



What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

by Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.



Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), or the former but still acceptable term "Sensory Integration" (SI), is a term referring to the way the nervous system receives messages from the senses and turns them into appropriate motor and behavioral responses. Whether you are eating pancakes, riding a skateboard, or reading a book, your successful completion of any activity requires processing many different sensations.

A Sensory Processing Disorder exists when sensory signals cannot organize themselves into appropriate responses. Pioneering occupational therapist and neuroscientist, A. Jean Ayres, PhD, compares SPD to a neurological "traffic jam" which prevents parts of the brain from receiving the information it needs to interpret sensory information correctly. A person with SPD finds it difficult to process and act upon information received through the senses which, in turn, can create severe challenges in performing countless everyday tasks. Clumsiness, behavioral problems, anxiety, depression, and school failure are a few ways SPD can affect someone that does not receive effective treatment.

Sensory Processing Disorder can affect people in only one sense—just touch, sight, or movement—or in multiple senses. One person with SPD may over-respond to the touch sensation and find clothing, physical contact, light, sound, food, or other sensory input as unbearable. Another might under-respond in reaction to stimulation – even pain or extreme hot and cold. Other children might exhibit habits that are in perpetual overdrive for certain sensations.

Children receiving impaired messages of sensory processing from their muscles and joints might experience poor posture and motor skills and, as a result, may have low self-esteem, experience social/emotional issues, and struggle academically.

This disability is not an obvious one. People unaware of this disorder, including parents and educators, may label SPD children as clumsy, uncooperative, belligerent, disruptive, or "out of control" Without an appropriate diagnosis and therapy, anxiety, depression, aggression, or other behavior problems can follow.



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However, most children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) are as intelligent as their peers and are sometimes intellectually gifted: the wiring of their brain is just different. Those with SPD must learn alternate ways (through therapy) to help them adapt to how they process information, and they must acquire leisure activities that suit their own sensory processing needs.

Children with SPD often receive a misdiagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and begin a regiment of medication that is not addressing their needs. Examine the symptoms of ADHD and SPD side by side, and you will see some striking parallels, as well as several disparities. The two conditions do not always go hand in hand, but they can and often do. Err on the side of caution and consult physicians and therapists who are knowledgeable about both.

Once children with SPD have an accurate diagnosis, they benefit from a treatment program of occupational therapy (OT) with a sensory integration (SI) approach. Well-trained clinicians will effectively combine an Integrated Listening System or other complementary therapies with Occupational Therapy and Sensory Integration techniques.