

Tip Sheets

Sensory Intervention Strategies and Environmental Adaptations

Each day we receive information through our eight senses that helps us interact, explore, and navigate within our environments. Sometimes, one or more of our senses do not interpret information in the same way the majority of others do.

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) refers to a disconnect in how the brain processes the information it takes in through the sensory system. This misinformation can interfere with our sense of security and safety. If a child does not feel safe and secure, their ability to learn and enjoy the world is affected.

The Importance of Environment

Children with SPD can be oversensitive or under responsive to sensory stimuli. Or, there can be a variable response dependent upon the environment and how a child is feeling on a particular day or at a particular time.

A predictable and structured environment can enhance the performance for a child who has SPD and may consequently improve the quality of the environment.

Implementing intervention strategies and adaptations throughout your child care program can help children with SPD successfully navigate various environments. Flexibility is also key to successful inclusion of children with SPD. There are times throughout the day when all children may need extra support and assistance.

Physical Environment Strategies

Variety of seating

- Offer seating options for floor time such as cushions, carpet squares, and cube chairs.
- Offer seating in chairs that allow children to sit with feet touching the floor, keeping knees and hips at a 90-degree angle for eating and fine motor activities.
- Table height should be at elbow level.

Quiet spaces

- Create small quiet spaces calming and quiet activities, including a quiet space for a child to go when a break is needed.
- Limit auditory stimuli in the environment. Classical/instrumental music played softly in the background can be very soothing. Some children may benefit from the use of a headset to muffle certain noises.
- Arrange quiet activities near each other and away from noisier activity areas.
- Limit visual stimuli in the environment.

Movement and sensory exploration

- Provide movement activities through climbing toys, mats, or pretend.
- Encourage the children to try to push the wall and see if they can move it, move furniture around the room, shovel sand or snow, sit in rocking chairs, swing, etc.
- Provide children with sensory experiences and other ways to explore sensory materials like sensory tables/bins, texture boxes, etc.
- Include dramatic play clothes of varying textures (e.g., silky, furry, soft, and stiff).

Emotional Environment Strategies

Preparation for change and transitions

- Explain a change of classroom routine or staff as soon as possible.
- Prepare for- and facilitate transitions by using songs as signals and providing activities while waiting. Fidgets can help decrease the need to touch friends or other objects that may cause difficulty.
- If possible, prepare children with auditory sensitivity for fire drills, vacuums, and other loud noises. Encourage children to cover ears or use headsets to muffle loud sounds.
- Allow opportunities for movement before and after quiet activities.
- Encourage children to take several deep breaths to help them slow down and/or focus before beginning work on a task they perceive as difficult.

Program Strategies

Consistency

- Have a consistent daily schedule/routine.
- Visually display the daily schedule using a picture schedule. Go over the schedule with the children by pointing to each picture.
- Store toys and materials in clear and labeled containers so children can easily find (and put away) what they are looking for.

Touch experiences and sensory exploration

- Provide small squish balls, stress balls, or other soft, squeezable items when a child is expected to sit and focus for group or story.
- Provide multiple touch experiences through various textures in books, toys, and sensory boxes, tables, or bins.
- Consider oral activities by offering the opportunity to eat chewy/crunchy snacks, drink through a straw or use teething toys.

Personal space

- Create personal space at tables by using cookie sheets, trays, laminated construction paper, place mats, or electrical tape.
- Use colored tape to visually designate personal space (waiting, lining up at the door, using the drinking fountain, during group meetings, etc.) as a reminder for each child that they are not to enter the boxed area unless it is their turn.

Opportunities for movement

- Have children march or move in another creative way from one activity to another. Moving the body to rhythm and giving input to the feet can be organizing.
- Provide opportunities for movement (climbing, rocking, swinging, spinning, etc.).
- Have children try to “hold up” or “push down” the walls while waiting in line. Doing push-ups also provides input to the body.

Additional Resources

Making Sense Out of Sensory Processing Disorder
https://depts.washington.edu/lend/pdfs/Making_Sense_Sensory_Processing_Disorder103114.pdf

Fraser
<http://www.fraser.org/>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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