



PROVIDING SENSORY INTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

© 2004, Laurel A. Falvo, CFLE

www.socialincites.com

Our bodies are intended to function as "well-oiled machines," which receive input from the senses, and organize and process that information to be able to use it appropriately, or to act on it. Our senses include hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and feeling, as well as the processes of movement and gravity. When these systems are all working properly, and the brain is able to correctly interpret the information they send, we refer to this process as sensory integration; the senses are working together! However, when there are imperfections in this system, we call that "sensory integration dysfunction." Although there are many variations in the ways that sensory integration dysfunction (or sensory processing difficulties) can present itself, there are two main underlying problems. The first is when a person receives too much sensory input; in effect, their brain is overloaded. The second is when a person does not receive enough sensory input, resulting in a "craving" of sensory information. More information about sensory integration (including recommended resources) can be found on our web site at www.socialincites.com.

Coaching can help identify strategies to help a person better handle sensory input and respond effectively! Contact us for more information. You can also do the following:

First, provide your child with an environment that is full of a variety of sensory input: colors, light and dark, sounds, music, things to climb on, different textures, and opportunities for movement and exploration, exposing all of the senses to various types of input. This varied exposure to sensory input (targeting specific needs) is often referred to as a sensory diet. It is important to learn what excites your child, what calms him, and what frightens him. Allow your child to choose activities that fit his needs and interests. Providing different experiences, along with support and encouragement, will be a good foundation for helping your child with sensory problems.

Second, knowing that your child may encounter things that are disturbing or overwhelming, help her to adapt the activity, or even avoid it when necessary. If your child does not like light touch (many people with sensory integration dysfunction do not), make a point of using a firm, calming, deep pressure touch. If your child cannot study in an environment with a high level of noise and other stimuli, help him to find a quiet place to complete assignments and prepare for tests.

Remember that your child may not be able to process a lot of sensory input simultaneously. For example, she may not be able to talk while she is walking on a balance beam. She may not be able to look at you when you are giving her verbal instructions. Although you might encourage a child to make eye contact with people when greeting them, asking a question, or beginning or ending an interaction, he or she might not be able to look at you when you are giving instructions or discipline. Instead, when we finished, we ask the child to rephrase what was said in order to monitor his or her comprehension.

Many children benefit from Sensory Integration (SI) Therapy, either through their schools (if their sensory integration dysfunction is interfering with their ability to learn or to participate in the school environment), or through private therapy. Usually, SI therapy focuses on the tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive systems. This therapy does not teach specific skills; rather, it provides exposure to sensory input in a controlled environment. Once children are able to tolerate and subsequently process the sensory input, they are able to catch up on skills that they may have been missing. Sensory Integration Therapy can be a wonderful way for parents to learn activities to do with their children at home! Once you learn about SI from occupational therapists, you can begin incorporating many different activities into your daily routine, including trips to the playground, "messy" play with paint, modeling clay, and sand, and a variety of exercises. Trained therapists can also provide an evaluation of a child to better determine what that child's needs are.

Some children need deep pressure in order to calm themselves and to help their brains organize and process sensory input. Children who crave deep pressure may benefit from using a weighted vest, blanket, or wrist or ankle weights. I recommend talking with an occupational therapist for specific suggestions regarding your child's needs.

There are many deep pressure activities you can do with children. Swinging in a blanket, being rolled in a blanket like a "hot dog," pulling each other across the room in a laundry basket, and carrying heavy milk cartons are all excellent activities. The Wilbarger Brushing Method, developed by Patricia and Julia Wilbarger, uses a surgical scrub brush to stimulate the touch receptors, followed by deep pressure (proprioception) on the joints. A trained therapist could determine whether a child might benefit from brushing, and could instruct parents on how to use this method with their child.

Although adults are generally able to control their environment by making decisions about the sights, smells, and sounds that surround them, as well as the activities that they engage in, children rarely have the "luxury" of avoiding uncomfortable sensory stimuli in this way. In a crowded, activity-filled classroom, there is often no opportunity to escape the noise and confusion. Activities such as finger painting, sculpting with clay, or dissecting a frog are planned for the entire class to participate in, and frequently, the student's performance is rated based on the successful completion of these tasks. It is important to talk with your child and his teacher to determine what activities and situations may be presenting challenges in the classroom and in other environments, and to help to provide a solution. There is much that can be done to help a child with sensory integration dysfunction!