

Making sense of it all – young children and sensory processing

by Angela Owens

Many children experience some level of challenge coping with sensory input from their everyday environments and activities. Some children may experience difficulty in processing stimuli for one or more of the five 'external senses' – touch, sight, sound, taste and smell. Sensory processing issues may also affect a child's sense of movement and/or sense of body awareness which are the 'internal senses'. Younger children in particular may be highly sensitive to certain sensory input, such as loud noises or strong smells, due to the immaturity of their sensory processing skills.

Children who experience significant and pervasive issues with processing sensory information may be diagnosed with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), also known as Sensory Integration Dysfunction/Disorder. 'People with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) misinterpret everyday sensory information, such as touch, sound and movement. They may feel overwhelmed by sensory information, may seek out sensory experiences or may avoid certain experiences' (SPD Australia, 2011). Serious sensory processing problems also often underlie other diagnoses such as Autism Spectrum Disorders, Attention Deficit Disorders, learning difficulties and delays, and mental health issues.



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	2.1, 3.1, and 3.3-3.5
OSHCQA Principles:	1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 2.3, 4.2 and 5.2
QIAS Principles:	1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1, 4.1 and 4.6

What is sensory processing?

McPherson and MacDonald (2006, p.4) explain that we take in information via our internal and external sensory systems and then 'our brain and nervous system 'sort out' the information to help us make sense of, or interpret, it. We then act upon this information or respond to it'.

Significant and ongoing issues in processing sensory input may be due to 'the 'working together' of the different sensory systems and parts of the nervous systems that usually occurs during the processing stage [being] disordered' (McPherson and MacDonald, 2006, p.5). According to SPD Australia, 1 in 20 children are affected by a significant dysfunction in sensory processing.

How are children affected by sensory processing issues?

Children experiencing issues with processing sensory information can be impacted in many ways, depending on the level and type of their difficulties. While some children may be hypersensitive and overreact and avoid sensory input, others will be hyposensitive and will underreact and seek out sensory experiences (SPD Australia, 2011). Common problems for children with sensory processing issues include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Inability to remain still for a reasonable period of time
- Learning difficulties
- Challenging or disruptive behaviour
- Poor coordination and 'clumsiness'
- Seeking intense and/or inappropriate sensory input, such as engaging in rough and overly vigorous physical play either on their own or with peers

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- Severe limitation in the foods that they will eat due to issues with food textures, colours and/or smells
- Aversion to 'messy play activities' such as finger painting, sand and dough play
- Fear of large groups of people
- Extreme sensitivity to touch, movement, sounds, sights and/or smells.

These issues can cause children to experience stress, anxiety, social isolation and poor self-esteem.

How can educators support children to manage sensory processing issues?

Each child's ability to make sense of their world and to use their internal and external senses to inform their decision making and responses becomes more refined as they engage in everyday play, interactions and learning experiences. It is normal for younger children to sometimes react negatively to intense sensory input. For example, loud noises may upset or frighten them, certain tastes and/or textures may be intolerable to them or they may find it difficult to transition easily between high and low levels of physical activity.

Educators need to remember that stimuli in the environment that does not affect them can have a significant impact upon the children for whom they care. This should therefore be considered when planning the way in which they set up the environment, routines and experiences for children. Educators may find it helpful to take into account the following strategies to minimise potential sensory issues for children in child care settings:

- Keep noise levels to a minimum, particularly indoors, and avoid distracting background noise, such as radios
- Provide different textures and surfaces for children's play and relaxation areas
- Avoid using too many bright colours or overcrowding walls and ceilings with children's artwork and other creations
- Provide a balance of passive and more active play opportunities for children
- Provide children with warning and sufficient time and support to move between busy, active experiences such as music and movement to quieter activities such as meal or small group times
- Avoid overcrowding or requiring children to be together in large groups. Use gradual transition

and small group experiences so that children do not have to jostle together or wait a long time for a turn at something

- Do not force children to eat foods that they do not wish to, or pressure them to participate in activities with which they are not comfortable, such as messy play experiences.

The SPD Australia website provides the following list of indicators that may suggest a child has a Sensory Processing Disorder:

- Child may seem to be in constant motion, unable to sit still for an activity
- Has trouble focusing or concentrating, can't stay on task
- Seems to be always running, jumping, stomping rather than walking
- Bumps into things or frequently knocks things over
- Reacts strongly to being bumped or touched
- Avoids messy play and doesn't like to get hands dirty
- Hates having hair washed, brushed or cut
- Resists wearing new clothing and is bothered by tags or socks
- Distressed by loud or sudden sounds such as a siren or a vacuum
- Has poor fine motor skills such as writing and cutting, difficulty with buttons and tying shoelaces
- Has poor gross motor skills such as body co-ordination, riding a bike, swimming, running
- Hesitates to play or climb on playground equipment
- Difficulties with balance
- Difficulty with eyes tracking objects and often loses place when reading or copying from board
- Marked mood variations and tendency to outbursts and tantrums
- Avoids eye contact
- Has trouble following and remembering a 2-3 step instruction
- Fussy eater, often gags on food
- Reacts to smells not noticed by others

(SPD Australia, 2011).



It is also helpful for educators to become familiar with any specific sensory issues that each child may have and to ensure that these are supported on an individual way.

How can educators support children with SPD?

While many younger children may experience issues in coping with sensory input in their early lives as a normal part of their development, for some children these issues will be significant, ongoing and interfere with their learning and development. These children may be diagnosed with SPD, and many educators may work with one or more children at some point who have either a diagnosis or strong indicators of SPD.

As for all children who have additional needs, educators will need to work sensitively and collaboratively with families and other professionals and/or therapists involved in the care of the child to ensure the best possible

outcomes for them. This will also help to ensure that the child's progress and achievements are shared and that any problems are quickly identified. This in turn will assist everyone to implement support strategies consistently to meet individual children's needs.

If an educator has concerns about a child's sensory processing, it is essential to raise these sensitively with families, and to be prepared to offer families advice regarding where they may seek support from professionals such as paediatricians, occupational therapists and special educators. While some families may disagree with the concerns raised or not be prepared to consider these, many families will appreciate educators' support and guidance to seek further information.

Conclusion

Many educators will have worked with children who have been described by others as being 'fidgets' or 'having ants in their pants'. For most children this is a normal part of their development, as they learn to integrate the input they receive via their senses. Educators play an important role in ensuring that the sensory input children receive from the environment, routines and experiences supports rather than hinders their comfort and abilities to concentrate and learn. Some children may exhibit particular issues with sensory processing which may seriously interfere with their ability to learn and self-regulate. If an educator has concerns about a child's development in this area, it is essential that they work positively with families and other professionals to optimise the child's opportunities to fully participate and learn in the child care setting ■

References and further reading

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