KidsMatters Occupational Therapy

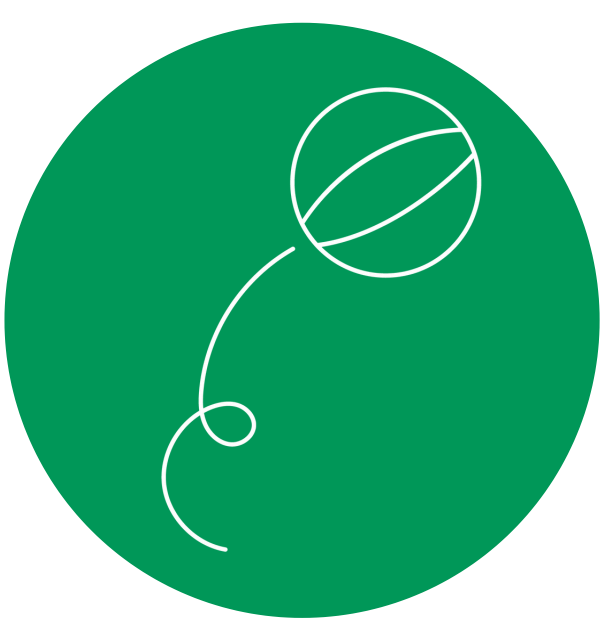
Enhancing Sensory Processing Skills

The Sensory System

Sensory Processing refers to the way in which we take in, process, interpret and respond to all that we:

- Hear, see, touch, taste, and smell.
- Move and balance.
- Feel gravity and body position in space
- Sense our interior environment (interoception).

Every person has their own sensory processing preferences, which can change over time. Under or over responding to different sensations can impact on a wide range of skills such as attention and concentration, behaviour, and interactions with others.



Sensory Threshold

Each child has a 'sensory threshold'. This is the amount of sensory input that they can tolerate. A child's sensory threshold is directly linked to their behaviours. Typically, we see children reacting passively or actively to sensory information. The 4 distinct ways that children react to sensory input are listed below:

Low Sensory Threshold

A child who is sensitive to sensory input tends to perceive a 'little bit' of input as 'a lot', meaning normal everyday sensations may exceed their sensory threshold.

They may interpret normal sensations as noxious stimuli i.e. a tag in clothing feels like a spider crawling on their skin. These children often become overwhelmed by sensory input and may experience a state of stress and anxiety in response to situations such as going to the shops or having their hair washed. They may also struggle to function within classrooms that are particularly noisy or visually stimulating.

Other children may try to avoid certain sensations. E.g. run away, cry, or put their hands over their ears to protect themselves.

High Sensory Threshold

Some children may need a lot of sensory input. E.g. They may need a firm touch or prefer strong scents or tastes as this provides them with more intense feedback. These children may need extra sensory input in order to stay alert throughout their day.

However, because they do not actively seek this out they may tend to appear 'day dreamy' or lethargic. Alternatively, other children may go about seeking out extra sensory input in an active manner i.e. appear very inquisitive, fidget with items in their hands, put things in their mouth, and be constantly on the go.

How Can We Assist?

Children can have a mixed pattern of sensory processing preferences. For example, they may be sensitive to touch, need more noise input, and seek out more movement. Our goal, as occupational therapists, is to make sure that your child remains in their optimal sensory range. We want to provide them with enough sensory input that they remain alert and stimulated but not too much that we overload them. By working out your child's individual sensory preferences, activities can be suggested to help to 'feed' your child's sensory system.

Helping a child to gather the sensory information they need can help them to remain calm and alert throughout the day to participate in tasks expected of them, such as getting ready for school or sitting at their desk to do work in the classroom. Your occupational therapist may ask questions about your child's responses to various situations and environments to gather more information to help determine if sensory processing differences are influencing their behaviour or skills. It is important to examine your own sensory processing preferences as well. Something you perceive as enjoyable, your child may dislike and vice versa i.e. you like your head rubbed but your child finds this distressing, or your child constantly makes noises, however you find this frustrating. If you understand your own needs, you will have a greater awareness of what will help to support your child.

Examples of Strategies That Can Be Used In Therapy

- Assisting your child to become more aware of their own body and how it responds to sensory input.
- Exploring a range of sensory strategies to assist your child to remain in a calm but alert state.
- Implementing structured ways of monitoring your child's sensory input at home and at school.
- Collaborating with school and support staff to devise the best way of keeping your child happy in the classroom or Kindy environment.
- Your therapist may also recommend using the program, 'The Alert Program: How Does Your Engine Run?' (created by Shellenberger and Williams), or Zones of Regulation to assist your child in playing a larger role in regulating and monitoring their own sensory preferences.

*The actual sensory activities used will vary according to the preferences and needs of your child, what they enjoy, and what makes them calm and organised (into the just right zone).

Enquire today

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