

# Sensory Processing Disorder

Teacher Training Article • Winter 2020–21 • Lisa Gintz and Nita Flores



## Description

Sensory processing disorder (SPD) is a neurological disorder caused by the brain's inability to regulate the senses. SPD is frequently associated with autism, ADHD, and other neurological disorders. Although SPD is not recognized as a disorder in DSM-5, the standard diagnostic manual for mental health professionals, research is ongoing regarding its classification.

## Characteristics

Children with SPD may experience high anxiety, a fear of crowds, or be unable to interact with other children. Bright lights, loud noise, and unexpected movement are a few examples of triggers that can cause a child with SPD to experience sensory overload. Sensory overload can cause the child to meltdown or have an emotional outburst due to being overwhelmed. A child may cover her ears because she is overwhelmed by the overall noise level or high-pitched sounds in the classroom or sanctuary. Another child may shield his eyes because he is overwhelmed by light or the busyness of the room. SPD can also affect a child with a lack of response to stimuli or an overall lethargy.

## Jermaine's Story (as told by Lisa Gintz and Nita Flores)

When a child with special needs engages in a repetitive self-calming action, try the following: First, reduce the classroom's noise level, brightness, and activity. Second, mirror the child's actions while standing to the side of the child, a short distance away. This may help create a bond with the child so he or she can learn.

On Easter Sunday, an eight-year-old boy we will call Jermaine came to my class. I recognized the signs of sensory overload. I shut off every fluorescent light, opened the blinds, and began speaking to the class in a slow, calm voice. I gave Jermaine some space and invited the class to look at the visual schedule posted on the classroom door reviewing what we were going to do that day.

The other teacher began teaching at the first center. Jermaine paced back and forth, running a tiny monster truck over his lips as he made a soft humming noise. I found the closest thing in size, and mirrored his actions, just to the side of him, within his view.

After two minutes of us pacing and driving our trucks in unison, he turned and looked at me. I said "Hi!" He went back to his activity and I went back to mirroring him.

Less than a minute passed and he looked at me again, but this time he stopped. He walked over and pressed his forehead against my forehead. Eureka! We had the beginnings of a connection. I opened my arms and he gladly leaned in for a hug. The hug was more than a sign of affection; it was a need for deep pressure to calm his body.

I quietly directed him to a bean bag chair at the next center and soon we were joined by our other children. He was calm and in my world. We taught our lesson, and he was able to learn. We gave him sensory breaks every five minutes to help keep him engaged.

## Accommodations and Supports

To avoid sensory overload, move the child with SPD to the sanctuary before the other children get there or after the halls have cleared. Consider extending classroom time to cover the additional time in the sanctuary.

Create separate zones and allow children to move around the classroom every five to ten minutes.

Exercise balls, sensory discs, and rocking chairs can help keep the body busy so the mind can concentrate.

Make the classroom clutter-free. Reduce the use of bulletin boards and wall hangings. Avoid neon colors and incorporate calming colors such as blue.

During times of sensory overload, use natural light rather than fluorescent light. Lamps may be helpful. Provide a calming area that is a quiet place with low light and soft music.

Have bean bag chairs, a ball pit, weighted blanket, or heavy toys available. Incorporate activities which involve carrying, pushing, or pulling something heavy.

Visual schedules which show pictures or representations of the planned activities can reduce anxiety. Announce activity changes one or two minutes before the change occurs.

## Practical Tips

When meltdowns occur, the child may be feeling ill and may not know how to communicate this. He may be overstimulated to the point that his brain cannot find calm. When this happens, quickly move him to a dimly lit, quiet place. Try hugging him, putting a hand on his shoulder or finger in the palm of his hand and gently apply pressure. Reassure him and give adequate time to allow his body to calm down. Slowly reintroduce him to the classroom.

Parents can be the best resources. Talk to the child's parents to discover what triggers a meltdown as well as what helps calm the child. Discuss the activities that motivate and engage the child. A Spiritual Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can be helpful facilitating this conversation.

Don't force eye contact. People with SPD may become overwhelmed when they try to look at you and listen to you at the same time. Do not be discouraged if the child looks away; she is likely trying to listen and understand without distraction.

Repeat concepts throughout the lesson and activities. Review lessons from the previous class to ensure concepts are retained and built upon.

Develop a circle of friends to participate in church activities, Sunday school, and church services for each child with special needs.

Every person, regardless of disability, should have the opportunity to be taught God's Word in an environment where they can learn.

Parents naturally worry that their child will not be understood, will become a distraction, or will be a burden. When the parent comes to pick their child up, make a point to let them know something wonderful about that child to show them that their child is welcome and was included throughout the class.

## Resources

Website: Special Books by Special Kids  
(<http://www.specialbooksbyspecialkids.org>)

Web Ideas: Search Pinterest for "Ideas for Sensory Buckets" and "Sensory Walls"

Website: Sensory Processing Disorder  
([www.sensory-processing-disorder.com](http://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com))

Book: *The Out of Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction* by Carol Stock Kranowitz

Book: *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder* by Carol Stock Kranowitz

Website: Understood: For Learning & Attention Issues  
([www.understood.org](http://www.understood.org))

## Connect with ABLE

If you have questions regarding special needs, contact ABLE (Accepting, Believing, Loving, Embracing). ABLE Ministry is a program of the Ladies Ministries Division of the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) and is dedicated to assisting the special needs and disabled populations within the church and the community. ABLE is committed to increasing awareness about disabilities in the community, the church, and the world. They strive to provide the strength, support, and assistance necessary to meet the needs of those affected by disabilities—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Facebook: ABLE Ministry UPCI

Website: <http://ladiesministries.com/programs/able>

For further information, email [ladies@upci.org](mailto:ladies@upci.org) or call 636-229-7895



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