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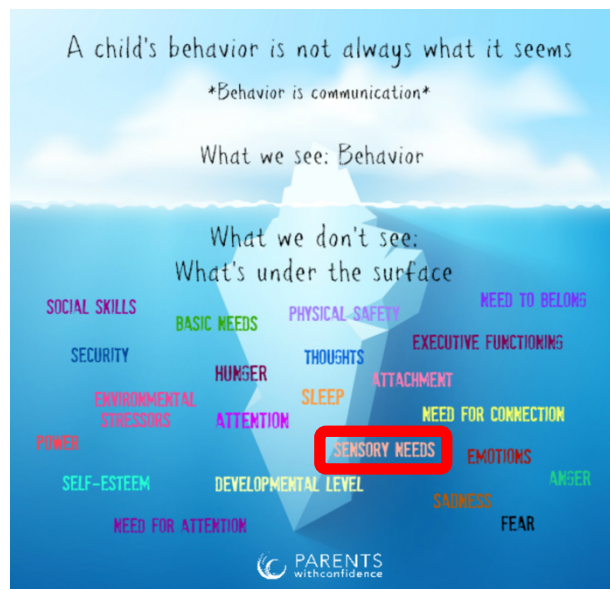
## Counsellors' Corner

### Understanding Behaviour and its link to Sensory Needs

#### A Counsellor's Perspective

#### Rationale:

Behaviour is communication. Consider behaviour as the top 10% of the iceberg that we see. What we don't see is what lies beneath; what drives or causes behaviour. Hunger, sleep, anger, fear...are all the most common issues that we address as parents; however, as demonstrated in the visual to the right, the myriad of factors that often go unnoticed can be a significant part of what an individual experiences.



Sensory Avoiders	Sensory Seekers
What They Can Feel	What They Can Feel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Easily overwhelmed</li> <li>○ Irritated by seams on socks, tags in shirts, certain fabrics</li> <li>○ Resistant to new foods, textures, smells</li> <li>○ Avoids situations where they could be bumped into (i.e. standing in line, playing in the gym)</li> <li>○ Smells are too strong, noises are too loud, textures are too rough, tastes are too bold, lights are too bright.</li> <li>○ Often have lower pain tolerance</li> <li>○ Angry, explosive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Drawn to what appears to be "aggressive" play: high contact, hard falls, wrestling.</li> <li>○ High interest in movement, smells, tastes, colours, textures, lights, etc.</li> <li>○ Seemingly aggressive in their play</li> <li>○ Bumping into walls, other children</li> <li>○ Crashing their bike, falling off their skateboard; quickly recovering</li> <li>○ Leaning into things, leaning over furniture and other objects</li> <li>○ Jumping off bunkbeds, furniture, etc.</li> </ul>
What It Can Look Like	What It Can Look Like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ These children tend to <u>feel senses stronger and react bigger</u> to them.</li> <li>○ Low pain tolerance</li> <li>○ Shying away</li> <li>○ Meltdowns over socks, shoes, clothes, tags, textures, baths, showers, haircuts, clipping toenails and fingernails</li> <li>○ Refusal to wear certain fabrics, clothes, shoes, boots, coats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ a need to touch people, things</li> <li>○ doesn't respect or understand personal space</li> <li>○ crawls all over people</li> <li>○ high pain tolerance</li> <li>○ clumsy, uncoordinated</li> <li>○ seeking messy play</li> <li>○ dumping toy bins, rummaging</li> <li>○ likes chewing on things (or clothing)</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Covering ears</li> <li>○ Bigger reactions than most to pain, noise, etc., often resulting in explosive behaviour</li> <li>○ Running away</li> <li>○ "Afraid" of crowds</li> <li>○ Prefers bland, uniform foods</li> <li>○ Resistant to new experiences, places</li> <li>○ Avoids parades, parks, public noisy places</li> <li>○ Will avoid playing "tag" as it can cause unexpected touch; however, will like to be "it" because they are in control of the touch (often interpreted as a sore loser).</li> <li>○ Prefer noise be turned down, puts hands over ears to block noise that most consider acceptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ biting</li> <li>○ spinning</li> <li>○ likes to "crash"</li> <li>○ jumps off furniture, climbing apparatus</li> <li>○ likes deep pressure: probably liked to be swaddled tight as a baby, likes "hard" hugs</li> <li>○ seeks stimulation, loud noises, tv loud, crowded spaces, spinning rides at the fair, strong odours</li> <li>○ may lick non-edible items, or put in mouth to explore the sensory experience</li> <li>○ difficulty sitting or lying still</li> <li>○ difficulty sleeping</li> </ul>
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### ***What's happening for the individual?***

We experience the world around us through our senses; we see, hear, touch, feel, smell and taste. As we develop through our lifetime, sensations act as the mechanism to inform our body how to make sense of our environment. This information guides how a baby, child, teenager, or adult responds. When we pay attention to these responses, we get a better understanding of what's going on for an individual. Walk into a school and your senses have much to process.

How does this connect to understanding an individual's behaviour and sense of safety/comfort? For the sensory sensitive child: imagine the human body like a balloon. All the sensory stimuli represent the air that fills the balloon. For example, a child walks into a brightly lit classroom with brightly coloured posters on the wall, the balloon gets bigger; they are asked to sit at their desk and then someone bumps into them, the balloon gets bigger; the students' energy and noise level increases, the balloon gets bigger; they realize their shoes are too small or the fabric on their t-shirt irritates them, the balloon gets bigger...eventually the balloon pops. The child responds with either a physical reaction (push, run, yell, argue) or they withdraw. As adults/caregivers, we respond to the behaviour with disciplining, disappointment, or chastising, which often results in feelings of frustration, more anger, and for some, shame.

How can we use our understanding of how an individual interprets their surroundings to support their behaviour, learning and sense of self? We need opportunities to release the air in the balloon. In this sense, we are helping children tolerate their environment, and achieve balance. This awareness leads to more success in achieving a calmer individual. It also provides helpful information to the individual as they grow and mature. Self-advocacy and self-care become tools to empower and create resilient individuals.

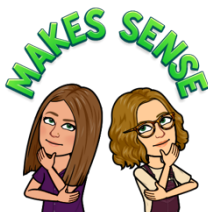
### ***Things Parents Can Do***

- Understand sensory processing is a part of an in-born temperament
- Help monitor when things become overwhelming or overstimulating and give strategies for staying calm (see below).
- Avoid labeling your child: "picky," "complainer," "cry-baby," "head-in-the-clouds," "oblivious," "out-of-it." Consider using, "tenderhearted," "discriminating," "easy-going," "accepting," etc.
- Help your child to understand sensory sensitivities/sensory seeking feelings and behaviours.
- Avoid shunning your child's reactions to sensory stimuli. For example, if your child is screaming over having a sliver, accept their experience as different from your own and understand their pain is real. Don't try to re-write their experience by saying, "You're over-reacting, it's not that bad!"

- Say more with fewer words. Recognize that conversation can add to an already-full balloon.
- For the sensory-seeking child, consider investing in a weighted blanket. In more significant cases, an Occupational Therapist can recommend weighted vests, "squeeze machines," and other strategies that can help you meet your child's sensory needs.
- Create a "sensory retreat" for your child. Recognize that for the sensory sensitive child, they need time to empty their balloon at the end of the day. Video games/screen time may seem like a good way to do this; however, they actually fill the balloon with more sensory input. As a result, when you try to take the screen away, you will often have an explosive reaction. Consider "draining" the balloon by having your child spend some quiet time when they get home from school: dim lights, no sounds, quiet activity like Lego, Playdough, drawing, sewing, knitting, crocheting, etc.
- When you find socks/underwear that don't irritate your child, buy several sets!
- Purchase shirts that have a stamped label rather than a tag.
- Consider trying sweatpants or pants without a waistband for increased comfort.
- Sports that have a lot of gear, like hockey, can be very challenging for a sensory-sensitive child; consider a less sensory stimulating, non-contact sport (swimming, tennis, etc.).
- Don't panic when your child tries to default to routine (same clothes, same foods, etc.). There can be comfort in the predictable.
- Teach your child to ask for accommodations (e.g., noise cancelling headphones, a quieter space to work, etc.).
- If your child has an IEP (Individual Education Plan), request that sensory accommodations be considered for your child and indicated in the IEP.
- Provide this article or others like it to your child's babysitter or caregiver to help them understand the behaviours that are often associated with sensory sensitivities or sensory seeking.
- Consider speaking to an Occupational Therapist (OT); they are experts and well-trained in the understanding of how children process sensory input.
- Talk to a counsellor or OT about systematic desensitization for sensory sensitivities; essentially a plan for gradually increasing your child's exposure and tolerance to sensory stimulation. OTs can also help create a plan for sensory seekers to have their needs met in a safe way.

### **Strategies for Students**

- Connect with an adult who understands and can support you
- Wear earplugs/noise cancelling headphones
- Ask to sit in a quiet spot in the classroom, away from doors and high-transition areas
- Wear sunglasses outside
- Ask if the class can have half the fluorescent lights turned off when appropriate to do so (some teachers may be willing to use several table lamps instead)
- Body Breaks (climbing wall, access the swings, walks, body break room if available)
- Plan for alternative environments and activities
- Check in with yourself – take a breath and scan for sensations. Ask for a break or calming activity to get your body back in balance



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