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It's Too Loud! Don't Touch Me! That Tastes Funny! Sensory Integration Therapy and Autistic Children

By Thaashida L. Hutton, M.S., CCC-SLP

We often think of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste as our only senses. However, there are actually seven senses. The other two are proprioceptive and vestibular. The proprioceptive sense is the body's awareness of itself and its position in space. The vestibular sense helps us regulate movements in relation to gravity. Our senses work together to organize and process information from the body and the environment. This is called sensory integration.

"According to the sensory integration theory, when the information from these systems is not integrated, the outcome will be poor body awareness, attention, and motor planning, as well as other developmental problems" (Cohen, 2002, p. 143). Many autistic children have difficulty responding appropriately to different stimuli in their environments and are often classified as hypersensitive (frequently craving different types of sensations) or hyposensitive (lacking or having a low response to sensations). For example, these children may gag at the sight of scrambled eggs, stick their fingers in their ears when the ceiling fan is on, or need to flap their arms and jump to be fully aware of their bodies. They respond as such in an attempt to regulate or adjust their sensory systems. Sensory integration therapy is one way to help children with autism deal with different sensations.

How Can Sensory Integration Therapy Help Autistic Children?

Sensory integration therapy is a specialized form of occupational therapy. The occupational therapist creates a space that combines sensory input with movement. These areas often include swings, therapy balls, slides, stairs, ramps, ball pits, and other sensory materials that therapists use to create activities to help regulate sensory responses. Examples of these activities include:



Swinging in a hammock
(movement through space)



Dancing to music
(sound)



Playing in boxes filled with rice or sand
(touch)



Walking up and down stairs
(balance, coordination)



Playing catch
(hand-eye coordination)

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An occupational therapist's goal when working with autistic children is to combine functional movement (going up the stairs, washing your hands) with the information they get from their senses. For example, an autistic child who may need additional gravitational (vestibular) input may benefit from walking and balancing on the edge of a curb prior to an activity to help regulate his/her system and complete the activity.

Does Sensory Integration Therapy Work?

When treating autistic children, it is important to remember that every child is unique and has different needs. Although there is no conclusive data supporting the benefits of sensory integration to autistic children, many parents, therapists, and other professionals claim improvements in behavior and focus. Sensory integration therapy is a way to enhance therapy and should not replace traditional occupational therapy.

Where Can I Find A Therapist Who Is Trained In Sensory Integration Therapy?

The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc., has a list of all registered, licensed occupational therapists. To find an occupational therapist with experience in sensory processing and integration issues, contact the Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation at <http://www.spdfoundation.net>. In addition, the Western Psychological Services (<http://www.wpspublish.com>) has a certified sensory integration program and keeps a current list of all therapists who have completed this program.



Resources:

Cohen, S. (2002). Targeting autism: What we know, don't know, and can do to help young children with autism and related disorders. California: University California Press.

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