



What is Sensory Processing

On a daily basis we all take in information through our senses. We interpret and process this information then act according to our interpretation.

In essence sensory processing is the “organisation of sensation for use” and “when the flow of sensations is disorganised it can be like a rush hour traffic jam” (J Ayres 1979p5)

When the flow and interpretation is disorganised, children can become overwhelmed and dysregulated; not knowing what to tune into. This is then reflected in their behaviours.

We process information from our five primary senses:

Touch Smell Sight Hearing Taste

We also process through our movement senses which tell us about how much or how little we are moving and the quality of that movement. These senses are referred to as our *vestibular and proprioceptive senses*

Some children feel too much...some children feel too little...

For some children, and adults alike, the interpretation of information received through the senses does not occur as it might for others. Incoming information can be interpreted by the brain as being too much of a sensation or not enough.

In daily life a child who feels too much might:

- Dislike touch which is not initiated by themselves
- Dislike grooming
- Become upset at different fabrics against their skin
- Be intolerant of noises such as vacuum cleaners, trucks or even fans
- Dislike messy play such as painting, sand, play doh

They may be referred to as “sensory defensive”

A child who feels too little might:

- Seek noises and make their own noises
- Seek movement even when they should be sitting still
- Have a high pain threshold
- Take longer to respond to requests
- Not notice when their hands or face are dirty

They may be referred to as “sensory seeking”

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Ultimately, feeling too much or too little for different sensory experiences means that their reaction to something is likely to be different to what you would typically expect.

For example – a child who is sensitive to certain smells, might refuse to hug grandma because of her perfume / a child who interprets hair brushing as “painful” may refuse to participate in grooming / a child who does not cope with noises may play up during car trips if the radio is playing

Regulation is the ability to maintain or change our level of alertness for different situations.

Regulation is influenced by how our nervous system processes and reacts to sensory information.

When children’s systems misinterpret information from their senses, then their nervous system is not at an optimal state for regulating. They often need assistance to help calm and “organise” the information in their systems to attain the zone in which they function and focus optimally.

What can we do to assist children regulate?

- ***Understand their sensory processing style***

When do they feel overwhelmed?

Which senses are at play?

Are they more sensory defensive or sensory seeking?



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Note: a child can be both seeking and defensive for the same sense in different situations.

Parents and teachers need to document behaviours including events which occurred before hand to gain a “sensory profile” of the child. Occupational Therapists can assist with this.

- **Communicate with your child**

Children with sensory processing challenges benefit from being aware of what to expect in their day. They often respond well to schedules and checklists

Prepare your child in advance for situations you know may be overwhelming such parties, shopping centres, change of regular events.

- **Communicate with others who care for the child**

Consistent awareness and strategies between all caregivers / teachers provides a basis for consistent management and support.

- **Implement strategies to support their sensory needs**

This may involve avoiding certain places which you know are challenging for your child. Commonly this can include shopping centres, busy sporting events, indoor playgrounds.

Alternatively this might involve adapting or subtly changing current situations. For example, removing bothersome tags from clothes, using a glove when finger painting, providing visual schedules.

- **Use physical tools or movement strategies**

As adults we help to regulate our nervous systems with many different movements and activities.

For example we may chew gum, exercise, enjoy a drink or relax to music. We may also do more subtle

movements such as flick a pencil in a meeting, fidget with a piece of jewellery or draw randomly on a page.

Children are no different in their need to regulate through movements. Often they may already be attempting to do this, however because their nervous systems are less mature, they tend to lack subtlety. So they might – roll on the floor / chew on their shirt / push into others / withdraw themselves from play.

As adults we need to guide them and assist them in regulating their sensory systems through movement, touch, deep pressure and calming rhythms.

A snap shot of activities which can help to regulate a child’s nervous system include:

- Deep pressure through muscles and joints through massage, bear hugs, rolling up in blankets, using weighted lap bags
- Active play which incorporates movement and pressure through joints: trampoline, animal walks, star jumps, dancing, bike riding
- Oral motor toys such as chewy jewellery or toys which encourage breath control such as whistles, balloons, blowing through straws
- Fidget toys for hands and fingers including squishy toys, stretchy toys, small items to manipulate
- Rhythmic movements including swinging, rocking, swaying
- Quiet places to withdraw to such as pop up tents, bean bag corner or a favourite soft chair
- Functional activities which use pressure such as pushing a broom or lawn mower or helping to garden / clean the car

There are many more options

Consult with an OT or specialist to assist in creating a “sensory diet” for the unique needs of your child.