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Sensory & Self-Regulation Strategies

Children need to be both calm and alert, or in a regulated state to be ready to learn. For some children it can be difficult for them to achieve this state due to difficulties with how their body makes sense of the sensory information it receives. Sensory concerns can lead to difficulties staying focused, managing emotions, and participating in many day to day activities at home and school.

Some children can be overwhelmed by sensory information which makes it hard for them to stay regulated.

- These children may be more distracted by loud noises, bright lights, or the feeling of certain textures in their food or the clothes they wear.
- They might find it very hard to focus in a busy classroom with lots of visual stimulation or noise.
- They might feel the seam of their sock or the tightness of their jeans very intensely so that they find it hard to pay attention or struggle with personal hygiene like brushing teeth or hair washing because they are overwhelmed with the taste of the toothpaste or the water on their head.
- They might seem to tire easily, lie on the floor at carpet time, avoid movement, dislike it when their feet leave the ground, or use too little pressure when printing.

Some children may need more sensory input to help them stay regulated.

- These are often the children who seek movement, find it challenging to sit still, and/or might chew or mouth non-food items.
- They might like to crash and bang into their peers or things in their environment, squeeze into tight spaces, or seek out hugs or other firm pressure.
- They might make repetitive noises, seek out rocking/spinning/swinging, flap their hands, or have some self-injurious concerns like banging their head or picking at their skin.

When children struggle to make sense of the information their bodies receive, their ability to focus, stay calm, interact with peers, react to disappointment, move between activities, etc. can be greatly impacted.

- This might result in emotional meltdowns or outbursts that don't seem to "fit the situation", tuning out of classroom instruction, or avoiding situations that are overwhelming.

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When a child is overwhelmed by sensory input consider:

- Providing noise cancelling headphones to block out noise in a busy classroom, during assemblies, or for outings in loud, busy places like the mall.
- Giving advanced warning of loud noises such as the fire alarm or the vacuum starting.
- Allowing the child to wear headphones that play quiet music during work periods to block out noises.
- Creating a "quiet zone" in the classroom or part of the house to give the child somewhere to go when they are overwhelmed (e.g. a small tent or area sectioned off with gym mats or moveable bookshelves)
- Dimming lights or looking for light covers/filters to decrease brightness.
- Having the child wear sunglasses—even indoors depending how much they are bothered by lighting.
- Limiting visual clutter in a classroom by posting fewer items around the room.
- Trying a study carrel or cardboard barrier to decrease visual input during work periods.

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When a child needs more sensory input consider:

- Providing frequent movement breaks throughout the day—don't wait until the child is close to a "meltdown" to offer a break. **Their body needs this movement so if you give it regularly they will seek it out less!**
  - ⇒ Try jumping jacks, running on the spot, yoga poses, dance breaks, movement pathways in the hall-way, playing at the park, etc.
  - ⇒ Work on learning activities using movement like practicing printing using sidewalk chalk outside, work on spelling words using flash cards while jumping to different locations around the room.
- Ensuring that there are opportunities to move such as recess, gym and outdoor play are not removed as a timeout period or consequence for a concerning behavior.
- Giving a movement opportunity before introducing a task that needs focused attention. Then provide a reward when the task is completed. Repeating this pattern regularly throughout the day, can help the child to participate more easily because their body got the chance to move before being asked to do a learning activity.
  - ⇒ At home: try a movement break before meals or before leaving the house to run an errand.
  - ⇒ At school: try a movement break in between carpet time and seat work.
- Trying different seating options or desk set ups at home and school
  - ⇒ Allow the child to stand for learning tasks rather than sitting by providing a stand up desk or work-space.
  - ⇒ A bean bag chair with a lap top tray provides a supportive position.
  - ⇒ Rocking chairs, exercise balls, air filled cushions, wobble stools, pedal bikes can give movement while still completing work tasks at a desk or table.
  - ⇒ Add resistance bands to chairs and desks to provide a foot fidget.

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When a child needs more sensory input consider (continued):

- Remembering that movement activities that require "heavy work" or proprioceptive input can be very calming for all children and especially for those who need extra movement or who seek deep pressure. Proprioceptive receptors are found in the in the muscles and joints and when they are activated, the result can be very positive. Picture yourself after a massage or intense workout.
  - ⇒ Examples of heavy work include animal walks, chair push ups, carrying a heavy back pack, pushing a heavy cart, carrying groceries, taking out the garbage, riding a bike, jumping on a mini-trampoline, Delivering supplies throughout the school, scrubbing desks or tables, raking leaves, etc.

- Providing fidget toys, resistance bands, weighted items, stress balls, etc. can all be used to help children stay focused during carpet time, assemblies, while watching movies, waiting for appointments in the community, or when walking in the halls at school.
  - ⇒ Consider weighted toys, blankets or lap pads keeping in mind that the weight of the items should be based on the weight of the child.
  - ⇒ Try small toys with moveable parts to squeeze or pull, putty, playdoh, stress balls to squeeze, etc. Be sure to avoid toys that might be choking hazards if the child tends to put items in their mouth.

- Providing oral motor sensory input throughout the day— chewing or sucking gives children a lot of deep pressure or proprioceptive input at the jaw and can help them stay calm and focused.
  - ⇒ Have the child chew gum throughout the day.
  - ⇒ Provide snacks that are crunchy, chewy, sour etc. such as dried fruit, raisins, pepperoni sticks, beef jerky, pickles, strong flavored mints, fruit roll ups, celery, lemonade, frozen grapes, etc.
  - ⇒ Look for oral sensory necklaces or bracelets that are designed to allow children to chew on something and then washed each day to be sure they are kept clean

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Sensory & Self-Regulation Strategies

- Interoception is a sensation that is not often considered but can have a large impact on a child's ability to stay regulated.

- Interoception is the ability to notice and connect bodily sensations with emotions. The interoceptive receptors are found inside the body in organs and even the skin. The sensations that we experience in our organs such as hunger, thirst, feeling hot or cold, feeling a full bladder, increased heart rate, etc. are not easily identified by some children who have sensory processing difficulties.

- For these children, especially those with autism, trauma disorders, sensory processing difficulties, ADHD, anxiety and behavioural challenges, it can be very hard for them to work on self-regulation of their emotions. For example, a child may not feel "fear" because they don't recognize that their muscles are tense, their breathing is shallow and their heart is racing or an itch may feel like pain or pain may feel ticklish. When they find it hard to make sense of what they are feeling, it can be harder for them to sort our their emotions.

- For children who have good interoception, they are able to recognize feelings and react accordingly:
  - ⇒ When they feel thirsty, they can ask for a drink.
  - ⇒ When they feel a full bladder, they know to use the bathroom.
  - ⇒ When they feel a sense of frustration, they know how to explain what is troubling them.

How can we help support interoception

- Calming activities such as rocking, swinging, deep pressure, and heavy work activities.
- Alerting activities such as active movement breaks and changes in position.
- Mindfulness activities such as body scanning to increase awareness of different body parts and their sensations—breathing, heartbeat, gurgling stomach, heaviness in the bladder, etc.
- Meditation and yoga activities.
- Providing language or pictures to describe what they are feeling.
- Helping to talk about feelings and emotions at home or at school when the body is in a calm state.
- Playing games or reading books related to emotions or feelings.

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Sensory & Self-Regulation Strategies

Here are some great resources to help you learn more about sensory and self-regulation:

- The **Out of Sync Child** by Carol Stock Kranowitz has a variety of books, articles and resources https://out-of-sync-child.com/
- Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration, 3rd Edition by Paula Aquilla, Ellen Yack & Shirley Sutton is a great book written by three Occupational Therapists who support children right here in Ontario.
- **The Alert Program** teaches children "how their engine is running" to help them better understand what they need to stay regulated. https://www.alertprogram.com/
- Many schools are using **The Zones of Regulation** to help children identify their own feelings and level of alertness using a color system so that they can choose appropriate strategies when they feel themselves struggling with their emotions or ability to stay focused https://www.zonesofregulation.com/learn-more-about-the-zones.html
- Kelly Mahler, Occupational Therapist, has a website called **What is Interoception** with great resources about helping children to recognize how their bodies feel on the inside which can help them to better respond with their actions and emotions https://www.kelly-mahler.com/what-is-interoception/

The following websites that provide movement opportunities for kids to help them stay regulated:

- Check out this link to a great Yoga site **Cosmic Kids** that is geared to children. It has some great ways to work on self-regulation https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga
- **Go Noodle** is a great website with lots of movement activities for kids. Have your child spend a few minutes moving with one of their videos before trying a more focused activity such as school work or meal time. https://www.gonoodle.com/