

“Out of the Mouths of Babes”

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Let’s try the Feingold Program with children challenged by Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

We all have sensory preferences: I like it warm, you like it cold. I like studying with the radio on, you prefer the quiet. I like to rock or chew on my hair while listening to the teacher; you’re fine with sitting still in your chair. I like swinging and running on the playground; you stay close to the teacher during recess. I like baggy-fitting clothes: you prefer tighter-fitting so they don’t rub your skin. I like having the lights on: you like them dimmed. I like crunchy foods, you enjoy softer choices.

Too fast, too slow; too loud, too quiet; too aggressive, too reserved – could indicate Sensory Processing Disorder.

Most children make adjustments if their sensory preferences aren’t met, without too much fanfare. If it’s too warm, they make a paper fan or drink some cool water. If someone else wants to be at the back of the line, they ask to walk with the teacher at the head. If the fluorescent lights cause too much glare, they automatically use their hands to shade their eyes. If their surroundings aren’t perfect, they know they’ll be OK. They can regulate, or adjust, the way they react to the world around them.

But for those children with SPD, it’s not so simple. They don’t have preferences; they have sensory must-have demands. According to the SPD Foundation, one out of every 20 children struggle with this disorder and symptoms occur within a broad spectrum of severity. While most of us have occasional difficulties processing sensory information, for children with SPD these difficulties are chronic and disrupt everyday life.



How can you tell a child is struggling with SPD? Behavior is the first indicator that something is awry. Unlike the cast that protects a broken bone, or a rash that indicates an allergy to grass, there’s no physical indication of this hidden, neurological disorder, so we rely on the baffling behaviors as red flags.

SPD is a complex and there are many subtypes. (For a detailed breakdown of the taxonomy, please visit www.SPDFoundation.net.)

Over-reactors, under-reactors, and sensory seekers

One subtype of SPD: sensory modulation disorder, or the difficulty regulating the intensity of how you respond to sensory information. One person will over-react, another may under-react, and yet another might seek out sensations. A sensitive child could over-react to touch, sound, smell, taste, visual cues, movement or gravity by having a meltdown. Another child could under-react and not notice the smell of smoke coming from the kitchen or hear the teacher calling their name for the third time. And another might seek out sensory experiences by playing loud music, or running into a wall for ‘fun.’

What makes SPD even more complicated is the fact that someone with modulation issues can exhibit any combination of these traits, depending on the situation. Trying to understand and help these children is frustrating, to say the least.

Jordan

Let's meet Jordan: he is 9 years old and hates school. He covers his ears in class because it's too noisy and he is overstimulated by the posters and other displays on the walls. Jordan never stays in line on the way to the library or the cafeteria because someone is bound to bump into him...and it hurts! He always sits by himself at lunchtime. He struggles with handwriting and requires extra time on tests because he processes information more slowly than the other children. He's smart, but can't demonstrate it because his brain constantly dealing with a barrage of sensory "missiles" coming his way.

Jacob

Let's meet Jacob: he is 10 and sees the world as his private jungle gym or big-time amusement park. Like Jordan, he hates school, but for very different reasons. The school routine does not provide enough movement for Jacob. He appears impulsive and inattentive, because he's always in motion, but it's this movement that keeps him focused. Jacob loves sports and plays with such gusto in gym class or on the playground that he drives the other kids away. He chews on his water bottle, fiddles with his pencils, and arrives at school, with some of his breakfast still on his face. Like Jordan, is teased at school and it's hard for him to handle the rejection. At home, Jacob loves to wrestle with his Dad and crash into the walls, to his Mom's dismay. His risk-taking behavior results in many injuries, yet he feels little pain.

Who can help?

Look for a pediatric occupational therapist (OT) who is certified (SIPT) in both sensory processing/integration theory and in techniques to perform an evaluation. Visit www.spdfoundation.net and www.aota.org for listings. An OT diagnoses sensory challenges and designs specific therapy regimens which include challenging play during therapy and a "sensory diet" of activities for home and school.

Can the Feingold program help these children?

I always recommend parents try Feingold in addition to the other therapies, like OT. A therapy will not be very productive if the child is having a melting down because of those red-dyed licorice treats that were supposed to provide calming, deep pressure input to the jaw.

I don't believe that removing artificial ingredients will cure a child of SPD, but it may help eliminate some of those behaviors that baffle us and are uncomfortable for our children. Many of the parents in my SPD online support group have seen a decline in the intensity of meltdowns after they have removed just the red dyes from their child's diet. This is very encouraging!

It isn't easy to figure out exactly what causes a meltdown or what triggers an excessively high energy level. But we can make progress in helping these children by addressing the many areas that might be involved, including diet, chemicals in the environment, social skills, and sensory deficits. By peeling away the layers, we can get closer to the core of the problem.

Removing harmful additives is important for all of us, but it's especially important for a child's developing body and brain. The petrochemicals used to create these beautiful colors and enticing flavors

are damaging to the nervous system. And a child with Sensory Processing Disorder cannot afford that kind of additional stress to their already-compromised system.

Let's take artificial ingredients **out of the mouths of our babes** so we can see help them succeed.



Sensory Street's recommended resources:

Books:

Out of Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder, Revised Edition, by Carol Stock Kranowitz

Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder, by Lucy Jane Miller and Doris A. Fuller

Websites:

www.Feingold.org, www.ateachabout.com, www.GamesLady.com, www.AlertProgram.com,
www.FHSensory.com, www.SPDBayArea.org, www.SPDCanada.com, www.Out-of-Sync-Child.com,
www.SPDFoundation.net

10 Common Signs of SPD (modified version of fhsensory.com's poster)

1. Extra-Sensitive to Touch – they don't like to be touched or can't be touched enough
2. Sensitivity to Sounds – they may cover their ears when the same noises don't bother others
3. Picky Eaters – they will only eat one or two familiar foods
4. Avoidance of Sensory Stimulation – they won't put their hands in anything messy such as glue, clay or mud. They only wear certain clothes. They wear a hat to avoid light glare.
5. Uneasiness with Movement – they fear amusement park rides, playground equipment or being turned upside down
6. Craves Movement – they can't sit still during the day or get to sleep at night
7. Fear of Crowds – crowded areas bother them to the point of frequent public meltdowns
8. Poor Fine or Gross Motor Skills – they have trouble with handwriting or kicking a ball, or have low muscle tone
9. Excessive risk-taking – they may be unaware of touch or pain, and can put themselves in harm's way without realizing it
10. Trouble with balance – they may be accident-prone, fall more than others, or have trouble walking down the stairs and have a sensory preference for sedentary activities.

Ida Zelaya is a Feingold member and President of Sensory Street™, Inc. a unique educational consulting company that teaches about SPD and strategies for these wonderful children in school, at home and out-and-about. Her toolkit is filled with whole-child approaches including increased movement, nutritional support, exploring feelings and making heart-connections. She also moderates an online support group in Yahoo!, a Facebook page (Sensory Street, Inc.) and Twitter (@Sensory Street). To learn more, visit www.SensoryStreet.com.