

Differentiating

Behaviors:

A Sensory Link?

A child's behavior and sensory integration issues are intricately intertwined. A child responds to internal and external stimuli which influence his/her behavior choices. The more stimuli a child is attempting to sort out, the more his/her resources for making positive behavior choices are compromised.

Remember that most children WANT to follow rules, receive praise and feel competent and confident. When children are not interacting with those around them in a way that allows for positive reinforcement, there are reasons. The reasons can be sensory in nature, a result of stress in the family or at school, and/or the result of negative behavior patterns which need to be undone and re-taught.

When our ability to process sensory information is inefficient, our ability to produce quality output is impacted. When our bodies feel disorganized we seek control in whatever ways we can. This is often observed as social-emotional and behavioral issues. When we can understand if there is a sensory relationship to our behavior or if the behavior is part of a more isolated pattern, we can then address the root cause more effectively and help children to feel less frustrated, increase their confidence and improve overall quality of life for them and their families.



The following are some guidelines to follow in understanding the distinctions between sensory and behavior issues.

What Sensory Issues Look Like

- Distractibility
- Disorganization/messy
- Impulsivity
- Irritable or easily agitated
- “Lazy”
- Difficulty listening to instructions
- Difficulty stopping a behavior or transitioning between tasks
- Constantly “on the go”
- Constant touching of objects or people
- Avoiding tasks (i.e. brushing teeth)
- Forgetful

What Behavior Issues Look Like

- Intentionally rude, talking back, sneaky
- Harming others or property intentionally
- Refusal to comply with instruction they understand and are able to do
- Defiance/Oppositional behavior: doing the opposite of what he/she has been told
- Repetitive behaviors: obsessions, compulsions, tics
- Choices made as result of low self esteem: “I’m not good at that.”

The Gray Areas

- Lying: a child, particularly an impulsive one, may lie to avoid trouble, but chronic lying is a behavior for which underlying motivating factors need to be understood.
- Tantrums: these often represent a child who is overloaded for a variety of reasons, but the extreme behaviors occurring in a tantrum (kicking, throwing, causing harm, etc) are behaviors that can be stopped.

Managing Sensory &

Behavioral Experiences

The first step toward understanding a child's behavior is to determine which actions are a result of sensory processing or sensory integration difficulties and which actions are a result of negative behavior patterns. Often, there is a relationship between the two and they can create a cycle or pattern of actions that limit the child's ability to successfully engage with the people and the world around them. Once we have identified which aspects of performance are related to sensory issues and which are related to behavioral issues, we can then accurately respond to the root cause of behavior and ensure successful, positive interactions. The following are some tips and strategies to follow to assist with managing sensory and behavioral issues.

Managing Sensory Issues

- Get help! Consult an OT. They can assist you with identifying sensory processing and sensory integration difficulties and work with you to develop strategies. Work with your OT to develop and implement a sensory diet.
- Manage the triggers. Minimize the child's exposure when possible. Modify the task and the environment if possible to maximize the opportunity for success. Understand what is needed to help the child manage their environment.
- Educate your child and those around them (teachers, caregivers, etc.) about his/her needs and ways to most appropriately manage them.
- Provide good nutrition for your child. Minimize the junk, sugar and processed foods and be aware of food sensitivities.
- Help your child select play activities that provide them with the appropriate type of input for their individual needs and assist them in monitoring the outcomes of activities.

Managing Behavioral Issues

- Be aware of the stressors on your child, which include evaluation of the school and home environments.
- Set clear and concise expectations that are appropriate for your child given their age and sensory needs. Remember less is more. Adults tend to use too many words and communicate many expectations at once. Keep it simple.
- Be consistent! Once you have established expectations and made modifications based on your child's sensory needs, stick to the rules.
- Use a combination of positive reinforcement and negative consequences. Don't threaten ("if you don't _____, then you won't _____")-this raises anxiety. Just enforce the rule and apply the consequence.
- Keep your cool. Take care of yourself and your relationships. When parents are less stressed, they make and model good behavior choices.



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