

What Is Sensory Processing Difficulties?

St Joseph's Catholic Primary School



What is sensory Processing Difficulties?

If you're familiar with the term "sensory overload," you have an idea what sensory processing issues are. Sometimes called sensory processing disorder or SPD, these issues happen because the brain has trouble organizing information from the senses.

Children with sensory processing issues can be oversensitive to sights, sounds, textures, flavors, smells and other sensory input. This can make a trip to a toy store or trying a new dish at a restaurant an overwhelming experience for them. Other children with sensory processing issues are undersensitive to information they receive through the senses. This can lead to other problems.

Sensory processing issues can impact a child's social skills. It can also cause difficulties in the classroom. Learning more about sensory processing issues and possible treatments is a good first step in getting help for your child.

What are sensory processing issues?

A child's brain receives a steady stream of sensory information—from the smell of cookies baking to the feeling of shoes rubbing against her feet. Most kids can "tune out" or "filter" that information as needed. They can deal with unexpected sensations, such as a loud crash on the playground.

But children with sensory processing issues may be oversensitive or undersensitive to the world around them. When the brain receives information, it gives meaning to even the smallest bits of information. Keeping all that information organized and responding appropriately is challenging for them.

All kids can be finicky or difficult at times. But children with sensory processing issues can be so emotionally sensitive that doing simple daily tasks is a constant challenge. Certain fabrics or tags in clothing might irritate them. On the other end of the spectrum, they might have a high tolerance to pain and not realize when they're in a dangerous situation.

How common are sensory processing issues?

There hasn't been enough research into sensory processing issues to know how many kids have them. One small-scale study suggested that as many as five to 16 percent of school-age kids do. But there's no other research or evidence to back that up.

What are the symptoms of sensory processing issues?

Symptoms of sensory processing issues can range from mild to severe. Here are some common symptoms:

Hypersensitivity: Hypersensitive (or oversensitive) children may have an extreme response to loud noises or notice sounds that others don't. They may dislike being touched, even by adults they know. They may be fearful in crowds, reluctant to play on playground equipment or worried about their safety (being bumped into or falling)—even when there's no real danger.

Hyposensitivity: Hyposensitive (or undersensitive) children lack sensitivity to their surroundings. They might have a high tolerance for or indifference to pain. They may be "sensory seeking," meaning they have a constant need to touch people or things—even when it's not appropriate.

They may also have trouble with personal space or be clumsy and uncoordinated. They might be constantly on the move and take risks on the playground, accidentally harming other kids when playing.

Some kids with sensory processing issues show signs of both hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity. They may react in one or both of the following ways:

Extreme response to a change in environment: Kids may be fine in familiar settings but have a meltdown in a crowded, noisy store. These meltdowns can be scary for parents and kids, since children who are oversensitive might have trouble stopping once they get started.

Fleeing from stimulation: Children who are undersensitive might run away from something that's too stimulating. Or they might run toward something that will calm them down. For example, they might zip across the playground toward a familiar teacher without paying attention to the other kids they're jostling.

What skills are affected by sensory processing issues?

For kids with sensory processing issues, dealing with sensory information can be frustrating and confusing. Here's how it can affect certain skills.

Resistance to change and trouble focusing: It can be a struggle for kids with sensory processing issues to adjust to new surroundings and situations. It can take them a long time to settle into activities. They might feel stressed out when asked to stop what they're doing and start something new.

Problems with motor skills: Kids who are undersensitive to touch may avoid handling objects. This is a problem because playing with and manipulating objects is a crucial part

What Is Sensory Processing Difficulties?

St Joseph's Catholic Primary School



of development—one that helps kids master other motor-related tasks like holding a pencil or buttoning clothes. They might appear clumsy due to poor body awareness.

Lack of social skills: Oversensitive kids may feel anxious and irritable around other kids, making it hard to socialize. Undersensitive kids, on the other hand, may be too rough with others. Other kids might avoid them on the playground or exclude them from birthday parties.

Poor self-control: Children who feel anxious or overstimulated may have trouble controlling their impulses. They might run off suddenly or throw a noisy new toy to the side without playing with it.