



OzWORKS  
T H E R A P Y

## **SENSORY DEFENSIVENESS IN CHILDREN**

### **What is sensory defensiveness?**

Every person has the ability to sense potential danger. We respond to these events with an appropriate amount of defense. However, some people have a tendency to respond to certain harmless sensations as if they were dangerous or painful. This is called “sensory defensiveness”.

Sensory defensiveness is simply an over-activation of our protective senses. It is a tendency to react negatively or with alarm to sensation that is generally considered harmless or non-irritating e.g. for children with sensory defensiveness, their clothes may feel like spiders on the skin and stairs may seem like cliffs to them. Common symptoms may include over-sensitivity or over-reaction to light or unexpected touch, sudden movement, high-pitched noises and certain smells.

Sensory defensiveness results in varying degrees of stress and anxiety with each child. The child with sensory defensiveness may perceive the world as dangerous, alarming or at the very least, irritating. Children with sensory defensiveness can be described as sometimes over-active, emotional or sensory-seeking. Learned patterns and habits are often developed around avoiding disrupting sensory events or seeking out sensation that might restore comfort. When sensory defensiveness dominates a child’s behaviour, parents or care-givers may find it increasingly difficult to manage the child. For example, the child may frequently hit or bite other children at school, throw temper tantrums during outings or destroy toys and books.

### **Types of sensory defensiveness include:**

Each child with sensory defensiveness develops his or her own set of behaviours. These are usually a combination of sensory avoidance and sensory seeking behaviours. There may be defensiveness to one type or many types of sensations. Although it is not possible to list all the symptoms of sensory defensiveness, the following is a list of common symptoms that can be attributed to each of the sensory systems.

#### Tactile Defensiveness:

Children with tactile defensiveness avoid letting people touch them and would rather touch others instead. They frequently fuss or resist hair washing or cutting. They may scream or tantrum during baths/showers or when having their clothes changed. They often do not like to get their hands or feet dirty. Some may bump or crash into things on purpose as a way of seeking sensation or seem under-responsive to certain sensations or pain.

#### Oral Defensiveness:

Some children dislike or avoid certain textures or types of food. They may be over or under-sensitive to spicy or hot foods, avoid putting objects in their mouth and intensely dislike tooth brushing or face washing. They may gag or vomit in anticipation when presented with certain food.



#### Gravitational Insecurity:

This appears to be an irrational fear of change in position or movement. These children are often fearful of having their feet leave the ground, or head tipped backwards e.g. swings at the playground.

#### Postural Insecurity:

This is a fear and avoidance of certain movement activities like jumping, hopping and climbing stairs. They avoid balancing activities and walking on uneven surfaces.

#### Visual Defensiveness:

This may involve over-sensitivity to light and visual distractibility. They may startle more easily or avert their eyes and avoid eye-contact with others. They may insist on wearing sun-glasses or hats when they go out in the sun. Some children may like to stare at flickering or overhead lights for a long time.

#### Auditory Defensiveness:

This reflects over-sensitivity to certain sounds and fearful responses to noises like vacuum cleaners, motors, fire-alarms etc. Children sometimes make excessive amounts of noise to block out sound, while others may cover their ears or run away. Some children may intentionally seek loud sounds e.g. turning up the volume of the T.V. or radio.

#### Others:

Other symptoms can include unusual sensitivities to taste or smell. These children may frequently lick or smell objects e.g. crayons, clothing. They may complain of unpleasant odour in the house all the time e.g. the smell of shampoo, rubber or cooking.

### **Where can you get help?**

Occupational Therapists have been successfully identifying and treating sensory defensiveness for many years. It is important that the diagnosis be made by a knowledgeable therapist through a careful sensory history review. If your child displays some or all of the symptoms, and your daily routines are severely affected by the child's behaviour, you may wish to bring your child to see the Occupational Therapist for an assessment.

(Adapted from: Patricia Wilbarger, MEd, OTR, FAOTA and Julia Leigh Wilbarger, MS, OTR).