

Feelings, Nothing More than Feelings: Sensory Integration in the Classroom

by Ann Stensaas, M.S., OTR/L

Sensory Integration

Our senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) tell us about our environment. Our senses receive information from both inside and outside of our bodies. Sensory integration (SI for short) refers to how our senses work together to organize and process incoming information from the world around us. Our sensory system is controlled by the central nervous system, made up of the brain and spinal cord. When our sensory system works together, it allows us to interact with the environment in purposeful and meaningful ways.

In addition to the five senses, we also have two special senses, proprioception and vestibular. The *proprioceptive* sense gives us information about where our body parts are and what they are doing. The *vestibular* sense gives us information about our position in space and the movement of our head in relation to gravity.

"Sensory Smart" Classroom

Sensory integration plays an important role in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of a child. Sensory integration theory indicates that sensory processing difficulties can get in the way of a child's ability to learn basic skills. Teachers routinely observe this in the classroom among children who "fall behind" because of their inefficient sensory systems. You may have observed a child who has difficulty staying alert to participate or a child who is in constant motion and unable to settle down to complete an assignment. These children may not know how to cope with the different sensory information they are receiving.

A "sensory smart" classroom provides children with many opportunities for heavy work, movement, and other calming or alerting sensory activities to improve their ability to attend and focus during school-related tasks. If you are concerned that one of your students may have a sensory processing disorder, it is recommended that you refer the child to an occupational therapist for an evaluation. An occupational therapist can recommend sensory strategies and assist teachers in making changes to the classroom environment to support a child with sensory issues in achieving his/her academic goals.



Sensory Inputs and Adaptations for the Classroom

Heavy Work/Organizing Activities - Use these strategies as preparatory activities for desk time or at transition times throughout the day.

- Allow for “movement breaks” and schedule structured movement activities for the entire class, such as stretching and yoga positions, to reenergize your students throughout the day.
- Provide your “on the go” students with a weighted neck/shoulder wrap or weighted lap pad to help them stay in their seats and finish their work.
- Give your students who seek out “heavy work” special jobs pushing or lifting weighted items in the classroom (e.g., chairs) or erasing the chalkboard or dry erase board.
- Organize interactive indoor/outdoor activities during recess (Red Rover, Red Rover; hopscotch; leapfrog; parachute activities; ball games).
- Introduce chewy and resistive snacks (gum, granola bars, and bagels) or mouth fidgets for your students who need oral sensory input to organize themselves. ***Consult with a child's parents to determine if he/she has any food allergies prior to giving food to the child.***



Alternative Seating Positions - Have your students sit on a therapy ball/ball chair if they need to move, or if they need space by themselves, have them lie on a beanbag chair or on their tummy.

Alternative Writing Utensils - Have your students use a wrist weight, or adaptive grips to provide more feedback and awareness to their hands during writing activities.

Environmental Changes and Equipment for a “Sensory Smart” Classroom - Design a quiet area with comfortable cushions and beanbag chairs, headphones with classical music, and a study table for students.

- Minimize visual distractions by organizing materials in bins or cabinets. Including items from the natural environment, such as sunlight, green plants, and fish tanks, also promotes a calm learning environment.
- Add equipment to your classroom that will provide both calming and alerting sensory inputs, including a rocking chair, net or hammock swing, and small exercise trampoline.

References

Nackley, V. (2001). *Sensory diet applications and environmental modifications: A winning combination*. Retrieved March 11, 2008, from http://www.henryot.com/news/sensory_diet_applications_review.asp.

Polichino, J. E., Clark, G. F., and Chandler, B. (2005, February 21). Meeting the sensory needs at school: Supporting students in the natural environment. *OT Practice*. American Occupational Therapy Association.

Name

Date



Helpful Products

Here are some Super Duper® products that may be helpful tools to use in a “sensory smart” classroom. Visit www.superduperinc.com or call 1-800-277-8737. Click the links below to see the product and description.

Upper Body and Core Strength Fun Deck®

Ask for item #FD-106

www.superduperinc.com/F-G_Pages/fd106.htm

“Sort and Say”™ Move Your Body!

Ask for item #SAS-141

www.superduperinc.com/S_Pages/sas141.htm

Basic Concepts in Motion Fun Deck®

Ask for item #FD-58

www.superduperinc.com/F-G_Pages/fd58.htm

Sensory Stickers - Pack of 432

Ask for item #OTS-123

www.superduperinc.com/O_Pages/ots123.htm

Frog Massager

Ask for item #OM-522

www.superduperinc.com/O_Pages/om522.htm

Ladybug Massager

Ask for item #OM-533

www.superduperinc.com/O_Pages/om533.htm

Sensory Diet Cards

Ask for item #CRD-33

www.superduperinc.com/C_Pages/crd33.htm

Webber® Pressure Brushes (3-Pack)

Ask for item #OTS-357

www.superduperinc.com/O_Pages/ots357.HTM

Yogarilla™ 55 Card Yoga Deck

Ask for item #OTSC-8609

www.superduperinc.com/O_Pages/otsc8609.html