

Sensory Smarts Goes to School

Lindsey Biel, OTR/L



Sensory strategies benefit *all* students.

Today there are more options than ever before for educating and helping our children with autism. Our students can be mainstreamed, in an inclusion class, in some kind of relationship-based program such as DIR/Floortime or RDI, or in a behavior-based program such as traditional or modified ABA, depending on the unique needs of the child. However, one sometimes overlooked, but essential component of any educational program is addressing the child's sensory challenges. A hypersensitive student may be anxious about the fire alarm because it feels like an earsplitting explosion or by a fluorescent light that hurts his eyes. A student may not be getting enough sensory input to stay tuned in to a lesson and instead becomes self-absorbed.

A student who has difficulty dealing with information from more than one sensory system at a time may become overwhelmed by a teacher's demand to process input simultaneously, such as to make eye contact when speaking. Any time a student is uncomfortable or in pain, isn't getting enough sensory input or is getting too much, that student can't reap the full benefit of the educational program – no matter how appropriate and well designed it may be.

The good news is that more and more teachers are working together with occupational therapists (OTs) who specialize in sensory processing issues to help these students by combining behavior and sensory approaches. Parents may initially need to foster this collaboration to help teachers better understand the sensory challenges that drive certain behaviors and help the OT better incorporate necessary behavioral approaches. It's a two-way street. And who benefits? Your child!

Getting Everyone on Board

There are many teachers and school administrators who already "get" the sensory piece. They understand that a child may need a hand fidget to self-regulate and attend at circle time, do 20 jumping jacks or climb a few flights of stairs before sitting down to work on handwriting, or wear earplugs during recess and assemblies to protect themselves from unbearable noise.

At the same time, there are many teachers and school staff who don't "believe" in sensory processing disorder (SPD). There's still a lot of press that touts that Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is the only "proven" intervention with "scientific studies" that back it up. This is nonsense. There is a growing body of scientific studies, electrodes and all, that prove SPD is a very real condition and that occupational therapy with a sensory integrative frame of reference works. For example, a study at Colorado State University using EEG measurements was able to distinguish between the brain activity of two groups of children – children diagnosed with SPD and typically developing children – with 86 percent accuracy.

In the meantime, SPD continues to gain significant momentum as a diagnosis. It has been included in Zero to Three's *Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health in Developmental Disorders in Infancy and Early Childhood* as Sensory Processing Disorders of Regulation since 2006, and in the Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disabilities' *Diagnostic Manual for Infancy and Early Childhood* as Regulatory Sensory Processing Disorder since 2007. SPD is under consideration as a distinct diagnostic classification by the American Psychiatric Association for the 5th edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* to be published

5 Ways to Build Your Sensory Smarts

with Lindsey Biel, Occupational Therapist

in 2013. In addition to merging autism and Asperger's into a single spectrum category, one of the proposed diagnostic criterion for Autism will be "stereotyped motor or verbal behaviors, or *unusual sensory behaviors*." (www.dsm5.org) So one way or another, sensory issues *will* be included in the next DSM. Sensory issues are a fact, and a very real challenge in our students, one that deserves our attention.

If you are struggling to get your child's school on board, it will help to spell out, citing observable behaviors, ways your child's sensory issues interfere with his education and day to day functioning. For example, if you know your child flaps his hands in front of his face when he is visually overloaded, an ABA person doing tabletop work under a fluorescent light in a room with a patterned rug and a wall full of distracting visuals and posters needs to know your child will be better able to learn (and not hand flap) if his session is in a workspace with a regular desk lamp, a clutter free surface, and without complex visuals within sight.

I created the Student SPD Checklist for parents, therapists, and other caregivers to use when interfacing with the school. It will help explain how sensory issues impact the child's functioning at school. You can copy it from this magazine or download the Checklist at www.autismdigest.com or www.sensorysmarts.com. Give it to your child's classroom teacher, paraprofessional, and anyone else who interacts regularly with your child at school.

Once teachers make the connection between sensory issues and classroom behaviors, they will likely be more willing to implement sensory-based activities and accommodations. Research shows that SPD affects 5-16 percent of the general population and up to 90 percent of people with ASD. As teachers become more sensory smart, they will become more aware of sensory challenges in other students, and realize that sensory strategies benefit *all* students. 📌

Read More Online

Subscribers: visit the AADigest website and the Subscriber Extras page to find the Student SPD Checklist, and a companion article to Lindsey's column. In this second piece she describes in more detail some of the empirical research mentioned above.

For more on advocating for your child with sensory challenges at school, please see *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit www.sensorysmarts.com.



Raising a Sensory Smart Child

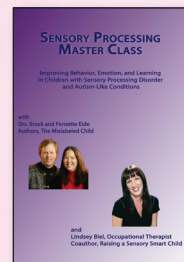
1 The best selling handbook on sensory processing challenges is now even better! The new, expanded edition has more practical information and more real-life solutions for children, teens, and adults.

Sensory Smarts Web Site

2 Essential information about sensory issues! Advice for handling everyday challenges like haircuts and clothing, sensory diet activities, checklists for families and teachers, great toys and equipment, parenting tips, and so much more.

Workshops, Web Casts and Audio Clips

3 Hands-on learning options for parents, teachers, and professionals. Find upcoming presentation dates, radio clips, and links to free web casts on Autism Hangout.



Sensory Processing Master Class

4 The expertise of a primary care physician (Dr. Brock Eide), a neurologist (Dr. Fernette Eide) and a pediatric OT (Lindsey Biel), fused together in a six-hour DVD program offering effective strategies to improve behavior, emotions, and learning.

Autism Asperger's Digest Magazine

5 Lindsey's Sensory Smarts column provides in-the-trenches insights and advice for parents, teachers, therapists and others.

Find all these options
and more at
SensorySmarts.com