



Interpreting Your Child's Behaviors: A Sensory Perspective

Have you ever watched children spin around in circles, arms outstretched, until they are so dizzy they fall down? Or seen a child who can sit quietly in a chair but tense up and appear afraid to move when presented with a swing set and some slides? Or a child who enjoys going places such as the park or a friend's house and behaves perfectly all day, then collapses into tears upon entering a grocery store? Understanding a child's behavior can be confusing to parents and caregivers. It may be helpful to try to interpret the world through your child's eyes.

Often children are given the label "hyperactive," "fussy," or "withdrawn" when they are actually attempting to regulate themselves to get into the optimal zone, or the place where they feel neither over or under-stimulated. Here are some examples:

- A "quiet" child who stays in the corner rather than play on equipment or interact with others may be overwhelmed by the environment. This is an example of being hypersensitive to sensory input (sight, sound, touch).
- A "noisy" child who is vocal, runs around, "crashes" and runs up to others may be under sensitive (hyposensitive) to sensory input and seeking more input.

You can help your child get into his optimal zone. Here are some examples:

- The hypersensitive child, or a child who is withdrawing from sensory input by closing his eyes or ears, or shying away from people/activities, may benefit from softer lighting, a lower noise level, soothing rhythmic music, a less visually cluttered environment, and calming activities such as swinging slowly, or being wrapped in a towel or blanket.
- The hyposensitive child may benefit from "heavy" work that uses large muscle groups, such as pushing or pulling heavy objects, carrying a backpack that is filled with relatively heavy items, doing animal walks, wheelbarrow walks, jumping on a trampoline, and doing "windmill arms" to wake up the body. These children also may benefit from softer lighting, lower noise levels, etc.

Try a variety of activities to get an idea of what works best for your child. It may also be helpful to consult with an occupational therapist to find your child's optimal zone. Occupational therapists are able to determine if children are hypersensitive or hyposensitive and can make suggestions to help make daily activities and routines more successful for children who struggle with sensory input.