

What is Sensory Integration Dysfunction?

Children with Sensory Integration dysfunction exhibit unusual responses to touch and movement experiences.

If they are oversensitive to touch sensations (tactile defensiveness), they will avoid touching and being touched and will shy away from messy play, physical contact with others, pets, certain textures of fabric, many foods, bumpy sock seams, etc. On the other hand, if they are under-responsive to touch sensations, they'll crave touching and being touched. These children will be finger-painting their arms, stuffing their mouths with too much food, shouting indoors, turning up the volume and bumping and crashing into people and furniture.

If children are oversensitive or defensive to movement experiences, their feet will never leave the ground. They will shun playground equipment and object to riding in the car or elevator. They may refuse to be picked up. Or, if they are under-responsive, they may crave intense movement, and seem always to be in upside-down positions, swinging on the tire swing for long periods, and on-the-go constantly -- jumping, bouncing, rocking and swaying.

It is important to note that many children are over-reactive to sensations, covering their ears when a truck rattles by, or pinching their nostrils to avoid smelling an old banana. And many children are under-sensitive, perhaps liking spicy pizza and fireworks more than others do. We wouldn't necessarily say that these kids have Sensory Integration dysfunction. It is unusual reactions to touch and movement that suggest Sensory Integration dysfunction.

- Keep notes on your child's atypical behavior. Does his reaction to a sensory stimulus occur with **frequency**, **intensity** and **duration**? For instance, does the child have a heck of a time calming down after being knocked down?
- When did it happen? Where? Who was involved? What happened or what was said? How did your child respond? After taking notes for a while, you may be able to see the pattern and find the answer to the trickier question of "Why did it happen?"
- Find an occupational therapist certified to provide Sensory Integration treatment. (Only about 20% of occupational therapists are.) For a list of certified therapists, contact [Sensory Integration International](#)

There is a significant difference between sensory integration dysfunction and a mild sensory issue. "Are the sensory difficulties impacting daily living, relationships, learning, and behavior; and, if so, to what degree?" Here is where we need to talk about degree and quality. Now, for a four-year old who is exhibiting "typical behavior in every other area but refuses to put her hands in the sandbox, is this really a big problem? Is it

really pervasive? Is it really adversely impacting her life? Could it be that this is just a "stage" or something ephemeral? In other words, will she grow out of this? And, does it really matter if she does? However, if she doesn't like to put her hand in the sandbox, and gags when she touches blue or finger paint, and falls out her chair, and the slide terrifies her, and her mother has intense daily power struggles with her about what hose is going to wear and what she is going to eat, and is obviously overwhelmed by large group activities, now do we have a big problem? Is it pervasive? Is it impacting her life/learning/social development? Maybe. At this point, as parents and as teachers, we would want to take a closer look at this child's level of previous experience and exposure these types of activities.

Sensory integration dysfunction or sensory issues may be associated with, or embedded within, another diagnosis such as ADHD, Learning Disabilities, mental health issues, and Autism Spectrum Disorders. There is always a significant sensory component within Asperger's Syndrome. Interestingly, first person accounts from adult individuals with Asperger's Syndrome describe sensory issues as the primary source of many of their social and communication challenges.

As sensory "detectives" we look at the whole child, tease apart patterns of behavior, and look at the quality of skills across developmental domains such as cognitive, language and communication skills, adaptive skills, social and emotional skills and motor skills.

If you suspect that your child may have problems in sensory integration you should mention your concerns to your child's pediatrician and /or teachers. These professionals may be familiar with these kinds of problems and be able to help you find resources in your community. Hearing your concerns will also give them an opportunity to share their impressions of your child. However, if they seem unaware of sensory integration dysfunction, or if they tell you to "wait and see," you will probably need to rely on other sources of help.