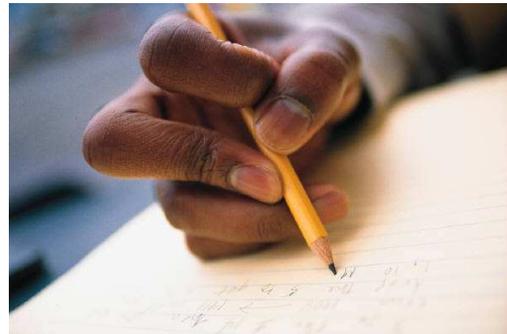


# SPECIAL REPORT

## What Your Child Wants You to Know About Sensory Processing



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# What Your Child Wants You to Know

## About Sensory Processing

*The term “sensory processing” gets thrown around a lot these days in the realm of disabilities. You may have read about it, or been told that your child has sensory processing problems. Many people don’t really understand what sensory processing is, or why it is important for their child. What follows is some basic information on sensory processing, and why it matters for all individuals.*

### Making Sense of Things Around and Within Us

We all take in information from the environment and our own bodies constantly, make sense of it, and then act on it—we just don’t typically think about it. Our capacity to do this begins before birth, and rapidly develops throughout infancy and beyond. The ability to process sensation accurately and efficiently forms the foundation for all other learning and development! We are designed to take in sensations and seamlessly interpret them in ways that allow us to function appropriately in our environment and daily activities. Consider the following examples:

- We hear background noises during a meeting, but are able to filter those out and attend to the speaker.
- A tag on the neck of our shirt feels itchy, so we cut it off.
- We can stand on a step stool to change a light bulb without falling over.
- While eating we begin to feel full, so we stop eating.

These are a few examples of how our brains process sensations from outside and inside our bodies so that we can respond appropriately. Appropriate responses vary from one situation to the next; but in the examples above, the responses are blocking out extraneous noises; removing a source of irritation; maintaining balance; and stopping eating. When our brains interpret the sensory input correctly, our responses are not over-reactive or under-reactive, and accurately meet our needs. Our ability to take in and make sense of sensations outside and within our bodies allows us to complete activities of daily living efficiently and without much difficulty.

## Noticing Problems

Sensory processing requires integral connections between the brain and the body. When these connections are not present or do not operate correctly, what results is a sensory processing deficit (problem). Sensory processing problems can show up in many different forms, depending on the individual. Some people are under-reactive to sensations around and within them because their brain does not pick up on them well enough.

The opposite problem results in over-reactive responses because the brain is too aware of even very small sensations. Depending on the specific sensory processing deficits, individuals may have problems in a wide variety of areas including balance, coordination, tolerating sensations, attentiveness, emotional regulation, and many others.

Let's think for a moment about individuals who try to operate with sensory systems that are overly-alert and easily irritated by things that happen to them every moment of the day. For a person whose system is unable to provide appropriate processing of

- Light – what we consider normal lighting feels too bright to them
- Sound – average sounds are too loud and hurt their ears
- Smell – even typical smells are strong and offensive

- Touch – certain kinds of touch or fabrics hurt or irritate them
- The position of their body in space – they can't tell where they are and “get lost in space” when they aren't directly touching something in the environment

What happens to these individuals? They are constantly being assaulted by sensations around and within them. They may not be able to articulate what the problem is most of the time, but it is very clear that there is a problem! What we see on the outside may appear to be inappropriate behavior, outbursts, low frustration tolerance, avoidance of certain things or activities, poor coordination, sloppy handwriting—the list goes on and on. When we see such behavior, we must become detectives and look at what underlying sensory systems may be breaking down for them. Only then we can develop a targeted plan to strengthen those systems.

Sensory processing affects everything we do, but we typically take notice only when problems exist in a given area. If your child is exhibiting signs of sensory processing problems, don't despair! Many children with and without other impairments have sensory processing problems in one form or another. There is treatment available that can make a significant difference in your child's ability to process sensation function more

comfortably in everyday life. The most important thing is to recognize the problem, get an accurate assessment of strengths and deficits, and begin treatment to strengthen your child's foundation for all other learning and development.

You now have some information to help you understand what sensory processing is, and why it is so important for your child's growth and development. ***If your child is exhibiting problems in this area, the next step is for you to contact professionals who can get you on the path to identifying your child's specific obstacles accurately, and help you in developing a plan to address them.*** You can get all the information and support you need to start this process by calling the Horizons team at (616) 698-0306 or sending an email to [sensory@horizonsdrc.com](mailto:sensory@horizonsdrc.com). We look forward to helping you support improved learning and daily functioning for your child by strengthening sensory processing abilities!



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