will also be very important.

Sensory sensitive people should learn to incorporate sensory reduction/sensory calming into every day, and to find acceptance and peace in the way things are. Do not interfere with self regulation attempts, help shape them to be effective.



**Have a Sensory Retreat!! These can often include lots of sensory stuff that may surprise you!! Gove the child control to decide what goes in. It's beauty is that it feels safe and this allows it to be as busy as the child wants.**

