

A Look at Sensory Integration Disorder

Sometimes Poorly Understood and Difficult to Pinpoint, it can Impact Social Development, Academic Performance

By Julia Bollman

As recently as 10 or 15 years ago, a child's sensory systems were rarely considered to be the cause of academic difficulties, problems with social development or an inability to tolerate the wind on a blustery day.

But today, thanks to research into sensory integration disorder and more and better treatment options, children are being treated at earlier ages for sensory disorders and suffering fewer consequences from it as they grow. But many of us still wonder: What exactly is sensory integration disorder?

Our sensory systems – the senses of touch, sound, vision, smell, movement and joint position – form the basis of how we relate to the world around us. When they work together seamlessly, they are automatic: they operate without any conscious effort and don't receive a second thought.

It's when a child's senses start to dominate their behavior that parents begin to notice something isn't quite right, and sensory integration disorder could be to blame. Parents begin to wonder: Why does my 3-year-old daughter dislike finger painting when her preschool classmates relish the chance to dip their hands in the colorful, messy paints?

Why does my 6-year-old son become so easily distracted by any and all noises in his classroom when other kids seem to be able to filter out background noises much more easily? Why does my 5-year old refuse to wear blue jeans because they are "too scratchy," or complain about nearly all of his t-shirts that have tags in them?"

Kay McCarthy, a St. Louis pediatric Occupational Therapist in practice for more than 20 years, often is called upon by parents who are confounded by their child's behavior and aren't sure where to turn – or even if they need to turn to a professional – for answers.

McCarthy explains that sensory integration disorder is defined by a group of symptoms, (not a single quirk, pronounced preference or dislike – we all have those) and can affect children in their social development as well as academically.

"We all have our own sensory profile – our own likes and dislikes – that have to do with how we personally perceive the sensory information that's coming in to us," McCarthy explains. "One person will never wear blue jeans because they are too rough or prefer certain kinds of socks. Another person may prefer a haircut that keeps their hair from falling in their eyes, and all of these things can be perfectly ok.

On a social level, kids with sensory disorders can unwittingly limit their development because certain activities make them so uncomfortable or upset they avoid them.

"It's when one or a group of these sensory systems causes enough difficulty in a person's life that it changes their behavior, affects their social skills or influences their academics that there is a problem."

McCarthy uses some examples to help parents understand when their child's sensory overload may be hindering development.

On the academic front, a child who is hypersensitive to sound may perform poorly in school, not because they are unable to do the work, but because they are distracted by a child who talks or



hums, or the classroom is loud in other ways. A child who is hypersensitive to smells may be so distracted by the aromas drifting into the classroom from a nearby cafeteria or the smell of a classmate's shampoo or soap that they are unable to concentrate on their work or think about anything but the smells in their immediate environment.

A child whose overwhelming sense of touch makes rough fabrics or common tags on clothes a major source of discomfort will find that nothing else going on in the classroom can override the annoying feeling of the offending piece of cloth on his skin.

"They can completely miss the lessons in the classroom," McCarthy explains, "and could be perceived as academically challenged or having attention deficit disorder when what's really going on is a sensory issue."

On a social level, kids with sensory disorders can unwittingly limit their development because certain activities make them so uncomfortable or upset they avoid them. They anticipate that a particular activity will be stressful but they aren't sure how to explain their feelings. So they just refuse to play with other kids or participate in group activities. It begins to influence their social development.

"Kids who are bothered by bright sun or

the wind in their face decide not to play outdoor sports or try to limit outside play as much as possible, and they often can't explain exactly why," she says. "Kids may try to avoid art or cooking projects because they are uncomfortable with the messiness of paint, glue, or certain foods."

If left untreated, sensory disorders cause children to purposely narrow their environments and that begins to hinder development.

"A sensory disorder starts to dictate your choices in life, and it gets worse as the child ages," McCarthy says.

When to seek help? "When there are enough behaviors that your child's daily life is effected," McCarthy says. But pinpointing a sensory disorder often is not easy, especially because some kids are better at compensating for it than others. "Some kids want so desperately to be a part of the group or want to please the teacher that they hold it together at school, but fall apart at home because it's a safe place."

What should you do if you suspect your child may have a sensory integration disorder? Seek out the advice of your pediatrician or an occupational therapist, who will perform a sensory profile, test your child's motor skills and evaluate overall sensory development.

The body's sensory system is most pliable when a child is young – under age 7 in most cases – and when treated at a young age, children are more likely to be able to unlearn behaviors that may limit them and relearn positive, productive ones.

Sensory disorders are often easiest to spot when they emerge, which for many kids can be around age 3, when they start to participate more in group play and can more readily express preferences. "Plus, more is expected of a 3-year-old than a 2-year-old, so you notice more if your child isn't doing what the other kids in the group are doing," McCarthy explains.

Most of all, parents shouldn't beat themselves up trying to assign blame or figure out what they "did" to cause a sensory problem in their child. The causes of sensory disorders are not always known. Sensory systems start to develop *in utero*, McCarthy explains, and experienced occupational therapists have been known to identify sensory difficulties in infants just days old.

Treatment of sensory disorders usually isn't long term (typically from three months to a year and a half). The older the child the longer treatment may take because established habits have to be broken and new behaviors learned.

"Having a good sensory foundation lays a nice framework for social behavior and academic skills," McCarthy says, "and makes for a happier and more productive day to day life." ■

McCarthy recommends the following books to parents who want to read more about Sensory Integration Disorder.

- *Unlocking the Mysteries of Sensory Dysfunction: A Resource for Anyone Who Works With, or Lives With, a Child with Sensory Issues* by Elizabeth Anderson and Pauline Emmons (2004).

- *Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder* by Lucy Jane Miller, Ph.D., OTR, (2006).



Kay McCarthy has worked in early childhood development for more than 20 years. She has provided direct treatment and evaluation of preschoolers, presented workshops and developed programs. McCarthy graduated from the University of Missouri-Columbia with a degree in Occupational Therapy. She has specialized training in the areas of hand skills and visual motor skills, and certification in the assessment of sensory integration and praxis abilities. She can be reached at (314) 324-0799.

Are you sick of being sick of it?

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