Sensory Defensiveness: Strategies to Create Positive Experiences

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

Some children show signs of sensory defensiveness—a negative reaction to one or more types of sensations such as touch, movement, sound, taste/texture, or smell. If this describes your child, you likely spend a lot of time and energy helping your child avoid many everyday activities. Here are some strategies to create positive sensory experiences for your child.


### Strategies for Positive Tactile (Touch) Experiences

- Prepare the child by telling him/her what you are going to do.
- Deep pressure touch is a strategy that helps decrease a child’s sensitivity to light touch.
  - Giving firm, consistent touch input to the area of body that the child is going to use.
  - The “Deep Pressure Protocol”—Contact an occupational therapist for training on this protocol before using it with your child.
- Move at the child’s pace and respect the child when he/she is “all done” with the activity. A child may be more willing to accept tactile (touch) experiences if he/she is in control rather than having someone else control the experience for them.
- Include play such as silly voices, songs, or movements during tactile play to minimize anxiety and discomfort for the child.

### Strategies for Positive Vestibular (Movement) Experiences

- Start out with simple movement activities on stable surfaces that allow the head to move in different positions (e.g., “warm-up” stretches, exercises while standing on the ground) and progress to having the feet move off the ground (e.g., climbing a slide, jumping into a ball pit).
- Once the child is comfortable with movement, introduce more unstable surfaces, such as sitting on a swing or large ball. Always support and/or sit with the child when introducing any new equipment/movements.
- Allow the child to control how long he/she continues the activity. Never force off-balance situations on a child.
**Strategies for Positive Auditory (Sound) Experiences**

- Provide your child with deep pressure activities before exposing him/her to noisy/loud environments (e.g. lunch room, music class, birthday party).
  - Bear hugs
  - Jumping on the trampoline
  - Rocking over therapy ball
  - Deep pressure massage to arms, legs, and body

- Provide the child with headphones and calming music before and/or during anxiety-producing situations. **(Caution: It is important to monitor the volume of the music when using this strategy).**

- Schedule an evaluation with an occupational therapist to learn about other intervention strategies that would be appropriate for your child’s sound sensitivity.

**Strategies to Increase Positive Mealtime Experiences**

- Tell the child what you are going to do (e.g., “I am going to rub your lips with my finger.”)

- Use playful songs and puppets to decrease anxiety during activities involving the mouth like eating, applying lip balm or making funny faces.

- Always use deep pressure when massaging the child’s cheeks, lips, or jaw before trying a new food item/texture or performing hygiene tasks (washing face, brushing teeth).

- Interventions to reduce oral sensitivities may work better once you address other sensory issues.

**More Information**

Positive sensory experiences are important for your 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.

**Resources**


The list of Super Duper® products below will help your child with sensory defensiveness. Visit www.superduperinc.com or call 1-800-277-8737. Click the links below to see the product and description.

**Sensory Diet Cards**  

**Yogarilla™**  

**Webber® Neon Pressure Brushes**  