

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)



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What Is Sensory Processing?

Sensory processing refers to how the brain receives, organizes, and responds to information from the senses—touch, sound, movement, vision, taste, smell, and internal body sensations. Some children process this information differently. This may make certain everyday experiences unusually overwhelming, distracting, or under-stimulating.

What Is Sensory Processing Disorder?

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) is a condition in which a child has difficulty interpreting sensory input. This can appear as **over-responsiveness**, **under-responsiveness**, or **sensory-seeking behaviors**. SPD can occur on its own or alongside conditions like ADHD, autism, developmental delay, anxiety, or learning challenges.

Common Signs of SPD

Sensory Over-Responsiveness (“too much”)

Children may:

- Cover ears with loud sounds
- Avoid certain textures (clothes, food, hair brushing)
- Resist touch or appear “on edge” in crowds
- Become easily overwhelmed or melt down with sensory input

Sensory Under-Responsiveness (“too little”)

Children may:

- Seem unaware of pain, temperature, or mess
- Not notice their name being called
- Appear passive, withdrawn, or hard to engage

Sensory-Seeking Behaviors

Children may:

- Crash, bump, jump, spin constantly
- Chew on clothing or objects
- Seek strong pressure (tight hugs, squeezing)
- Prefer very loud noises, bright lights, or intense movement.

Why Does It Matter?

SPD can affect:

- Daily routines (dressing, bathing, mealtimes)
- School participation
- Sleep and self-regulation
- Social interaction with peers
- Emotional well-being

Early support helps children learn coping strategies, build confidence, and engage more fully in their environments.

How Parents Can Help: Practical Tips & Techniques

1. Create Predictable Daily Routines

Children with SPD thrive on structure.

- Keep morning and bedtime routines consistent.
- Provide visual schedules for younger children.
- Prepare your child ahead for changes (e.g., “We are going to the grocery store in 10 minutes. It might be busy.”)

2. Offer Sensory Breaks Throughout the Day

Short, structured sensory breaks help regulate the nervous system.

Examples:

- Jumping on a trampoline / Carrying groceries or pushing a laundry basket
- Yoga poses (child’s pose, downward dog) / Swinging or rocking
- Deep pressure squeezes or “sandwich hugs”

3. Support Sensory Needs at School

Work with the teacher or OT to incorporate:

- Flexible seating (wobble cushion, yoga ball chair)
- Noise-reducing headphones / Fidget tools
- Movement breaks / A quiet corner to reset

4. Adapt the Home Environment

- Use softer lighting, reduce clutter / Keep a calm, organized play area
- Introduce sensory bins (rice, beans, sand, water)
- Use compression clothing or weighted blankets (only under OT guidance)

5. Use “Co-Regulation” During Meltdowns

Instead of correcting behavior, support the nervous system. Try:

- Speaking in a calm, low voice / Sitting close by without demanding eye contact
- Offering deep pressure (if the child finds it calming)
- Removing extra sensory input (lights, noise, crowds)
- A neutral, predictable tone: “You’re having a hard time. I’m right here with you.”

6. Expand Sensory Tolerance Slowly

Do not force sensory experiences. Introduce new sensations gently:

- Food textures: start with very small amounts, pair with preferred foods
- Clothing textures: wash clothes more times, tag-less options
- Sounds: use gradual exposure, always with warning

7. Occupational Therapy (OT)

A pediatric OT is the main support for SPD. They help develop individualized sensory diets, coping skills, and strategies for home and school.

What Is a “Sensory Diet”?

A **sensory diet** is a personalized set of activities incorporated throughout the day to help the child stay regulated, focused, and calm. It can include:

- Movement (jumping, pushing, crawling)
- Deep pressure (weighted items, tight hugs)
- Oral input (chewy foods, crunchy snacks, straws)
- Visual breaks (dim lights, quiet spaces)

A sensory diet is **not** a one-size-fits-all plan; it should be OT-guided.

Helpful Tools at Home

- Weighted blankets (use under supervision)
- Chewlery or chewable pencil toppers / Fidget tools
- Yoga cards for kids / Noise-canceling headphones
- Trampoline or crash pad/ Slant board or wiggle cushion

When to Seek Further Evaluation

Speak with your pediatrician or OT if you notice:

- Meltdowns that impact daily life
- Difficulty with feeding or textures
- Delays in motor or language milestones
- Trouble participating at school
- Excessive fear or avoidance of sensory experiences
- Constant crashing, spinning, or seeking movement

You may benefit from referral to:

- Occupational therapy
- Developmental pediatrics
- Psychology (for anxiety, emotional regulation, ADHD)
- Audiology or vision assessment if sensory issues are suspected

Recommended Books for Parents

Foundational Reads

- **The Out-of-Sync Child** – Carol Stock Kranowitz
The classic guide to understanding SPD.
- **The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun** – Carol Stock Kranowitz
Hands-on activities categorized by sensory profile.
- **Raising a Sensory Smart Child** – Lindsey Biel & Nancy Peske
Practical strategies, school tips, sensory diets.

For Understanding Children's Sensory Worlds

- **Sensational Kids** – Lucy Jane Miller
SPD research explained by one of the field's leading clinicians.
- **Understanding Your Child's Sensory Signals** – Angie Voss
Short, easy explanations for common behaviors and how to respond.

Activity & Therapy Support

- **The Whole-Brain Child** – Daniel Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson
Great for understanding emotional regulation.
- **Smart but Scattered (Kids)** – Peg Dawson
For children with attention or executive function challenges that overlap with SPD.

Useful Websites

- **STAR Institute for Sensory Processing** – sensoryhealth.org
- **Child Mind Institute** – childmind.org
- **Understood.org** – excellent SPD and neurodiversity parent resources
- **Parent Workshop - When Children Won't Eat - Free 2 hour webinar** Parent Workshop - When Children Won't Eat - Free 2 hour webinar -
<https://sosapproachtofeeding.com/parent-workshop-when-children-wont-eat/>