

SENSORY SMARTS

People with autism can frequently be overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of everyday life...

BY LINDSEY BIEL, OTR/L

Sensory processing challenges underlie many of the obstacles the people we love and work with have to face. If entering a busy supermarket feels like walking into a rock and roll concert, with fluorescents flickering on and off like strobe lights, and the piped in music sounding like heavy metal percussion, it's no wonder people on the autism spectrum often become overwhelmed in such environments.

While not all people who have sensory issues have autism, virtually all people with the disorder do have significant sensory challenges, ranging from sensory preferences and intolerances to sensory jumbling and white-outs. Mastering sensory challenges gets easier as you develop "sensory smarts."

DIFFICULTY WITH ONE OR MORE SENSORY "CHANNELS"

If the volume is turned up too high or too low on one or more sensory channels (sight, touch, hearing etc), input may come in so strongly that being gently touched may feel threatening, or a certain sound may be painful. In this case, a person may become hypervigilant, demonstrating fight-or-flight stress responses to what seem like innocuous experiences. If sensations come in too quietly, a person may be under-aroused unless given a lot of activating input such as exciting, fast movement and colorful, noisy toys.

Sensitivity is also affected by context and comfort level. When a child is relaxed, well fed, and well rested, bright lights or crowds might not distress him. But when he's under stress due to aller-

gies, poor diet, fatigue, and so on, they may throw him into a tailspin.

DIFFICULTY COMBINING SENSORY INPUT

A person may struggle with multiple channels of input. Just as you may turn down your radio in heavy traffic, a person may need to turn off one source of sensory input in order to tune in others. A student might avoid looking at the teacher when she is speaking, turning off vision in order to turn on hearing. Or he may be better able to tolerate the oral tactile, taste and smell sensations of eating if he is in a quiet room instead of the school cafeteria.

DIFFICULTY TUNING IN

What seems "normal" to us can easily overwhelm a person with sensory issues. Add social, academic, and behavioral demands, and you can see why a sensitive person might frequently tune out or have a total meltdown because he can't handle the assault. In either case, self-absorbed, self-stimulatory behaviors become a self-soothing mechanism for that person as he tries to block out unbearable sensory input.

It may help to think of sensory overload as putting too much food on a flimsy paper plate. Your plate may hold up as you load on a hot dog, potato chips, and some coleslaw but add potato salad and the whole thing falls apart. You'll need to put on less food, get a stronger plate, or both. In the same way, you can use your sensory smarts to balance protecting the child (reducing sensory load) and pushing him forward (building ability to tolerate sensory challenges). ◀



6 SENSORY STRATEGIES TO TRY

- 1 Give a relaxing deep pressure massage, using long, firm, reassuring strokes. Avoid light, unexpected touches.
- 2 Identify a soothing essential oil and take it with you. Many kids like gentle scents such as sweet orange oil or vanilla, but others go for pungent odors like eucalyptus or lavender.
- 3 Protect hypersensitive ears in noisy environments, such as amusement parks, with earplugs or earmuffs.
- 4 Replace or turn off annoying fluorescents (sensitive people can see and hear the flicker) and glaring downcast lighting and use eye-level incandescent lamps with full-spectrum bulbs.
- 5 Take regularly scheduled sensory breaks to give the person input that helps him or her stay on an even keel. An occupational therapist can help you discover the most effective type of input, e.g., whether the person needs alerting input such as jumping and listening to exciting music or calming input such as getting cozy under a weighted blanket in a dimly lit room.
- 6 Plan for challenging outings such as a dentist appointment or a busy party by discussing what will happen, how long you will stay, and what to do if it becomes too much. It's better to have a short, successful outing than a long one that ends in a meltdown.

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- ▶ For a printable **Sensory Checklist**, practical daily life strategies and more, please visit www.sensorysmarts.com.