Kathryn Zentner, LCSW
8701 Shoal Creek Blvd. Ste 403
Austin, TX 78757

kathryn@bluestarcounseling.com
www.bluestarcounseling.com
(512) 497-2177

Sensory Issues Affect Our Parenting

As parents we notice when our children behave in a way that is uncharacteristic of other children their age: we may have a child who "freaks out" at a noisy birthday party, or is unusually picky about the food he eats or clothing she wears, or makes excessive amounts of noise for no apparent reason, or resists any kind of change in routine, or crashes into things on purpose, or does not like going outside in the bright sunlight. These situations affect our parenting because they can lead to the child "falling apart" emotionally under little or no apparent stress. Yet, for children with genuine sensory issues the stress involved in situations such as these is very real. They are interpreting the sensory information in a way that makes them feel fearful--and their responses are reactions to those fears.

All of us constantly process sensory information we receive. We continually experience different sensations related to sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, and movement. The process of organizing the information we get from our bodies and the environment and putting it to use in our daily life is called sensory integration. When our brains process this sensory information correctly we respond appropriately and automatically. However, sometimes sensory information is misinterpreted or processed inaccurately. This could lead to "sensory avoiding" or "sensory seeking" behavior as a way to compensate.

In the area of sensory integration most of us (adults and children) are either hyposensitive or hypersensitive. If we are hyposensitive to sensory input we like *a lot* of sensory input: i.e. we enjoy spicy food, loud sporting events, activities where we are "on the go", bright rooms with lots of light, crashing toys into each other, getting messy, etc. If we are hypersensitive we avoid scratchy clothing, we don't like having our face washed or teeth brushed, we get irritated by loud noises such as the vacuum cleaner and airplane engines, we prefer low lighting, we are scared of heights, etc.

It is also important to note that within each category there is a continuum. We may be *somewhat* hyposensitive or *somewhat* hypersensitive. Or, we may have sensitivities in certain areas more than others. When we overreact to certain senses to the point that it dominates our behavior we have developed "sensory defensiveness." This is the tendency to respond to harmless sensations as if they were dangerous or painful (such as a misperception that makes our clothes feel like spiders on our skin). Untreated it can lead to other social/emotional symptoms that interfere with our daily life (such as only wearing one type of clothing).

Obviously, the goal is for each of us to function somewhere toward the middle of the continuum--where we can accept sensory input for what it is and not "freak out" if a certain sensation is not to our liking. Children with significant sensory integration issues or "sensory defensiveness" that cause disruptions in their lives should receive treatment from an Occupational Therapist who is trained to work with these issues. It is important for children to get treatment because the sensory defensiveness can develop into habits and learned fears that persist throughout their childhood and beyond.

However, if symptoms are mild we as parents can foster appropriate sensory integration by exposing our children to different sensations. The following list has several examples of different activities that are beneficial:

- Rubbing a variety of textures against the skin (oatmeal soap, shaving cream, sponges, wash cloths)
- Sand play--the child explores sand by burying and finding toys, filling, pouring and dumping cups (can also be done with rice or beans)
- Rolling--down a hill or on the floor, doing somersaults
- Swinging--at the park on regular swings, tire swings, trapeze swings, etc.
- Spinning on a sit-n-spin, merry-go-round, tire swing
- Tummy down, head up activities--coloring, playing games while lying on tummy
- Carrying heavy loads (such as grocery bags) or pulling a wagon filled with heavy objects
- Hanging by arms from a bar, swinging on the "monkey bars"
- Pillow crashing (allowing the child to dive or crash into a pile of pillows or couch cushions)
- Roughhousing or wrestling with mom or dad
- Deep pressure--such as a big hug, or pressure in the oral area such as drinking a milkshake through a straw
- Creating a "cave" out of a box, or creating "forts" with a card table and blankets, or snuggling in a sleeping bag
- Calming behaviors such as rocking and singing
- Aerobics, jumping jacks, jumping up and down
- Physical activities such as bike riding, running, swimming, wheelbarrow walking, pushups
- Play-doh, clay, other kinds of gooey substances

Something else to consider: If a child is AVOIDING something, we as parents should look for ways to expose the child to that sensation in an acceptable way. In other words, what the child AVOIDS the child may actually NEED. So, for example, a child who hates getting his hands messy would benefit from ways in which his parent gradually encouraged him to work with messy substances. (For example, the child may be willing to knead a batch of cookie dough before he would put his hands in finger paint.) Gradually introducing the child to the sensation would benefit the child much more than simply saying, "Oh Johnny doesn't like getting his hands dirty so we never finger paint."

Obviously, there are many things on the list above that children naturally experience in childhood. Still, it is nice to learn WHY they are helpful. The next time we need groceries carried in from the car we can remind ourselves that we are actually HELPING our children experience a sensation that is good for them!

Happy Parenting!

Resources: Sensory Integration and the Child, by A. Jean Ayres, PhD; The Out-of-Sync Child, by Carol Stock Kranowitz, M.A.; Sense Abilities: Understanding Sensory Integration, by Maryann Colby Trott, M.A.