

## *Making Your Classroom Sensational: How to Identify & Address Your Students' Sensory-Related Needs*

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## Outline

- Sensory Processing Explained
- The 3-Legged Stool: Addressing Sensory Needs Within the Classroom Context
  - Teacher's role
  - Environment
  - Routine
- Teaching Self Regulation Skills
- Sensory Processing Disorder
  - 3 subtypes: sensory over- or under-responsiveness and sensory craving
  - Suggested strategies - Sensory Systems Overview chart
- References

## External Senses

- *Hearing* (auditory)
- *Sight* (visual)
- *Touch* (tactile)
- *Taste* (gustatory)
- *Smell* (olfactory)



## Internal Senses

- *Vestibular*
  - Movement and balance
- *Proprioception*
  - Body in space awareness
- *Interoception*
  - Sense of internal organs



See *Sensory Systems Overview* chart for more details.

## Sensory Processing is...

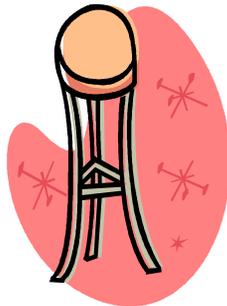
- A neurological process that occurs automatically as the body organizes sensory input for everyday function
- The end product of info gathered by the body's sensory receptors: eyes, nose, mouth, skin, muscles, joints, and inner ear
- A process which begins to develop in utero and continues throughout childhood



## Supporting All Students' Sensory Needs in the Classroom

### The 3-Legged Stool

- *Teacher's role*
- *Environment*
- *Routine*



## The Teacher's Role



- *Control your message:* voice (volume, tone, rhythm/song); concise language for directions; proximity to child
- *Provide consistency:* follow a flexible routine with transition cues; clear classroom expectations
- *Modify the activity* to meet the child's needs: suggest alternative spaces, timing, tools
- *Use gentle but firm (not light) touch*
- *Be a behavior "detective" & think proactively*

## The Environment

### ■ *Visual*

- Posted picture schedule
- Organized materials
- White space on floor, shelves and walls

### ■ *Auditory*

- Rugs, wall coverings to reduce background noise
- Music (tempo, volume) or bell for transitions

### ■ *Tactile*

- Seating options: carpet squares, cushions, bean bags, chairs with arms, blocks, stools
- Snack food choices



## The Environment



### ■ *Vestibular*

- Incorporate tasks with a mix of activity levels throughout the daily schedule
- Playground/motor time multiple times of day

### ■ *Proprioception*

- “Heavy work” (pushing/pulling/chewing) activities as part of classroom activities, routines and jobs

### ■ *“Cool Out Cave”*

- A place to re-group when needing a break
- Stocked with calming sensory input: headphones, heavy blanket, squeeze ball, stuffed animals, books

## Daily Routine



### ■ *Arrival/Departure*

- Establish multi-step sequence
- Dedicate space per child: for belongings; waiting spot

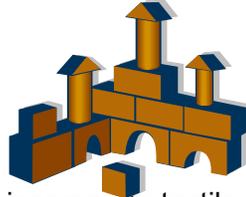
### ■ *Circle Time*

- Review picture schedule
- Vary seating options with adequate space
- Integrate sensory components before and during Circle for whole group + meet individual needs of specific children

### ■ *Fine Motor Activities*

- Provide optimal workspace
- Vary tasks: open-ended, set

## Daily Routine



### ■ *Learning Centers*

- Fine motor + full body activities to incorporate tactile and proprioceptive input (Block, Finger Play, Dress Up)

### ■ *Snack/Lunch*

- Environment: music, question of the day
- Sensory-based food choices: crunchy, chewy options
- Strategic seating

### ■ *Gross Motor Activities/Playground*

- Variety of movement experiences: climbing structure, wagon/riding toys, swings (seated, tire), monkey bars, hula hoops, balls, stepping stones/tree stumps

## Other Considerations

### ■ *Self Care*

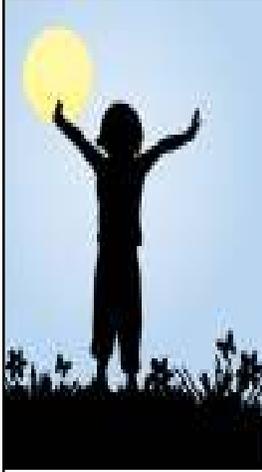
- Toileting: stagger children's entry  
provide step stools  
post picture chart of hand-washing sequence
- Backpacks/Bags: toddler-sized, carry over both shoulders



### ■ *Transitions*

- Use pre-determined signal/code word for schedule changes
- Employ multi-sensory stimuli: visual, auditory, proprioceptive
- "Job" opportunities
- Strategic positioning, timing when lining up

## Teaching Self Regulation Skills



- Introduce and practice age-appropriate skills including:
  - Identifying one's arousal/energy level based on physical markers (i.e. heart rate, breath rate, movement speed)
  - Linking it to feelings/emotional status
  - Adjusting it with different techniques, including sensory strategies (i.e. bouncing-arousing; quiet music-calming; breathing-relaxing)
  - Matching it to a given activity or setting (i.e high – playground; medium – Circle/ Meeting Time; low – bedtime)

## Self Regulation Materials

- Modify programs to meet age-appropriate skills
- Many mix insight with sensory strategies including movement and breathing
  - How Does Your Engine Run:  
The Alert Program for Self-Regulation  
(Williams & Shellenberger)
  - Zones of Regulation (Kuypers)
  - Mindfulness Training: University of Wisconsin - Madison's Kindness Program; Minds, Inc.
- Books
  - Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children or Mindful Movements: 10 Exercises for Well-Being (Hanh)
  - Breathe Like a Bear: 30 Mindful Moments For Kids to Feel Calm and Focused Anytime, Anywhere (Willey)



## Sensory Processing Disorder is...

- Difficulty with effectively utilizing the information gathered from the senses
- Can result in challenges with:
  - Motor coordination (gross, fine)
  - Attention span
  - Social-emotional skills
  - Play skills
  - Arousal/energy level which does not match activity or setting

## Sensory Over-Responsiveness

- aka *Sensory Avoiders*
- Responses are too quick, too big, or last too long - disproportionate to stimuli
- Most common type of sensory challenge
- Child may respond to stimuli as if were fearful, irritating or painful.
- Theory: child's threshold is too low; goal is to raise threshold to allow greater tolerance

## Sensory Under-Responsiveness

- Child may be described as *“in own world”* or *lethargic*.
- Responses are too slow, too small, or don't last - disproportionate to stimuli
- Theory: child's threshold is too high; goal is to lower threshold to help generate greater response

## Sensory Craving

- aka *Sensory Seekers*
- Child seeks excessive stimulation (more than typical) and never seems satiated.
- Theory: child's calibration system is “off”

*Refer to Sensory Systems Overview chart for additional descriptions and strategies.*

## Red Flags



- Remember that children attain skills at different rates and that development is asymmetrical.
- Regression or skill loss (especially language or social skills) is a big concern. It may be related to large changes in a child's life (death, moving, divorce).
- Check with pediatrician/clinician when a child lags 3 - 6 months behind in milestones or when skill challenges are becoming an obstacle to engaging in desired and/or expected activities.

## References

- *Sensory Processing*
  - *Sensory Integration: A Guide for Preschool Teachers*  
Christy Isbell and Rebecca Isbell
  - *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* Lindsey Biel & Nancy Peske
  - *Growing an In-Sync Child* Carol Kranowitz
  - *Sensational Kids* Lucy Jane Miller
  - [www.thespiralfoundation.org](http://www.thespiralfoundation.org) - See the "About" tab
  - [www.spdstar.org/basic/understanding-sensory-processing-disorder](http://www.spdstar.org/basic/understanding-sensory-processing-disorder)
- *Classroom Materials*
  - [www.everestbag.com/category/backpacks/junior/](http://www.everestbag.com/category/backpacks/junior/)
  - <https://funandfunction.com/solutions-center/early-intervention.html>
  - Seating strategies: Kore Wobble Chair, Safco Runtz Ball Chair, BackJack Floor Chair



## References

- *Self Regulation*

- [www.alertprogram.com](http://www.alertprogram.com)
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