

Making Sense of SPD

By Sarah Jones, Oak Meadow parent

More and more people have either heard about or have experienced Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) in their families. Many kids with SPD have a hard time being in loud restaurants, are picky about the clothing they wear and how it rubs against their skin, get too close to others or don't like it when others get too close to them, and also have a very hard time with transitions or change.

SPD is a condition where the brain is unable to accurately receive and respond to sensory information that comes in from the environment. Because kids with SPD "misperceive" the information from their environment, they will react differently from a typically developing child. Kids with SPD can be over-responsive, where they are extremely sensitive, especially to sight, touch, or sound. They can also be under-responsive, where they fail to respond to stimuli such as food on their face. Still others are sensory seeking and may run, jump, spin, or flap their hands; some are sensory avoiding and may avoid movement or sensory input. Most children with SPD have a mix of these symptoms and fall along a spectrum of intensities. Another component of SPD is the child's difficulties in the sensory motor area of development. The children normally experience muscle weakness and/or clumsiness, or may show delays in acquiring gross and/or fine motor skills.

For parents who have a child with SPD, it's important to choose a school where their child's sensitivities won't get in the



The Montessori classroom provides a sensory-friendly environment that is organized, predictable, and includes natural materials—all of which help with visual and tactile sensitivities.

way of his or her learning. Parents have to be particular about the environment created by the school. Most Montessori schools provide many of the items on the checklist of what a child with SPD needs to thrive in school. And most Montessori teachers are trained to assist the child in developing to his or her maximum potential. The table on page 13 lists some observations on how Montessori helps ease some of the sensitivities that go along with SPD.

For more information on SPD check out the SPD Foundation's website: <http://spdfoundation.net/about-sensory-processing-disorder.html>

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Top Sensory Tips for the Montessori Classroom

By Wendy Barbara Fidler

More than 80% of our nervous system activity involves processing and organizing sensory information. Some children with central nervous system dysfunction have undamaged areas of their brains “waiting” to be stimulated through a sensory integrative approach. These children can benefit greatly from occupational therapy, but there are also things that practitioners in the Montessori class can do. The following tips may be used in the class with all children for a fully inclusive teaching and learning approach. Parents may find that many of the tips are adaptable to their home environment, as well.

- Avoid (or fit diffusers to) fluorescent strip lights as they can distract children by flickering many times per second.
- Avoid high ceilings, large spaces, and hard floorings, as they contribute to echoes and tinny sounds (in low stimulation environments, children’s noise-making behaviors diminish markedly).
- Adopt a non-perfumed body products rule.
- Avoid detergent and fabric conditioner overload (smell and sensitivity issues).
- Consult with parents about foods, fabrics, and other materials to avoid.
- Use divided plates to separate foods with different textures.
- Consult with parents to prepare for change, e.g. field trips or visitors to the class.
- Provide ice-cold wet wipes (keep in the fridge) for the toilets for better sensory feedback.
- Keep walls clear of displays and the wall coverings light and uncluttered.
- Provide coping strategies such as regular movement breaks.
- Provide squidgy or beany fidgets for children to squeeze.
- Allow heavy jackets, or pockets with weights, as they can have a calming effect.
- Encourage *all children* to read, knit, or sew while standing on balance boards.
- Plan daily catching and throwing activities using graded weight bean bags and balls for *all children*.
- Plan for *every child* to engage in daily activities that cross the body midline, e.g., practical life transferring activities such as spooning and pouring.
- Plan for *every child* to attempt at least one inset for design each day.
- Provide suck and blow activities, such as whistles, bubbles, and straws.



Sensorial materials such as the Lockboard isolate and develop the senses.

What Causes Sensory Issues?

Sensory issues arise when the information we receive fails to be processed in the normal way. This might be because of too much or too little stimulation of the senses, or a failure to process or integrate the different sensory perceptions coming our way. Many children with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) have sensory issues arising from malfunctions in sensory processing.

The Seven Senses

Dr. Maria Montessori designed Sensorial Materials to help children isolate and develop the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These materials include:

- Sound boxes and bells to develop the *auditory* sense (sound)
- Smelling bottles and food preparation for the *olfactory* sense (smell)
- Activities to match sweet, sour, salt, and bitter, the *gustatory* sense (taste)
- Color, shape, size, and form activities to develop the *visual* sense (sight)
- Rough and smooth boards to develop the *tactile* sense (touch)

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Table 1: How Montessori helps ease sensitivities associated with Sensory Processing Disorder.

| Sensitivities | How Montessori Helps |
|---|---|
| Visual/tactile | Low stimulus environment that is organized, predictable, and has natural materials. |
| Loud sounds and many people talking at once | Most lessons are taught one on one instead of in a large group setting. Kids eat in their classroom instead of a cafeteria. |
| Difficulty with transitions | Kids are encouraged to finish the activity that they start, as opposed to traditional school where each activity is assigned a time limit. |
| Difficulty with change | Consistent daily classroom routine. Kids get to stay in the same classroom for more than one year as opposed to moving to a new class/teacher/ environment every year. |