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Answers to Common Questions About Sensory Integration

As the team of occupational therapists at Primary Therapy Source continue to serve the Magic Valley, and in particular for children with sensory processing concerns, many parents are asking the same questions in wanting to understand what it means to have a child with a sensory processing dysfunction. (Other similar terms used include sensory integrative dysfunction, for sensory processing delay).

The following is a compiled list of answers to common questions we receive as therapist that we feel will help parents, caregivers, teachers, and others understand sensory processing dysfunctional concerns:



1. What senses are involved in a sensory processing dysfunction?

Answer: In school, we tend to focus on the external senses of hearing, vision, touch, taste, and smell. However, we have additional sensations that are produced from inside our bodies that give us information about how we move, our balance, and where our bodies are. These are called the proprioceptive and vestibular senses. Pain is another internal sensation that is very helpful to our bodies in letting us know when something is wrong.

2. How does a sensory processing concern affect learning?

Answer: In order to learn, and feel just right a child needs to be able to have all of the senses being correctly interpreted by the brain (both internal and external). This allows focus of attention and comfort in ones own body that is important for learning. If a child is drowsy, feels disconnected from the body, or is not able to cut out sensation (like sound, or lights, or movement), everyday life may seem very chaotic. This is much like many people experience when walking into a large store on Black Friday.

Some children have poor body awareness overall. This affects a child's ability to know where the body is in space. Some ideas to help a child learn where their body is include yoga, playing head, shoulders, knees, and toes, and use of physical boundary cues (taping lines on a table, carpet squares or a hula hoop on the floor, or stepping stones to walk in a path).



3. What are some common signs of sensory dysfunction?

Answer: Sensory dysfunction may present itself in many ways. A child may not recognize or complain of pain when they fall. They may also seek excessive risks in play, or have a hard time concentrating overall. Noises, textures, or movement may bother them more than it does peers, or they may seek these same sensations to the point of distraction.

4. How do I know if my child is having a tantrum (behavioral outburst) or a meltdown (overloaded nervous system from sensory dysfunction)?

Answer: A tantrum is intentional and elicited to manipulate a situation. Meltdowns are less controlled and are the result of sensory overload, such as from stress, unexpected events, and poor tolerance to various sensory experiences. Tantrums are not effected by calming sensory strategies (such as brushing or deep pressure), whereas meltdowns can be calmed through these means.

5. Should I keep my child on a routine? Does this help sensory processing?

Answer: For a child who has a hard time interpreting the environment, keeping a routine, or using additional cues throughout the day (for example: in 5 minutes we are going to clean up) can help a child predict what is coming next, and help them correctly interpret the environment.

6. Will my child ever be cured of sensory integrative dysfunction?

Answer: A child's brain is plastic and is very changeable. Some kids are able to have neurons rewired to the extent that there is no residual dysfunction. Some tendencies may remain, in which case further adaptation can be made to accommodate these challenges. Some children may require more adaptation than others. Mostly, this is dependent on each individual child and is also affected by the existence of other diagnosis or complications.

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