

Sensory Integration with Infants and Toddlers

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Occupational Therapists often work with babies/toddlers with sensory integration issues. So, what does sensory integration mean? That is one of the most difficult questions for OT's to answer for parents. Our sensory systems (touch, smell, taste, hear, sight, vestibular and position in space) mature in utero until after birth. Premature baby's systems are not fully developed when born and placed in a NICU environment. This makes the process of receiving information from their senses, organizing the information, and using it to interact with others or their environment difficult. However, a full-term baby can also experience sensory integration problems. These children experience either too much or too little stimulation through their senses. It is important that parents and caregivers look for stress cues or "red flags" to help identify if a child has a sensory processing disorder.

The following examples may help parents to see some of the "red flags". For hyper-sensitivity to touch, does your child not like to be hugged, touched or avoid certain textures of food or clothes? On the opposite end of the spectrum, with hypo-sensitivity to touch, does your child seek out sensory input through spinning, climbing, high tolerance to painful or bump into things on purpose? Lets look at another example such as over-sensitivity to sound. Does your child cover his/her ears with sudden loud noises or everyday usual noises such as the vacuum cleaner, grass cutting or music? Or is your child hypo-sensitive to sounds? Does your child need loud sounds, music or TV noise to get their attention?

Sensory Integration therapy is where Occupational Therapists provide sensory input to help babies/toddlers by exposing them to sensory stimulation in a controlled, yet challenging environment. This allows the child to achieve a higher level of arousal or a better ability to self-regulate/focus after sensory input. Sensory Integration also assists children to adapt over time to repeated stimulus. There are special sensory gyms for this type of treatment. Occupational Therapists can also provide parents with appropriate activities at home to do on a consistent basis to help their child.