



What are Sensory Processing Needs?

Overview

We all experience the world through the basic senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. Additionally, we experience input from proprioception (pressure), vestibular (movement, balance), and interoception (awareness of one's own body, e.g. thirst, pain) systems.

Each of these senses may be experienced through hyper-responsivity (extreme sensitivity, leading to avoidance), hypo-responsivity (lack of sensitivity), or sensory craving (leading to intense seeking of this type of input).

Understanding Sensory Processing Disorder

Sensory Processing issues result from "a neurological disorder in which the sensory information that the individual perceives results in abnormal responses." According to the STAR Institute, "Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) can affect anyone. Studies indicate that five percent to 16 percent of children exhibit symptoms of SPD."

SPD - What is Sensory Processing Disorder

Depending on the type of sense that is involved, and the person's response level, sensory processing issues can be manifested in many ways (whether seeking or avoiding input), and can often be mistaken for behaviors.

Consider this scenario: A first grader who is overwhelmed by the noise and chaos of indoor recess hides under their desk. When they are prompted to get back in their chair and refuse, people may assume they are being oppositional. But are they? Or is their behavior a manifestation of an attempt at coping with severe sensory overload?

Determining an appropriate response is critical to ensuring that the student is not punished for something he can't control.

How to address Sensory Processing concerns through the Special Education process.

If your child already has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), discuss with the IEP team having an Occupational Therapist do a Sensory Inventory. If they don't have an IEP, then request a special education evaluation in writing (ideally via an email to your child's teacher).

If the student's responses to sensory inputs are manifesting as behaviors, then the team may wish to consider a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). Once the results are known, the team should revise the IEP accordingly.

In the IEP, Sensory Processing concerns should be documented.

- In the Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance, in both the Functional Performance section, as well as in the Needs sections.
- In the Goals section of the IEP, the team can determine if it would be appropriate to develop a goal. For example, the student could learn to independently request sensory breaks, or a specific sensory item, or develop a replacement behavior when faced with sensory stimuli.
- In the IEP's Specially Designed Instruction (SDI), the team can also determine what types of supports the student needs: headphones in a noisy environment, warnings about fire drills, fidget items, specialized seating such as a "wobble cushion", scheduled sensory breaks, for example.
- If the student does not qualify for an IEP, they may qualify for accommodations through a Section 504 Service plan ([What Is a 504 Plan](#)). Strategies to support sensory processing needs can be added to the list of accommodations in a student's 504 plan.

Other useful resources:

[Patients & Clients: Learn About Occupational Therapy](#)

[Occupational Therapy Using a Sensory Integration – Based Approach With Adult Populations](#)

[Sensory Integration: Understanding the World Around Us](#)

[SPD - What is Sensory Processing Disorder](#)

[Understanding Sensory Processing Issues](#)

[What is Sensory Integration Therapy?](#)

Achieva disability advocates provide information, technical assistance and individual advocacy on issues that impact children and adults with intellectual disabilities and autism and their families. We also work with state and federal legislators and policy makers to ensure that the human, civil and legal rights of people with disabilities are protected and that they are afforded services to assist them to be included in their communities. We will provide guidance, information and technical assistance to the best of our ability. Achieva advocates are available to answer questions specific to your situation. Please contact us at 412.995.5000 x486, 888.272.7229 x 486 (Toll-Free) or log onto www.achieva.info/contact-advocacy.