



The WCPA News

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Sensory Processing Dysfunction (AKA “Sensory Integration Disorder”): What is It and How Can Schools Respond to It?

By Suzanne Coffey, M.A.

What is Sensory Processing Dysfunction? Sensory Processing Dysfunction (SPD) involves how our senses take in information from our environment and how our brain processes that information. A multitude of sensory information enters our brain every moment, not only from our eyes and ears, but also from every place in our body. Most people believe that there are five senses: sight, taste, hearing, touch and smell. Yet there are also two additional senses, although they are not typically mentioned nor understood. These are the proprioceptive sense and the vestibular sense (both described below). Our brain must organize and integrate all information from each of these senses if a person is to learn normally; this process is termed sensory processing. Sensory Processing Dysfunction occurs when a person’s brain does not process information from each of the senses normally, and a person’s body is left feeling out of sync.

How is SPD Presented in Schools? What Should We Look For? People must have all seven systems balanced and in sync before they can focus on anything else -- in our case, learning. Problems can occur when any system is hyper- or hypo-sensitive. The easiest examples, and the ones that teachers have always considered, are limited eyesight and/or hearing. But problems can occur with the other senses as well.

The vestibular system gives a person their sense of movement in relation to gravity. If you do not have problems with your vestibular system, you can easily utilize stairs, up and down, with ease and no concerns about gravity. Another example concerns sitting in your chair and not having to think about how to stay in it. For those with vestibular balance issues, these types of concerns can overshadow what needs to happen in the classroom. Other behaviors teachers may experience in the classroom from children who have difficulty with their vestibular balance system are: spinning, fear of climbing playground equipment, difficulty sitting while doing paper/pencil tasks, and preference of standing over sitting. Many of these physical “red flags,” if not addressed, will lead to potential problems with decreased attention span, eye control and concentration, and increased and exaggerated emotions.

The proprioceptive system gives our brains information about the position of our body parts, joints and muscles, as well as the amount of force being used with movement. Are you the person who shakes your leg or foot non-stop? Do you know someone who is constantly tapping or drumming on objects? Do you prefer a light touch or light hug or would you prefer to receive a bear hug and a more firm touch? Do you know anyone who bumps into doorways as they walk through? If you can relate to any of these examples, then you have experienced first hand a concrete example of your proprioceptive system at work. A child whose proprioceptive system is out of sync might present as: walking on toes, tires easily, hanging onto people or objects, continually seeking out movement, misjudging how much room they actually have to move through a space, missing the chair when backing up to sit down, walking heavily and needing “bear hugs.” These children are often described as being clumsy.

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From the Director

One of the great changes that I've observed with children is in the way they "play." Play is a critical component in the healthy development of a child. In talking to others closer to my age, we may have begun our very early years in a play pen where we learned to keep ourselves occupied while Mother was cleaning, cooking or hanging the laundry on the line. In later years, play time was precious. After helping with the chores on summer days, we would escape to a friend's home to play games all afternoon or meet up with others for a game of baseball. We would play in the neighborhood until dinnertime. I'm not sure that our parents really knew where we were all day. If we had an argument with a friend, we would have to work it out or we would be afraid we wouldn't have anyone with whom to play. We had to learn conflict and social skills to survive. Our parents weren't overly concerned if someone didn't like us or treat us fairly. They assumed that we would work it out. They certainly never became involved in our day-to-day play nor our day-to-day conflicts.

How does this differ today? Instead of allowing an infant to play quietly with blocks or a ball, well-meaning parents may over-engage their infant to insure that they are being intellectually challenged. Parents set up play dates to help develop their child's social contacts. Parents who would allow their older children to play in the neighborhood, and not know where they are at all times, are now viewed as neglectful. Playing games is not gathering in someone's back yard playing ball but rather spending hours on the computer playing video games. There is no need for children to learn to resolve their differences on the playground; adults now referee organized sports. In fact, who has time for the playground? If two children get in a squabble, the argument is continued through their parents. Parents have assumed the responsibility of becoming their child's social planners and arbiters. What has happened to "child's play?" We may have become so anxious to insure our children's success that we have robbed them of their play and all the good things that come from it.

- *Mary*

Parents' Educational Lunch Meetings Offered

Today, schools often experience low attendance at evening parent meetings that are not made mandatory. Everyone's lives are so busy, and our students' parents are no exception. As are our own, their evenings are often consumed with work, children's activities, sports, and meetings. Evening "down time" can become precious, a treasure to be guarded. As an alternative, WCPA can provide your school with lunchtime parental education meetings – where lunch, brief education about a topic relevant to parenting today, and discussion is combined. If you are interested in providing such educational opportunities for your school's parents next school year, contact Amy Maus at the WCPA office, (314) 275-8599. We can choose the topics and schedule that best suit your school's needs and preferences. Possible topics include:

- Creative Discipline – Beyond Time-Outs and Grounding
- Encouraging Independence and Self-Confidence
- Internet Safety – Protecting Today's Online Generation
- How to Talk with Your Children About Drugs and Alcohol
- Reinforcement, Rewards, and Bribes – What's the Difference?
- Ending the Homework Hassle Forever
- Children, Stress and Over-Scheduling
- The Bullies, the Bullied, and Bystanders
- Understanding Real Self-Esteem in Children
- Understanding Girls' Relational Aggression

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

Sensory Processing Dysfunction (Continued from Page 1)

The five better known senses can also impact a child's learning throughout the day. If a child is hypersensitive to sounds and your classroom is located near the dumpster, that child may be distracted, and learning ceases each time he hears the dumpster being utilized. If the child is hypersensitive to smells and someone in the room has a mildly offensive odor, strong shampoo or strong perfume, the child is distracted and again learning ceases. These are just a few examples of how a child's ability to use the information he receives from his environment is critical to learning.

Does This Child Have SPD or Is He/She Just Picky and Stubborn? Most of us can relate to some of the examples listed above that could distract us from concentrating and learning. Most of us have experienced the occasional time when we were distracted and unable to focus. However, when all areas of a person's everyday existence is impacted negatively, SPD may be the dysfunction. SPD is difficult to weed out from other problems that impair learning because many of its red flags overlap those of ADHD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and even behavior management concerns. When a child is having difficulty, or others around him are having difficulty, it is critical to determine if a child can't (developmental reasons), or won't (behavior reasons) or isn't able to focus (ADHD or SPD).

If these descriptions fit a student you know, be aware that the first step to proper evaluation and treatment for SPD is to make an appointment with an Occupational Therapist (OT). The OT can accurately diagnose by using parent and teacher reports/checklists and by observing the child perform a variety of fine and gross motor tasks. The OT can then prescribe a variety of fun tasks that will begin to integrate the body and the mind. The OT may also prescribe a "sensory diet" to be integrated throughout the child's entire day, including school hours. Since SPD and ADHD share similar behaviors, an OT is the best for providing a full evaluation of SPD and a psychologist who provides the appropriate psychological tests is the best for diagnosing ADHD. Neither should be diagnosed by pediatricians.

Educators can help by looking for patterns. For example, are the problems occurring in all environments, or can the child perform the particular task in another environment, yet not in your classroom? It is critical for educators to understand that sensory processing is a real issue and not just a child being picky, fussy or ornery. While to some children certain types of play, sounds, or even lights might be annoying, to others, the experience can be unbearable.

Parents and educators alike, after learning the nuances of SPD, may need to revamp their discipline techniques, and learn to reconnect with the child. Using a counselor who specializes in SPD will provide you with the necessary tools, support and techniques to enhance the learning environment, peer relations and the adult relationship with the child.

Tips for Teachers:

- General strategies include: using graph paper to help organize math problems, provide pencil grippers for children who have trouble using a mature pencil grasp, remind children to use their non-dominant hand to hold the paper, minimize visual and auditory distractions, and if child presses too hard on the pencil, give him a mechanical pencil.
- For a child oversensitive to light touch: place the child's desk out of traffic, so he can have a good view, put them "in charge" in the back of the line (not as a punishment, but as a place with worth).
- For children who need sensory input to stay on task: suggest 5 minutes of swinging, climbing, or jumping during recess, rhythmical, sustained movement (marching, washing desks), running notes to other teachers or the office, using the rocking chair, and never discipline a "sensory seeker" by taking away recess or physical education – you will intensify the random movements and outbursts. Other ideas to help with those who need additional heavy work might include: pushing their bottoms off the chair with their hands (like a seated push-up,) holding their own hands together and trying to pull them apart, and moving, scooting or carrying reasonably heavy objects.
- For children who need oral sensory input: drinking from water bottles kept at their desk or chewing on rubber tubing placed on the end of a pencil (can be obtained at the aquarium section of department/discount stores). For those teachers who allow snacks in the room, encourage this child to have hard crunchy snacks (hard pretzels, pita chips, rice cakes), or chewy snacks (gum, gummy bears, raisins). If snacks are not permitted, encourage that child to bring these types of food in their lunch.

Resources: *The Out-of-Sync Child* by Carol Kranowitz
Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder by Lucy Jane Miller

Suzanne Coffey's area of expertise is in working with children. She specializes in working with families who have children with SPD. She has particular experience and expertise with families who have children with developmental delays, parenting skill training, and working with young children with self-esteem and/or behavioral concerns. She provides individual and family therapy, on-site observation and consultation, and support groups.



For Parents Only:
Help! My Child Seems “Out of Sync” with His World!
Understanding Sensory Processing Dysfunction

Do any of these describe your child?

- Dislikes the playground equipment, such as swings or merry-go-rounds
- Picky eater, won't eat certain tastes or textures
- Squirms excessively, can never seem to get “settled,” often stands at his desk
- Overly sensitive to textures, food, clothing, tags, etc.
- Strongly dislikes hair care, washing, combing, etc.
- Accused of being too physical in class or in line
- Often hangs upside down while reading or watching TV
- Seems to crave physical, rough activities while appearing to have no fears

If any of these do describe your child, he/she may have something called Sensory Processing Dysfunction (SPD). Often, children who have been diagnosed with SPD will act somewhat appropriately at school or in public. Yet at home, where they feel the most comfortable, they will “let their hair down.”

Students who have SPD have difficulty integrating and processing sensory information from their environment. When that difficulty occurs, they tend to focus on getting their body settled before they even begin to learn. For example, if a child has super sensitive hearing and can hear the lights buzzing in the classroom and the trash truck backing up and dumping the trash, they aren't listening to what is happening in the classroom. If a child is visually distractible, he/she may need to sit in the front of the room so as not to be so distracted by the other students and the other visual distractions in the classroom. Another example refers to those children who require more physical activity than one typically gets while in the classroom. That child may present to be “hyper” or too physical and bumps into the other children, pushes others in line, fidgets at his desk, can't sit to do his written work, and/or has difficulty sitting at circle time, etc.

If you have observed these behaviors yourself or have had teachers notice them, you might consider seeking help from an Occupational Therapist (OT) and a therapist that understands SPD. The OT can provide a full evaluation to determine if your child indeed has SPD, or if the problem is something else. The therapist can work with your family and school to ensure that interventions begin to help your child function his or her best. Why “look into” anything, you wonder? If your child is taking time in the classroom to alert his body, or to stay balanced in his chair, or wonder what that sound is or where it might be coming from, he has lost precious learning time. During his activities, the teacher has been teaching her lesson and he has missed much of it. Many children with SPD come home from school just exhausted from learning plus from the day-to-day grind of keeping their bodies in sync. Appropriate diagnosis and interventions can start your child down the path toward better success in school and greater happiness and ease in general.

If you have any questions about SPD or where to turn to if you suspect your child has SPD, feel free to call Suzanne Coffey, at West County Psychological Associates, 314-275-8599. Ms. Coffey specializes in working with families who have children with SPD. She also has particular expertise with families who have children with developmental delays, who need parenting skill training, and who have young children with self-esteem and/or behavioral concerns. She provides individual and family therapy, on-site observation and consultation, and support groups.