

# Sensory Processing

## at the Center for Autism and Related Disorders

Sensory processing is the ability to organize sensations from the environment for purposeful use. Children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often have difficulty organizing and interpreting information from their senses. Difficulties adequately processing sensory input can affect a child's motor skills, attention span, behavior, learning, play skills, and self-care skills. The role of an occupational therapist is to address the child's sensory systems so that learning and skill development are not adversely affected. The sensory systems include:

- Sight
- Hearing
- Vestibular, movement
- Proprioception, body awareness
- Touch
- Taste
- Smell

The above senses play an important role in providing context and meaning to daily experiences. Our senses are responsible for detecting information from the environment so that appropriate responses can be formed. Some children have an increased response to sensory experiences, while others have a decreased response to sensory experiences. For instance, a child may experience increased activity and fear when shown a toy that is too bright and too noisy and, therefore, cannot play with it appropriately. Another child may cover his ears when a plane flies by or cover his eyes when bright lights are turned on. Some children have heightened responses to touching or eating sticky or slimy foods, causing difficulties at mealtime. Other children show a decreased or limited response to sensory input. For example, they may not react to their names being called or notice a peer who walks in the room. Children who lack sensory responses may bump into others and demonstrate little regard for personal safety. Finally, some children simultaneously demonstrate both increased responses and decreased responses to sensory input.



Problems regulating or modulating sensory systems affect children's social-emotional responses, along with their abilities to learn, play, and successfully complete self-care tasks. It is important to consider the sensory environment when a child is facing such challenges. The following questions should be considered:

- Is the play area organized?
- Is the work space free of extraneous clutter?
- Are visual and auditory distractions minimized?

For children who have increased responses to sensory information, it may be beneficial to dim the lights, turn off the television or radio, and provide comfortable seating. For children who have decreased responses to sensory information, it is important to provide sensory-rich experiences.

**We are all born with great potential.  
Shouldn't we all have the chance to achieve it?**



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Singing to them, providing intense movement breaks such as jumping, bouncing, and pushing, and use of color contrasts may be optimal for learning. Most children benefit from a multisensory approach to learning; however, it is essential to monitor the sensory input within the environment so they can remain focused without becoming under- or overstimulated.

## Evaluation and Treatment

Occupational therapists are trained to customize a treatment plan that addresses each child's specific and unique sensory needs. Occupational therapy evaluations are available at the Center for Autism and Related Disorders. Referrals can be made by a clinician or doctor, or at a parent's request.

## Resources

- *Parenting a Child with Sensory Processing Disorder: A Family Guide to Understanding And Supporting Your Sensory-Sensitive Child*, by Christopher R. Auer, Susan L. Blumberg, and Lucy Jane Miller
- *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*, by Carol Stock Kranowitz and Lucy Jane Miller
- *Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder*, by Lucy Jane Miller and Doris A. Fuller
- *Understanding Sensory Dysfunction: Learning, Development and Sensory Dysfunction in Autism Spectrum Disorders, ADHD, Learning Disabilities and Bipolar Disorder*, by Polly Godwin Emmons and Liz McKendry Anderson
- *Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Integration Issues*, by Lindsey Biel and Nancy Peske



- [www.KIDFoundation.org](http://www.KIDFoundation.org)
- [www.sensorynation.com](http://www.sensorynation.com)
- [www.spdnetwork.org](http://www.spdnetwork.org)
- [www.sensory-processing-disorder.com](http://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com)

## Contact Information

### Center for Autism and Related Disorders at Kennedy Krieger Institute

To make a referral or schedule an appointment, please call **888-554-2080**.

For more information about our program, call **443-923-7680**.

TTY: **443-923-2645** or Maryland Relay **711**

[card.kennedykrieger.org](http://card.kennedykrieger.org)

### Physicians & Healthcare Professionals

To make a referral, call our Physician Referral Line at **443-923-9403**.

### Clinic Locations:

3901 Greenspring Avenue  
Baltimore, MD 21211

1130 Annapolis Road, Suite 200  
Odenton, MD 21113

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