Occupational therapy and sensory processing: Working with young children with autism. (Part 2)

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What is sensory processing?

Sensory processing is the normal neurological function that all people experience when their brain processes sensory information from the environment around them. Sensory information is visual (what we see), gustatory (taste), auditory (what we hear), tactile (what we feel through our skin), and vestibular and proprioceptive (where we are in space and how our limbs are positioned). Sensory processing makes each of us who we are, with individualized preferences and aversions that influence what our interests and chosen activities may be.

Why is sensory processing important for some children with ASD

Research has shown that children with ASD may process their sensory environments differently to other children (Brown & Dunn, 2010; Pollock, 2009). Unusual sensory processing can have a great influence on how a child interacts with their world and how they participate in daily occupations (Koenig & Rudney, 2010; Robinson & Magill-Evans, 2009). Families may notice that their child with ASD has unusual reactions to some aspects of the sensory environment. However, all people have individualized sensory preferences, and it is important to recognize that unusual sensory preferences or aversions may not influence a child’s functioning or learning as much as language, social and cognitive challenges which reflect the key neurodevelopmental problems in autism.

Remember: “A problem is not a problem unless it’s a problem” --Dr. Jill Ashburner, Research and Development, Autism Queensland

Occupational therapists use specific assessments to determine how a child is processing their sensory world and how their sensory processing influences the child’s abilities and development. An instrument that is commonly used by occupational therapists is the Sensory Profile (Infant and Toddler) (Dunn, 1999). The Sensory profile is a tool to measure the child’s responses to sensory events in everyday life that support or interfere with function. Use of this tool allows parents and therapists to better understand the child’s abilities and behaviors in play, self
care, motor, social and during communication. Tools such as the sensory profile assist the family and professionals to understand the complexities of the child’s sensory processing difficulties.

How do sensory processing issues impact on a child’s participation in daily activities?

For some children with an ASD, sensory processing difficulties that are a consequence of their atypical brain function, may impact on participation in key ways. For example, at times children may find certain sensory experiences (soft touch or loud noises) so aversive, that an event or activity is avoided. This results in reduced participation in, or disruption of family routines. Children may avoid family events—mealtimes, outings, travel. Children may participate less in activities at kindergarten/childcare/school and environments that involve other children or structured/busty environments. For example, they may have difficulty sitting on the mat for story time, standing in line, or managing lunch items. Children may fidget, move too much, avoid tasks, or be pre-occupied with aspects of the environment. Sensory processing difficulties may reduce a child’s self care skills — grooming, dressing, bathing, and toileting. Parents may report struggles with hair combing, teeth cleaning, haircuts & nail trimming.

Occupational therapists intervene to accommodate a child’s sensory processing or to reduce the impact on the child’s performance on the daily tasks that the child wants or needs to do. Intervention is aimed at facilitating change, improving understanding about sensory reactions and facilitating participation in the child’s tasks.

Is sensory processing and sensory integration that same thing?

Sensory processing and sensory integration (SI) are not synonymous. Currently in OT, there are 2 fields of thought (Pollock, 2009; Rodger, et al., 2010). On the one hand, some OTs will attempt to remediate underlying impairments (traditional SI). Other OTs will focus on enabling the child and families participation through accommodation and adaptation to the sensory environment. Parents need to be aware that there are a number of dubious sensory interventions that promise unrealistic outcomes for children and families.

Ultimately families must focus on collaborating with OTs to establish goals for their child and family that are measurable and indicate meaningful progress. Occupational therapists are evidence based practitioners who are responsible for providing families with evidence to substantiate interventions and measurable goals that indicate progress. OTs have access to a National Continuing Professional Development online package to up skill in the services provided to children with ASD and their families. This is available through their national organization.

Where can I find an OT?

Selected References


Myers, S, Plauche Johnson, C, & the Council on Children with Disabilities, 2009, online: [www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/120/5/1162](www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/120/5/1162)

