

OT Savvy

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY DEPARTMENT

Available at http://www.asdk12.org/depts/sped/OT_savvy.asp

Diane Poage, Director

Jason G. Hlasny, Editor

March 2007

SENSORY SYSTEMS

By Terri A. Atwell, OTR/L

We are all sensory beings, and we each process information differently based on our own unique neurological systems. Some students may have sensory systems that seek out sensory input, while others may avoid it. This can make learning challenging. Each child must be assessed as an individual, to observe what functional skill is difficult for the child, and determine if the challenge is due to behavior difficulties, sensory deficits, or a combination. The focus of this article will be to provide an overview of sensory processing, discuss the importance of addressing underlying behavioral concerns, and provide general suggestions for helping students who demonstrate sensory needs.

What is **sensory processing**? Sensory processing is the taking in, interpreting and organizing of sensory messages from our bodies and environment for purposeful responses. It is important to remember that everything we do during our day is a sensorimotor activity.

In the Anchorage School District, we use the term **sensory processing** to describe and address sensory needs in the educational setting. A child who is showing difficulty processing sensory information may demonstrate seeking or avoiding behaviors related to environmental input. For example, a child who is over-responsive to tactile input may avoid messy art activities or have difficulty with being too close in line with others. A child who is under-responsive to tactile input may seek out frequent input by fidgeting with textured objects or by constantly touching others or objects. There must be a sensory component before a behavior would be considered to be a result of a sensory deficit. In some children, behaviors that may appear to be sensory in nature are actually the child communicating a need to obtain or avoid attention, an object or activity. It is important to analyze the behavior to determine what the child is trying to obtain or avoid, and what the consequences are for the behavior. In many cases, a consistent behavior plan is required, not a sensory program.

In the case of a child who may have a sensory deficit that results in negative behaviors adversely affecting educational performance, the behaviors must still be addressed through a behavior plan, while the sensory needs may be addressed concurrently. A variety of strategies may be used, including a sensory diet, movement activities, and environmental adaptations. Each child is an individual, and the occupational therapist will use different strategies based on his or her experience, the environmental setting and the child's needs. However, the following strategies are safe, generic suggestions that may be helpful for students with sensory needs. Please collaborate with your occupational therapist for specific suggestions when working with individual students demonstrating unique and complex needs.

- **Auditory**-Is your room too noisy? Are there distracting sounds?
 - *Strategy*: change student's placement in the room or use headphones.

- **Vision**-How is the lighting in your room? Are the surroundings visually overstimulating or calming?
 - *Strategy:* Have a space in your room free of posters, hanging art, etc. that provides a visually calm area for work.
- **Vestibular** (responses to movement and changes in planes)-Does your student seek out or avoid movement activities?
 - *Strategy:* Provide movement breaks during your day. Can the student use a ball chair or take notes to the office?
- **Proprioceptive** (deep input into the joints and muscles)-Do they use their body in a forceful way? Do they lean their arms on the desk or bump into objects?
 - *Strategy:* Add "heavy work" activities to his/her day, such as pushing the lunch cart, carrying a stack of books to the library, etc.
- **Tactile**-Does your student avoid textures, or seek out touch input and explore his or her environment?
 - *Strategy:* Allow hand "fidgets" such as small koosh balls, etc., if student can use them but still attend.
- **Taste and smell**-Does your student have difficulty with smells in the classroom such as perfume or the garbage? Do they constantly put things in their mouth to chew or explore?
 - *Strategy:* Consider a fragrance free room-no perfumes or air fresheners. Allow student a water bottle on their desk for oral "work" during the day.

What do we do with all this? The goal is to help the child understand his/her sensory needs, learn self-regulation and improve successful performance of life activities. Any plan must be dynamic, continually re-evaluated, and should include consistent behavioral strategies. By having a sensory-rich environment you provide opportunities for your students to meet their individual sensory needs. Sensory activities must be embedded in the day; the result is to help the child maintain self-organization and be able to attend and learn.

References

- Kranowitz, C. S. (2006). *The out-of-sync child: Recognizing and coping with sensory processing disorder, revised edition*. New York: Penguin Group (USA), Inc.
- Murray-Slutsky, C., & Paris, B. A. (2005). *Is it sensory or is it behavior? Behavior problem identification, assessment, and intervention*. PRO-ED, Inc.