



Managing Sensory Behaviours In Children With Developmental Disabilities And Autism

Find out what causes sensory behaviours in children with special needs and the ways to manage them.

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A trip to a special needs school may leave you wondering about certain behaviours displayed by its pupils – for instance, why is this child covering his ears, and why is the other fapping her hands?

These manifestations are viewed as sensory behaviours, which present themselves in various ways, depending on the dynamics of the environment and the individual's organisation of self.

Examples of such behaviours also include mouthing, running around aimlessly, pushing, pulling, lying on the floor, climbing over the highest possible surface, talking to oneself, gazing blankly, pencil chewing, fingernail biting, resting one's head on the table, fidgeting while at task and during social interaction.

These behaviours are frequently observed in children with developmental disabilities, and they intensify when the kids are unable to manage the environment around them, leading to the manifestation of a myriad of sensory behaviours. In severe cases, these actions may reach a point where the children end up hurting themselves or others in the process.

Are sensory behaviours only seen in children with developmental issues?

No. They are not limited to kids with learning disabilities; they can affect all ages, intellectual levels and socio-economic groups.

When one is unable to respond to the demands of certain situations as a result of stress, fatigue or lack of understanding, one may display sensory behaviours to some extent – for example, chewing of fingernails.

While this only happens to normal individuals under extreme situations, it often occurs in children with developmental disabilities, as deciphering sensory input poses a challenge to them. This causes distress, disconnectivity and loss of functional performance.

The impact of such behaviours not only affects their learning, but also affects their parents who are uncomfortable with such behavioural patterns, causing the latter to be always on the vigil to avoid any embarrassment. They may even hesitate or avoid bringing the children to public areas.

Understanding The Manifestations

Occupational therapists describe such behaviours under disorder of sensory integration. Sensory integration is the ability of the brain to make sense of sensory information for day-to-day life.

From the sensory integration point of

view, sensory behaviours occur due to:

1. Sensory modulation disorder

Sensory modulation refers to the ability of our brain to take in pertinent information and discard unwanted information.

Sensory modulation disorder is related to the arousal of our nervous system. Children with poor arousal of the nervous system are classified as under-reactive (hyporesponsive), while kids who get aroused excessively are classified as over-reactive (hyperresponsive).

Dr Stanley Greenspan and Weider (1997) highlighted that 19% of preschoolers with autism showed predominantly hyperresponsive patterns, while 39% displayed hyporesponsive patterns. 36% displayed a mixed pattern of sensory responses.

Research has also indicated that issues relating to sensory and sensory processing behaviours increase as the child grows. A cross-sectional study conducted by Talay-Ongan & Wood (2000) found that sensory symptoms increased with the child's age.

2. Sensory processing and praxis disorder

Sensory processing and the praxis ability of the brain allow us to focus on the functional aspects of information, so as to understand and carry out actions

spontaneously.

Therefore, children's ability to handle situations spontaneously in day-to-day activities, communication and academic performance are associated with sensory processing and praxis difficulties.

Each time when kids are unable to perform, they tend to use their memory to produce rote responses. As demands of the curriculum become more complex, memory-based responses no longer support learning.

As such, children tend to display sensory modulation disorder or sensory behaviours in order to cope and facilitate their sensory organisation and sensory processing for attention and performance. Hence, it is important to understand sensory modulation behaviours along with sensory processing and praxis ability challenges.

Managing Sensory Behaviours

Historically, sensory behaviours were initially addressed by psychological intervention, particularly through behaviour modification techniques. However, there was no universal method or technique that could solve the entire plethora of behavioural issues.

This explains why managing sensory behaviours continues to be a daunting



