

# SENSORY PROCESSING

AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST'S LOW DOWN ON SENSORY

## WHAT IS SENSORY PROCESSING?

Sensory Processing is in simple terms the way that your brain processes the information coming into your body. Your brain and body are constantly communicating with each other. Your body is telling your brain what is going on in your environment (sensory) and your brain is constantly telling your body how to move and react to this information (motor).

Sometimes our brain can get overwhelmed with the information coming in and it can make us feel unsafe, out of control or like we are about to explode. This can be what our little ones experience too.

## TYPES OF SENSORY PROCESSORS

Sensory processing is occurring all of the time. There tends to be two schools of thought for how our kids – and ourselves react to and interact with sensory information.

### **Sensory seeker:**

Sensory seeking children seek out sensory input into their body. They may do things like mouth not food objects, spin around, climb on things, jump around a lot, turn lights on and off or make a lot of noises.

### **Sensory avoidant**

Sensory avoidant children may avoid sensory input. They may avoid climbing and sliding on playground equipment, dislike trying new foods, pull their hands away from messy play, or appear withdrawn from others.

### **Can one be both a seeker and an avoider?**

Absolutely! Truth is, most of us are a combination of the two. We may seek out some sensory input, and avoid others all together! Working with your child's occupational therapist can help you untangle the web of sensory processing and empower you to support your child's sensory needs!



# OUR EIGHT SENSES

8? I THOUGHT THERE WERE 5!

## THE SENSES AND THEIR JOBS:

Below is a quick run down on the senses and some things a sensory seeker in this area may do and what an avoider may do! Please note, this is only to serve as an example for you!

### 1. SIGHT

We see with our eyes. Our eyes take in the light and send that information up to our brain for our brain to make sense of!

Seeker: A sight seeker may like to watch toys spin

Avoider: A sight avoider may wear sunglasses indoors

### 2. AUDITORY

We hear with our ears. Our ears take in the auditory input around us in and take that information to our brain that sifts through it.

Seeker: An auditory seeker may listen to music really loud or bang objects

Avoider: An auditory avoider may prefer to wear noise cancelling headphones

### 3. GUSTATORY

Our mouth takes in a ton of sensory input, and so does our tongue. Our tongue is responsible for our sense of taste. Our taste buds tell us the flavor, texture and temperature of all of our foods! We can taste 5 distinct flavors- sweet, salty, bitter, sour and savory.

Seeker: A gustatory seeker may love to eat lemons

Avoider: A gustatory avoider may eat the same foods daily.

### 4 OLFACTION

Our nose relays our sense of smell to our brain. Interestingly, it is a very under-appreciated sense. Scientists have linked our sense of smell to our memory centers in the brain. This is why people can have intense emotional reactions to smells that remind them of either a great time or a traumatic event.

Seeker: An olfactory seeker may like to light scented candles

Avoider: An olfactory avoider may quickly cover their nose to smells you might not smell



# OUR EIGHT SENSES

8? I THOUGHT THERE WERE 5!

## 5. TACTILE

The main way we take in tactile input is through our hands and skin. Our skin has many receptors that tell our brain temperature, texture, pressure and pain.

Seeker: A tactile seeker may have to feel every soft fabric in the store or may be a hugger

Avoider: A tactile avoider may cut the tags out of all of their clothes.

## 6. PROPRIOCEPTION

Proprioception is the sense of where our body is in space, and is the way we grade how much force and pressure we need. Our muscular system sends our brain this information.

Seeker: An proprioception seeker may love to throw their body onto the couch.

Avoider: An proprioception avoider may avoid rough play.

## 7. VESTIBULAR

Our vestibular system regulates our sense of balance, where our head is in space, motion, and our visual field. The inner ear works to regulate vestibular input so we can focus and play.

Seeker: A vestibular seeker may love to spin on a spinner.

Avoider: A vestibular avoider may not like to ride roller coasters.

## 8. INTEROCEPTION

interoception is our body's awareness on what is going on inside of it. This is commonly referred to as the hidden sense and accounts for feelings of needing to use the bathroom, feeling hungry, tired, full, thirsty and all of our emotions.

Seeker: An interoception seeker may like going through haunted houses.

Avoider: An interoception avoider may prefer to not watch sad movies.



# HOW CAN WE WORK ON SENSORY PROCESSING?

## OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY!

Occupational therapists are the only highly specialized professionals who address the nuts and bolts of sensory processing. Other professionals may have some skills to lightly address sensory needs, but OTs have the knowledge, toolkit and ability to address the reasons why engaging in a sensory behavior is happening, what to do about it and how to use your child's sensory needs to empower them to be successful.

## ASK WHY:

My number one suggestion when you see your child engaging in a sensory behavior or a stim is to also engage in it and ask why they might be doing it. Are they watching the top spin around and around because they like the noise or the lights? Are they walking on their tippy toes because they went from the carpet to the hard floor? Asking why is the number one way we can tease out what is doing on!

## ADVOCATE:

We all have sensory quirks that we engage in to calm us down. Advocating for your child's sensory needs in their environment can help to empower you both. You can also work with your team to come up with a list of accommodations for your child to add into their IEP for their sensory needs.

## TAKE NOTE OF YOUR OWN SENSORY NEEDS:

I have always found it helpful for parents to take note of their own sensory needs and quirks. Examples of my own quirks that I have are: no overhead lighting or big lights - lamps with warm light are my go-to-, gum or leg shaking in meetings, noise cancelling headphones in really loud environments, asking people to chew with their mouth closed, sitting with the air blowing on me in a car so I don't get motion sick and more! Take some time to talk about some of your sensory needs. This can help you feel more empowered to talk about your child's needs and advocate for them.

