



# Disability Awareness Begins With You: What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) is a complex disorder of the brain that affects developing children and adults. People with SPD misinterpret everyday sensory information, such as touch, sound, and movement. They may feel bombarded by information, they may seek out intense sensory experiences, or they may have other symptoms.

"Sensory processing" refers to our ability to take in information through our senses (touch, movement, smell, taste, vision, & hearing), organize & interpret that information, & make a meaningful response. For most people, this process is automatic. When we hear someone talking to us or a bird chirping, our brains interpret that as speech or an animal sound, & we respond to that information appropriately.

Children who have a Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), however, don't experience this process in the same way. SPD affects the way their brains interpret the information they take in & also how they act on that information with emotional, attentional, motor, & other responses.

## What Does SPD Look Like?

There are several types of Sensory Processing Disorder; each one may result in a number of different behavioral & sensory patterns.

### Sensory-Avoiding Children

Some children with SPD are over-responsive to sensation. Their nervous systems feel sensation too easily or too intensely & they feel as if they are being constantly bombarded with information. Consequently, these children often have a "fight or flight" response to sensation, a condition called "sensory defensiveness." They may try to avoid or minimize sensations, such as by avoiding being touched or being very particular about clothing.

These children may:

- Respond to being touched with aggression or withdrawal
- Fear movement & heights, or get sick from exposure to movement or heights
- Be very cautious & unwilling to take risks or try new things
- Feel uncomfortable in loud or busy environments, such as sports events, malls
- Be very picky eaters &/or overly sensitive to food smells

### Sensory-Seeking Children

Some children are under-responsive to sensation. Their nervous systems do not always recognize the sensory information that is coming in to the brain.

As a result, they seem to have an almost

insatiable desire for sensory stimulation. They may seek out constant stimulation or more intense or prolonged sensory experiences, such as by taking part in extreme activities or moving constantly.

Some behaviors seen in these children include:

- Hyperactivity as they seek more sensation
- Unawareness of touch or pain, or touching others too often or too hard (which may seem like aggressive behavior)
- Taking part in unsafe activities, such as climbing too high
- Enjoying sounds that are too loud, such as a very loud television or radio

## Living With & Treating Sensory Processing Disorder

Most children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) are just as intelligent as their peers. Many are intellectually gifted. Their brains are simply wired differently. They need to be taught in ways that are adapted to how they process information & they need leisure activities that suit their own sensory processing needs.

When children with SPD are accurately identified, they can begin a program of occupational therapy (OT). OT, which is conducted in a sensory-rich environment, helps these children to manage their responses to sensations & to behave in a more functional manner.

The goal of OT is to enable a child to take part in the normal activities of childhood, such as playing with friends, enjoying school, eating, dressing, & sleeping. It can take place in a hospital OT department or in a private practice setting; the therapy is tailored to the needs of each child.

Parents are encouraged to get involved & work with the occupational therapist, so they can learn more about their child & incorporate their family's priorities into treatment. The treatment plan will usually include a number of ideas that the parents can use at home & at school to help their child become regulated & coordinated.

An added benefit of OT is that parents come to understand that their child's disability is real, even though it is a "hidden handicap," & they are encouraged to become strong advocates for their child at school & elsewhere.

## Barriers to Treatment

Studies show that as many as five percent of all children suffer from SPD. Yet despite this high rate, information & help for those with this disorder is still very limited. This lack of resources, combined with the fact

that SPD often looks like other disorders, often results in misdiagnosis & inappropriate treatment for many children. And even when parents do obtain a diagnosis & referral to appropriate therapy, most insurance companies do not cover the cost of the treatment.

**The Sensory Processing Disorder Network**  
[www.SPDDNetwork.org](http://www.SPDDNetwork.org)  
**The KID Foundation 1901 West Littleton Blvd.**  
**Littleton, CO 80120**

## Raising a Sensory Smart Child The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Integration Issues

by Lindsey Biel, M.A., OTR/L and Nancy Peske; Foreword by Temple Grandin

Long thought to be a disorder that affects only autistic children, and a disorder that is often mistaken for ADHD, sensory integration dysfunction is finally being recognized as a separate condition.

For parents of children with sensory integration issues, Lindsey Biel, M.A., OTR/L and Nancy Peske have written a groundbreaking book that will be an invaluable resource for parents and teachers alike.

Because each child has a unique experience, this book helps parents to understand what their child is going through: how the seven (yes, seven!) senses work, and how to find an occupational therapist (OT) who is trained and experienced in helping kids with SI dysfunction who can actually help retrain the child's nervous system to work more adaptively.

The book also addresses everyday behaviors from dealing with clothing sensitivities, to getting children the deep pressure against their skin and in their joints that will calm them down, to helping their auditory-sensitive child handle background noise, whether at home, at school, or in the neighborhood. Biel and Peske provide guidance on how to work together as a team to help kids with sensory issues cope with the confusing sensations coming from within and outside of their bodies.