

# UNDERSTANDING SENSORY PROCESSING & ANXIETY



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A FREE GUIDE FROM  
KIDS MATTERS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

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## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome. It often involves a strong desire or concern to do something or for something to happen.

Anxiety is a normal feeling. It is there to keep us safe. However, if it is persistent for too long and blocks function, the anxiety is considered problematic.

### How anxiety can present in children:

- Fight: aggressive, violent, refusing.
- Flight: avoiding, quietly refusing, missing school or avoiding social activities.
- Fright: Looking worried, concerned or anxious, shy.
- Controlling and demanding behaviour.
- Physical **symptoms**, such as headaches, stomach aches, muscle tension, or tiredness. Their worries might cause them to miss school or avoid social activities.
- Requiring constant reassurance and information repeated.



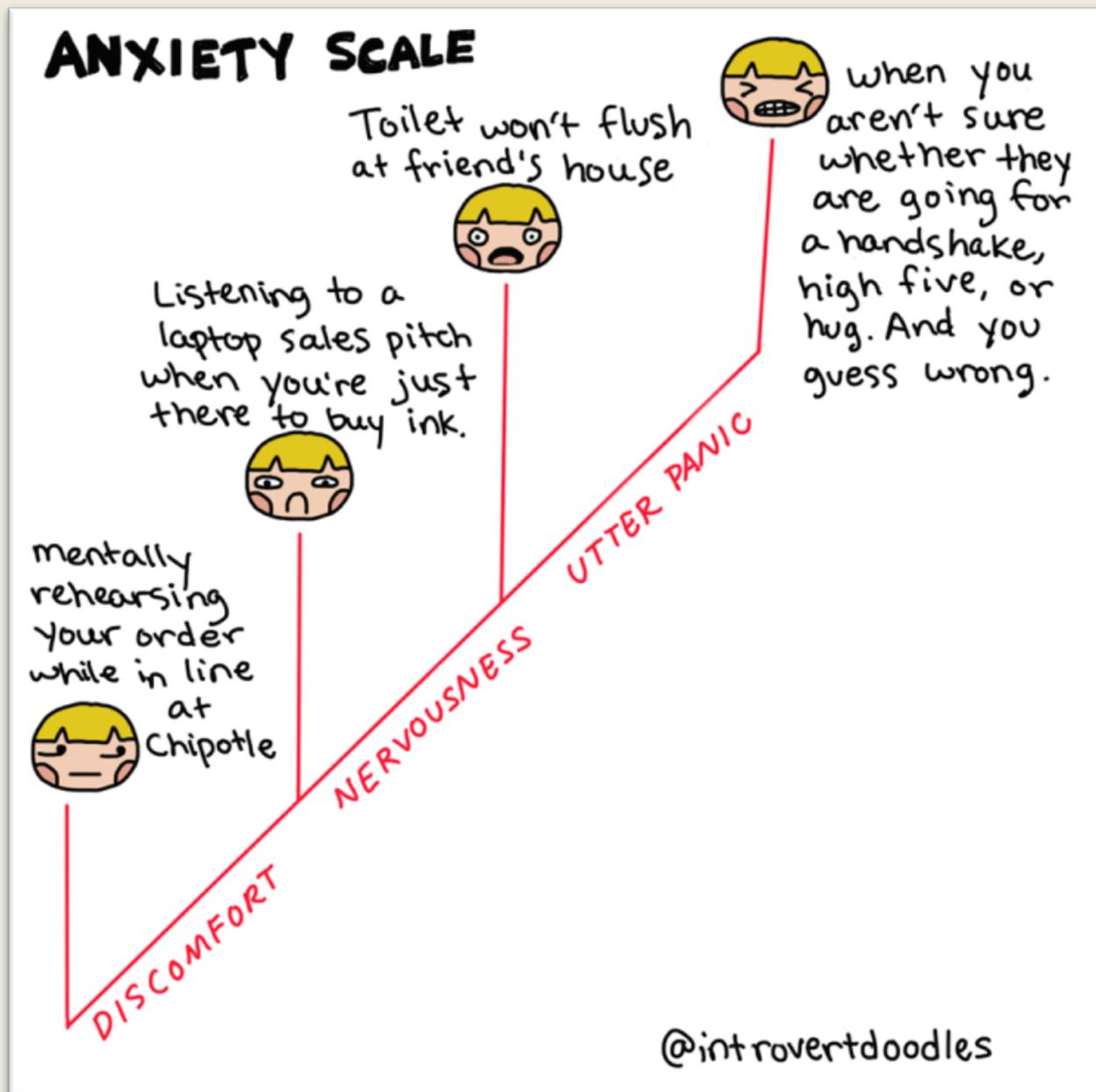
## **No child or person sets out to have anxiety, so they should not be blamed for having these feelings.**

There are a myriad of possible contributing factors as to why someone may have developed anxiety, such as:

- Biological contributors - genetics, the way the brain is wired.
- Sensory Processing issues - confused messages from the senses.
- Performance issues - child can't do the task the way they'd like to.
- Just right challenge - the task is too hard.
- Physical well-being - medical, fatigue or sickness issues.



## HOW BAD IS YOUR CHILD'S ANXIETY?



SO MUCH CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE ANXIETY,  
STARTING WITH BUILDING YOUR KNOWLEDGE?  
[CLICK HERE](#)

## WHAT IS SENSORY PROCESSING?

Sensory Processing is about how the brain takes the information from each of our senses – within our body and from the world around us and combines this to get an accurate picture of our world.

- Problems with sensory processing can be likened to a neurological “traffic jam” that prevents certain parts of the brain from receiving the information needed to interpret sensory information correctly (Jean Ayres).
- Sensory Processing Disorder is NOT a diagnosis on DSM5. Instead, we talk about sensory processing difficulties (SPD).



# WHAT IS SENSORY PROCESSING?

1

## Sensory Input

- Visual
- Auditory
- Taste
- Smell
- Touch
- Vestibular
- Proprioception
- Interoception

2

## Processing

- The brain assembles, organises, and filters information

3

## Output - what we see

- Behavioural and emotional responses
- Motor development
- Visual perceptual & cognitive development

# LINKS BETWEEN SENSORY PROCESSING AND ANXIETY

## Anxiety can be caused by:

- The system being unable to process information - automatically or effectively.
- The system being unable to regulate the incoming information.
- Embarrassment and/or shame.
- The task or situation seeming too hard.

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# THE EIGHT SENSES

1. **Auditory** - Hearing

2. **Visual** - Sight

3. **Vestibular** - Balance

4. **Tactile** - Touch

5. **Olfactory** - Smell

6. **Gustatory** - Taste

7. **Proprioception** - Movement

8. **Internal Senses/ Interoception** - Internal body awareness for hunger, pain, toileting needs and emotions



**There is interconnectivity between all these senses and their processing.**

Important to note where your child is at with respect to all the different senses.

# SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

## Sound Sensory Processing is Built on Solid Foundations:

- Good Health - Healthy Nutrition and Sleep Habits
- Supportive and nurturing environment
- Engaged and connected relationships

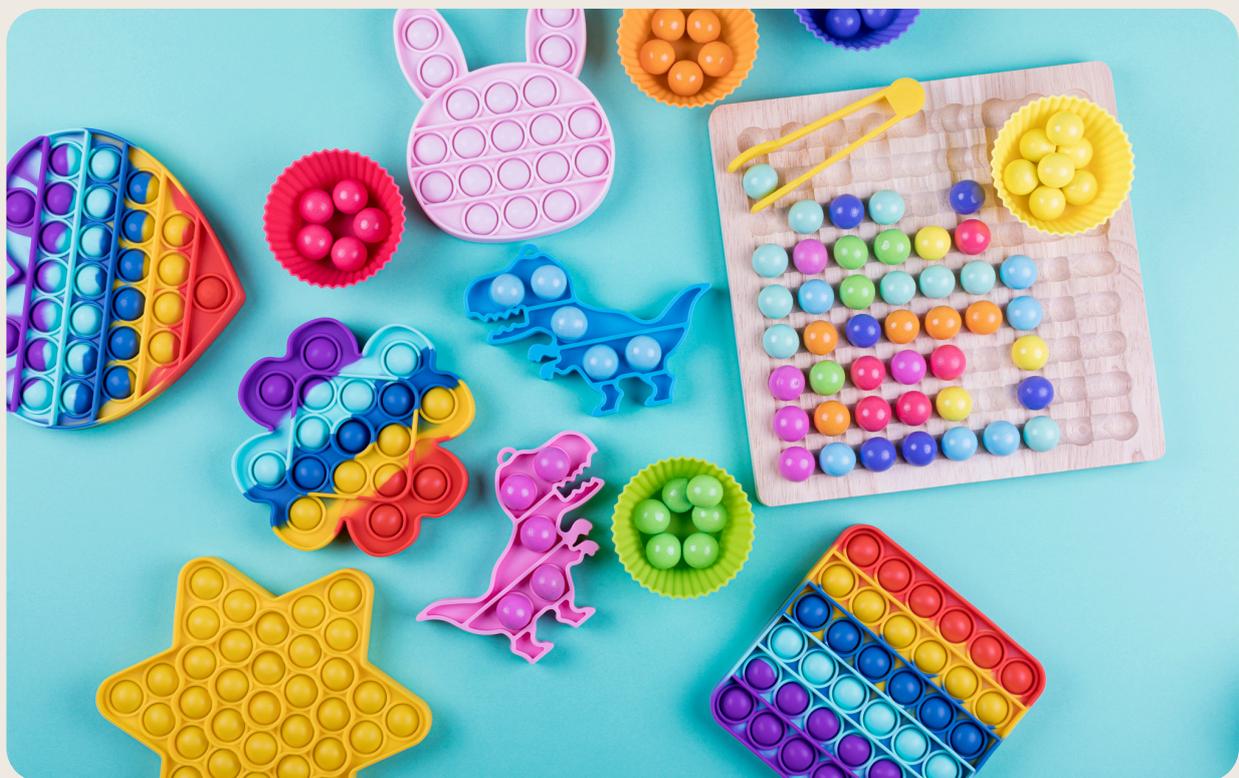
## Possible Causes of Sensory Processing Difficulties:

- Parts of brain are under connected (don't have enough wiring)
- Parts of brain are over connected (have too much wiring)
- Genetic factors
- Environmental toxins
- Children lack the opportunity to develop or mature their sensory systems



## Children with Sensory Processing Differences can sometimes have other Co-existing Conditions like:

- ADHD/ADD
- Autism
- Aspergers Syndrome
- Dyslexia
- Learning Difficulties
- Down Syndrome, Fragile X and other syndromes
- Intellectual Impairment





## STRATEGIES

- Build a warm, engaged and trusting relationship with the child. Having a **date time** with your child can be very valuable.
- Use tone of voice and relationship to encourage a child to **explore sensations** they are scared of. Give them control over this - e.g. they can do as much or as little as they like. They can clean hands with a towel, wear ear protection if they like and they can have fun while you explore (even if they just watch at first until they feel comfortable).
- Have **clear and fair rules and routines** that respect the sensory preferences but give predictability so a child knows what to expect and for how long. This helps them get used to things.
- **Collaborative problem-solving** or working out the answers to problems together. Kids are much more likely to have buy in if they were part of the solution.
- **Make tricky things playful & fun** - Kids are far more likely to overcome their struggles if they are engaged, motivated and having fun.
- **Visual strategies** - checklists, schedules, whiteboards and even paper lists, show kids what is expected and help them remember what to do. This helps build predictability and understand expectations.
- Have **breaks** when needed. For a difficult task, a break may be initially needed after every item done. The need for breaks decreases as skill and confidence improve.

## STRATEGIES

- **Breathing** can help slow the heart beat and increase focus. Try playful ways of breathing such as pretending to blow out your fingers like candles or a bubble tub (detergent in a cup of water and blow bubbles with a straw).
- Try **linear movement** - Swinging on a swing, rocking in a chair or over a therapy ball can help kids calm and regulate.
- Try programs like the **Alert Program** or **Zones of Regulation** to help kids (and parents) understand their state of regulation and what they can do about it.
- Try the **interoception curriculum** for kids to learn how their body feels, how their emotions feel, how to communicate this to others and how to meet their sensory and emotional needs.
- Become a detective and find out what **sensory tools** work for your child to help them be calm, focused and regulated more of the time. eg. jumping and crashing into pillows, swinging, big hugs, time alone, music, climbing, lego, puzzles, playground and much much more.

**SEE OT RECOMMENDED  
PRODUCTS**

## NEXT STEPS

1. [Download this tool](#) for a free checklist to see whether your child has sensory processing issues.
2. Search through our selection of learn online videos and webinars to help boost your confidence and knowledge.

### LEARN MORE

3. Keep on doing your best and look after yourself.
4. If needed, seek support from an Occupational Therapist who can help your child achieve their goals and put in place strategies for everyday life.



#### **Vivienne Williams, Principal OT**

Vivienne has been working for over 20 years with children who have sensory processing challenges, anxiety and developmental delays of every kind. She shares her extensive knowledge and practical experience in an engaging way.

