

# FOCUS

## On Early Childhood Mental Health



*Pennsylvania Key  
Early Childhood Mental  
Health Consultation  
Project  
717-213-2063  
micwal@berksiu.org*

## *Sensory Processing Disorder*

Jordan cries because his shoes are too tight or his socks too scratchy; he hates the playground and the sand. Sarah doesn't seem to know where she's going and bumps into things; she's tired all the time and mostly sits around at school. James is constantly fiddling with something, tapping his feet, or chewing his shirt; he wants to touch everything. Their extreme reactions to their environment could be signs of a sensory processing disorder.

**What It Is:** Sensory Processing Disorder is "the inability to use information received through the senses in order to function smoothly in daily life" (Kranowitz, p. 9). Five percent (or 1 in 20) of all children may experience enough difficulty handling the information they receive through their senses (vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell, movement and body awareness) to affect their daily lives. Children with a sensory processing disorder may:

- Be over-sensitive to their surroundings (complain that lights are too bright or clothes are too scratchy, over-react to noise)
- Be under-responsive (tolerate unusual pain, don't notice obstacles, are unaware of unpleasant smells)
- Crave more intense sensory experiences (like to play in mud, move constantly, like being squeezed hard)

These children may also have trouble making friends or being part of a group. They may seem clumsy, disruptive and out of control. Most of these children are not intellectually delayed, but their brains are wired differently. Some but certainly not all children with a sensory processing disorder also have some form of autism and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

**What You Can Do:** There are lots of ideas for how to help a child with a sensory processing disorder. Not all suggested treatments or therapies have been proven to be effective. However, all children, even those with normal sensory development, will benefit from activities that stimulate their senses, so children should have opportunities to do things that involve using all their senses. If children over or under-react to specific sensory stimuli, caregivers can individualize the activity and gently encourage the child to try new things that they might ordinarily avoid. See the resources below for ideas for specific activities.

### **Resources:**

*The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*, by Carol S. Kranowitz (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); *Sensory Integration: A Guide for Preschool Teachers*, by Christy Isbell and Rebecca Isbell (Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, 2007); *Parenting a Child with a Sensory Processing Disorder*, by Christopher Auer and Susan Blumberg (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2006); the following Web sites also provide information and resources on children with sensory processing disorder : [www.sensoryprocessing.info](http://www.sensoryprocessing.info); [www.sensorystreet.com](http://www.sensorystreet.com); and [www.spdfoundation.net](http://www.spdfoundation.net).