

SENSORY SUCCESS IN THE CLASSROOM

Many parents and teachers are concerned about how children with sensory issues can negotiate school and what effects their sensory issues will have on their learning. In the busy environment of a classroom, sensational kids can slip through the cracks.

Lucy Jane Miller, PhD, OTR and Britt Collins, MS, OTR

Our bodies need to move to set a foundation for learning in the brain. Movement is crucial for all children!

We commend the many teachers who try hard to make sensible adjustments for our children!

Training teachers to empathize with children who have sensory challenges can help create *success*—and enhance *joy* at school for teachers and children. Below we note subtypes of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) and provide ideas that might prove helpful in the classroom.

Remember this one important caveat: use sensory strategies that are good for *all* children. The less the *sensational*

child is pointed out as different from other children, the better his self-esteem is likely to be. Know what strategies children need to succeed, and do these activities to improve the school experience for all children—typically developing as well as sensory challenged. Every child is different. If you find children who do not respond to simple sensory lifestyle changes (see table), be sure to refer them for a complete occupational therapy (OT) evaluation.

Movement is crucial for all children! Children are asked to sit for way too long without moving. How does

your own body feel after sitting in a seminar all day? Our bodies need to move to set a foundation for learning in the brain. Furthermore, recess is not optional! Children need recess more than most people realize. It's not just fun—think of it as brain food. Recess should not be sacrificed unless absolutely necessary. (If children need a consequence for misbehaving, do anything *other than* taking recess away.)

Focus on joy at school: a happy child learns more and tries harder. Look at how the child engages and participates in all areas—music, PE, lunch, recess. How does the child transition from the bus or car to the classroom at the day's start, and from the classroom at the day's end? Are other transitions difficult? What can be put in place to support the child during challenging academic and social times?

Remember, schools are mandated only to provide services that are educationally relevant. It lies in our responsibility as parents, teachers, and therapists to show how our requests relate to advancing educational outcomes. Talk about how the child's functional abilities are affected, rather than his sensory needs.

Most of all have fun! Fun is the fabric that makes school engaging for children. The most you can wish for is that a child wants to go to school to play with friends and to learn. Receiving the sensory help he needs is a vital ticket to this success at school! ■

Resource

The American Occupational Therapy Association (www.aota.org) has developed a downloadable fact sheet (<http://tinyurl.com/mtqzyfy>) and a complete PowerPoint presentation (<http://tinyurl.com/lhpw539>) that highlight using natural settings, such as recess, to support learning and positive behavior. Your occupational therapist can access these materials for free! Ask him or her to provide an inservice for staff and parents.

SPD Subtype	Symptoms	Strategies
Sensory Overresponsivity (SOR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not like others standing close Afraid of kids who move quickly Difficulty participating in groups Struggles to tolerate sights, sounds, smells, and tastes in cafeteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep classroom quieter at times when children must concentrate. Allow child to build up tolerance to group work, starting in pairs, then triads. Provide movement breaks to help regulate arousal.
Sensory Underresponsivity (SUR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slouches in chair or against wall Difficulty paying attention and answering questions Takes extra time to process others' requests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wake up their bodies with fun, jazzy music, shakes, and wiggles. Allow water bottles on their desk with lemon water.
Sensory Craving (SC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty sitting still, may wiggle around incessantly May often touch objects and peers Difficulty interacting appropriately with peers (may be in their face or space) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow movement breaks throughout day. Create smaller, less stimulating spaces so child can focus. Include regulating routines in your schedule (e.g., yoga pose, deep breathing).
Postural Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Falls out of chair Poor muscle tone Weak core strength Difficulty with fine and gross motor skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide opportunities to work on strengthening exercises. Evaluate need for seating adjustments (e.g., ensure feet can touch the floor when sitting).
Dyspraxia (motor planning problem)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty with fine motor tasks (e.g., writing letters, cutting with scissors) Challenges with gross motor tasks (e.g., climbing, playing soccer) Trouble with sequencing tasks (e.g., craft projects) Difficulty generating ideas for play because they have trouble following others' ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Break tasks into smaller chunks. Encourage children to invent ideas (even if silly). Try catching medium-size ball before small ball.