

Sensory Integration 101

A. What is Sensory Integration?

1. it is an unconscious process of the brain
2. it organizes the information detected by the senses
3. it gives meaning to the information detected by the senses and selects what to focus on
4. it allows us to respond to the sensory information received in a purposeful manner
5. it forms the foundation for learning and social interaction

B. What senses are involved in sensory integration?

1. taste, hearing, smelling, sight and touch
2. the sensation of the body's position in space
3. the sensation of gravity's effect on body
4. the sensation of what is going on in one's own body

C. How is the sensory system developed?

1. development of the sensory system starts in the womb and continues to develop through experiential learning
2. it is a neurodevelopmental process
3. in childhood much of this learning happens through play and hands on experiences
4. up to about age 7 is the sensorimotor developmental stage. A sensation is received and a motor response is produced without much else involved in the process.
5. from age 7 cognition and social responses begin to have a larger role in sensory processing and response. Success at this stage depends on a strong sensorimotor stage.

D. What are some examples of how children with sensory integration issues might present at school?

1. children that appear clumsy, uncoordinated
2. children that have difficulty making friends, reading social cues, exhibit poor self-esteem, are anxious
3. children that have difficulty with academic learning even though they are of average or above average intelligence
4. children that overreact or underreact to sounds, smells, etc.
5. children that have difficulty sitting still, fidget with anything within reach, are "hyperactive"
6. children that slump at their desk, seem like a "limp noodle"
7. children that can't seem to organize themselves, learn routines
8. children that are overly reluctant to try new tasks
9. children that exhibit language and communication disorders
10. children that have trouble tolerating clothing, aren't toilet trained, have very limited food choices

E. Some things to remember

1. children, especially young children, are often not able to articulate why they respond the way they do since the response is not an active choice they are making
2. since the response is not an active choice it can't be fixed by rewards alone and punishment may make the problem worse
3. while sensory processing disorder may present by itself, it often occurs along with another diagnosis such as ADHD/Autism/ODD
4. all of us have some sensory processing challenges at some point in time. Problems arise when sensory processing issues interfere with successful functioning in multiple areas of life.
5. maladaptive sensory behaviors are often seen more when the child is stressed and this often presents as behaviors that seem to happen out of the blue

If you suspect that your child is having difficulty with tasks at home or school because of sensory related issues, give us a call. Our Occupational and Speech Therapists have extensive experience helping children and providing families with resources for home and community.