

Did You Know?

The Out-of-Sync Child

IDENTIFYING CHILDREN WITH SENSORY PROBLEMS

What is "Sensory Integration"?

Sensory Integration is the normal neurological process all of us utilize to organize sensations for our use in everyday life. Sensations help us to plan and organize what we need to do. We don't learn unless it's connected to our senses.

A child with Sensory Integration Dysfunction has a *disorganized brain*—he or she has *difficulty organizing all the sensations that are coming in*. As a result, many aspects of his behavior are disorganized. Instead of progressing along smoothly, his overall development is inconsistent and ordinary tasks can be challenging.

TOUCH Builds Neural Connections

We don't remember
unless it's connected
to the senses.

WHAT'S WRONG?

"My child looks 'normal'
but something's not right."

Does your child seem to have everything going for him (he has no identifiable disability)—yet he still struggles with the basic skills of:

- * Tolerating ordinary sensations
- * Planning and organizing his actions
- * Regulating his attention and activity level

Could it be a SENSORY problem?

The Out-of-Sync Child

All children are out of sync some of the time, but Carol Kranowitz, Author and Occupational Therapist, has coined the term "*the out-of-sync child*" to describe the child who has sensory difficulties MOST of the time. She says the out-of-sync child may either avoid ordinary sensations, or seek excessive stimulation. This child has a body that is uncooperative, behavior that is difficult, and he or she just doesn't quite "fit in."

The out-of-sync child receives sensory information just like everyone else does—but he can't interpret or use that information the way most people do. For example, the out-of-sync child feels his clothes touch his skin, he gets movement sensations on a swing, he hears the washing machine spin, and he smells and tastes a banana. But he responds differently! He may have a tantrum because the tag in his shirt is scratching his skin, or he may not notice

that his pants are on backwards. He may feel seasick swinging and cry to get off—or he may want to swing forever and never stop. He may panic hearing the washing machine's noisy whine. He may gag at food smells and textures—or he may cram all sorts of things (edible or not!) into his mouth. He may shrink from visual stimulation (like neon lights)—or he may ignore the sight of rushing cars and run into the street. We say that this child has Sensory Integration Dysfunction because he has "disorganized" sensations.

Signs of Sensory Issues:

- ★ Is *over*-sensitive to sensations of touch, movement, sight, or sound
- ★ Is *under*-responsive to sensations of touch, movement, sight, sound
- ★ Has an unusually *high* or unusually *low* activity level
- ★ Is impulsive, fidgety, inattentive, and easily distracted
- ★ Has a poor sense of body awareness (i.e.: "gets in others space...")
- ★ Has immature gross & fine motor skills (clumsy, uncoordinated)
- ★ Has poor bilateral coordination (using both sides of body together)
- ★ Has poor motor planning (climbing play structure, getting dressed)
- ★ Fatigues easily, slouches, or sprawls
- ★ Lack of definite hand preference by age four or five
- ★ Has poor oral-motor skills (chewing, speaking)
- ★ Frequently misjudges distance between self & other people/things
- ★ Responds slowly to verbal instructions or questions (gets flustered)
- ★ Becomes very emotional/quickly frustrated when things aren't right
- ★ Prefers "same old" and resists new things (food, scenes, people)
- ★ Has a hard time with transitions (shifting is difficult)

NOTE: We look for *frequency*, *intensity*, and *duration* in any of these symptoms.

Sensory Integration Dysfunction Is A Complex Problem

It may affect children's development, behavior, learning, communication skills, friendships, and play. The child with severe Sensory Integration Dysfunction shows many symptoms.

Interacting with other people, functioning in daily life, and doing the job of being a child are greatly impaired. The child with mild dysfunction is only slightly impaired and may find ways to compensate. Too often, the problem is overlooked or mislabeled.

When Is Sensory Integration Dysfunction Suspected?

When a child exhibits one or more of these common symptoms (in box on first page) with *frequency*, *intensity*, and *duration*, we suspect a child has “sensory issues.” Problems can play out differently from child to child—and from day to day, depending on how tired, hungry, or stressed a child is. Sometimes sensory problems are severe, sometimes mild. Sometimes they occur occasionally, sometimes continuously. Inconsistency is one of the hallmarks of Sensory Integration Dysfunction.

“The RED FLAGS of Sensory Integration Dysfunction are a child’s unusual responses to touching and being touched, and/or to moving and being moved.”
—Carol Kranowitz, M.A.

Sensory integration problems can often look like ADHD, Learning Disabilities, Learning-related visual problems, Allergies, Emotional Problems, or even just like normal childhood behavior. Sometimes the problems run concurrently. This is because neurological problems are on a continuum—the more difficulty a child has in one area, the more difficulty he is likely to have in other areas.

Where Do We Commonly See Sensory Integration Dysfunction?

We see it in children with Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, and serious Language Difficulty, and unfortunately, it intensifies their difficulties. SI Dysfunction also frequently co-exists in children with Learning Disabilities and/or Attention Deficits. What about “normal” children? We have seen a significant increase in the last 30 years. Current estimates indicate that about 12-30% of children today have sensory problems serious enough to warrant intervention (O.T.). We are seeing more children with sensory issues in our classrooms at Mandala.

What Causes SI Dysfunction?

No one knows for sure, but current research indicates that these may be possible factors: a genetic predisposition (family history), prenatal circumstances (chemicals/toxins), prematurity, birth trauma, postnatal circumstances (trauma, lack of stimulation, environmental pollutants, etc.), or other unknown reasons.

Getting HELP: Occupational Therapy (O.T.) for Sensory Issues

Sadly, children do not grow out of Sensory Integration Dysfunction. They grow into it, finding compensatory ways to cope with their confusing and unpredictable sensations. They do what they must do to survive, playing it as safe as necessary. This is one of the big problems for children with sensory difficulties: often, they do not feel safe. They feel ineffective and clumsy when they try to meet ordinary challenges. As a result, they become overly self-protective or not self-protective enough.

More often than not, a child with Sensory Integration Dysfunction will need extra coping assistance. When sensory issues get in a child’s way, sensory integration-based Occupational Therapy (or “O.T.”) is highly recommended. An Occupational Therapist is a specially trained health professional, with a graduate degree, who has studied neurology, anatomy, orthopedics, among other things. The O.T. uses purposeful activities such as swinging, rolling, bouncing, climbing, jumping, brushing, and other sensory activities to improve the functioning of the child’s nervous system.

How does this help? Under the guidance of the O.T., the child takes in movement and touch information in playful (but important) ways that help his or her brain learn to tolerate and organize different sensations. An O.T. will design a program based on a child’s particular needs. Kids learn to improve their balance, their coordination, their motor skills,

their control, and their body awareness. The best part is that OT is fun for kids because the appealing play equipment and the specially designed activities are all things that children love. We have seen O.T. help lots and lots of children. Occupational therapy teaches a child to succeed while having a good time.

Want to Learn More?

Check these out:

- *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction* by Carol Kranowitz, M.A., 1998.
- *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun: Activities for Kids* by Carol Kranowitz, M.A., 2003.
- *Asperger Syndrome and Sensory Issues: Practical Solutions* by Brenda Smith et al, 2000.
- www.sensoryresources.com

Looking for an Occupational Therapist?

Call me and I can help. Here are a few places to start:

- *The Lighthouse Project* 871-8711
- *Center for Speech, Language & Occupational Therapy* 995-6129
- *Pediatric Therapy Services* 358-8330
- *Development Is Child’s Play* 865-1365
- *VIA* 243-7861
- www.sensoryint.com (gives list of trained therapists)

References for this article: the books listed above

