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What Is Sensory Defensiveness?

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Does your child get upset by tags in clothing, the sound of the vacuum cleaner, or certain smells in the environment? If so, your child may be showing signs of sensory defensiveness. Sensory defensiveness is a negative reaction to one or more types of sensations (such as touch, movement, sound, taste/texture, or smell), often requiring you to control his/her daily routine to avoid such things.

Types of Sensory Defensiveness

There are different types of sensory defensiveness including tactile (touch), gravitational (movement and balance), auditory (hearing), and oral defensiveness (taste, smell, texture).



Tactile Defensiveness (Touch)

The tactile system is our sense of touch. It protects us from danger and helps us identify different objects in the environment. A child showing signs of tactile defensiveness may:

- Overreact to ordinary touch experiences (e.g., touching play dough, wearing clothes with tags or varying textures, or being touched by someone).

- Avoid daily activities (e.g., washing face/hands or brushing hair).
- Avoid light touch (e.g., a kiss) but seek out deep touch (e.g., a bear hug).



Vestibular Insecurity (Balance/Movement)

The vestibular system is our sense of movement and balance. It tells us where our head and body are in relation to gravity and other objects and supports our vision, posture, emotions, and coordination skills. A child showing signs of gravitational insecurity may:

- Have an excessive fear of falling during ordinary movement activities (e.g., swinging, riding a bicycle, or climbing).
- Become overwhelmed by changes in head position (e.g., being upside down).
- Have difficulty socializing with peers and will avoid group activities.
- Prefer sedentary (minimal movement) activities (e.g., reading a book or watching television).

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Auditory Defensiveness (Sound)

The auditory system is our sense of hearing and listening. It processes the sensations of movement and sound and helps us respond appropriately to the sounds we hear.

A child showing signs of auditory defensiveness may:

- Show extreme sensitivity to common sounds (e.g., toilet flushing or a motor).
- Frequently cover his/her ears to block out the "loud" noises.
- Demonstrate anxiety and discomfort in noisy environments.
- Avoid activities that most children enjoy (e.g., eating in the lunchroom or going to birthday parties).



Oral Defensiveness (Taste/Smell/Tactile)

The olfactory system is our sense of smell. The gustatory system is our sense of taste. These systems work

together to identify scents and odors. They are strongly linked to our emotions and memory.

Our sense of taste also helps us identify flavors (spicy, bland) and is closely related to our oral tactile sensations of food texture (smooth, lumpy) and temperature (cold, hot). A child with oral defensiveness shows unusual sensitivity to taste, smell, and texture, and may:

- Be a restrictive or anxious eater (e.g., eat the same food items over and over).
- Gag from certain textures, tastes, and/or smells during meals.
- Avoid messy tactile play (e.g., finger foods or finger paint).
- Dislike brushing his/her teeth or washing his/her face.

The world is a confusing and overwhelming place for children whose sensory systems routinely overreact to the sensations they receive from the environment. If left untreated, this disorder can result in the avoidance of daily routines as well as an overall delay in a child's social, emotional, and motor development. If you are concerned that your child may be demonstrating signs of sensory defensiveness, contact a pediatric occupational therapist trained in addressing sensory-integration issues.

Related Handy Handouts®:

[206 – Creating Rich Sensory Experiences](#)

[176 – Sensory Defensiveness: Strategies to Create Positive Experiences](#)

[146 – Creating a Sensory Stimulation Kit](#)

Resources

Kranowitz, C.S. (1998). *The out-of-sync child*. New York: Penguin Putnam.

Sensory Processing Disorder. (2008). Retrieved June 3, 2008, from: <http://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com/oralsensitivities.html>

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