



Rifka Schonfeld **STRATEGIES**

THE NEWSLETTER FOR OPTIMUM SUCCESS

TIPS ON SOCIAL SKILLS FOR ADULTS & CHILDREN

What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

Dear Readers,
This week's newsletter will discuss the topic of sensory processing disorder (SPD).

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QUESTION:

I've been told that my son has a sensory processing disorder. I'm not sure what this means and I'm also not clear on how this could affect him in school. From what I have read, sensory processing disorders are not necessarily academically based. Is this true?

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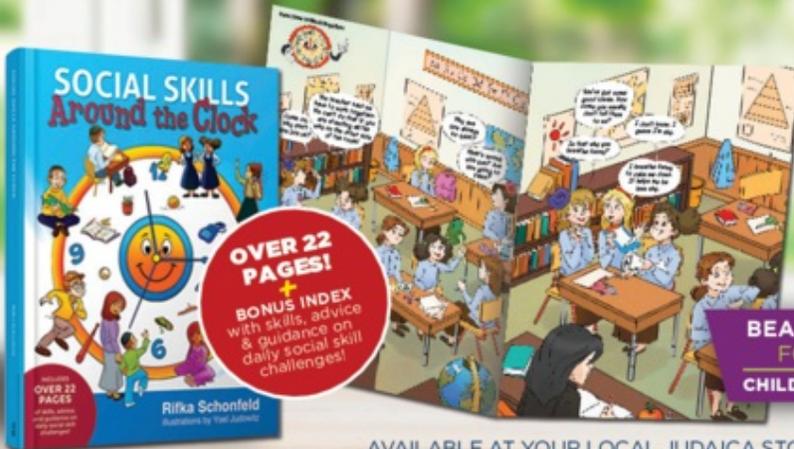
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ANSWER:

There is always a lot of confusion surrounding sensory processing disorder – mainly because there are many different diagnoses that fall under the catch-all phrase sensory processing disorder (SPD). There are many different disorders that fall into SPD, among them are three specific subcategories are:

- **Sensory Over-responsivity:** In this category, children respond very strongly to minimal stimuli. They often avoid touching or being touched. They often react strongly to certain textures of clothing or food. In addition, they will get overexcited with too much to look at or with strong smells or sound.
- **Sensory Under-responsivity:** In contrast to children who are over-responsive, children with this form of SPD often pay little or no attention to the sensory experiences around them. They are unaware of messy hands, face, or clothes. They will also fail to notice how things feel and will often drop them. When presented with new stimuli, they will ignore them – even if a food is extra spicy or a noise is particularly loud.
- **Sensory Seeking:** Children who are sensory seeking are exactly that – always looking for new sensations. They dump toys and rummage purposelessly, chew on shirt cuffs, and rub against walls. They welcome loud noises, seek strong odors, and prefer spicy or hot foods.

While children who fall into the categories described above exhibit widely (and sometimes opposite characteristics), they are all classified as possessing a sensory processing disorder. No wonder you were confused!

Now, to your second question, do sensory processing disorders affect academics? The answer, unfortunately, is a resounding “yes.” The first way that sensory processing disorders affects academics is simply in the child’s ability (or inability) to sit still when there is a plethora of sensory information in a classroom. Many sensory seeking children cannot help getting up to touch a letter on the bulletin board while over-responsive children will flinch at every noise. In this way, classrooms of twenty-five children or more can make learning difficult for children with SPD.

Carol Stock Kranowitz in her book *The Out of Sync Child* explains the second way that SPD affects learning:

Your child yanks the cat's tail, and the cat hisses, arches its back, and spits. Normally, through experience, a child will learn not to repeat such a scary experience. He learns to be cautious. In the future, his behavior will be more adaptive.

The child with SPD, however, may have difficulty "reading cues," verbal or nonverbal, from the environment. He may not decode the auditory message of the cat's hostile hissing, the visual message of the cat's arched back, or the tactile message of spit on his cheek. He misses the "big picture" and may not learn appropriate caution.

While this situation is both dangerous and frightening, it also illustrates a larger issue within academic learning. If your child cannot decode sensations (the pencil in held in his hand in a certain way, the pursing of the lips to form the letter "B," or the nuanced difference between the phonemes /d/ and /t/), he will have difficulty grasping the concepts essential for elementary reading, writing and math.

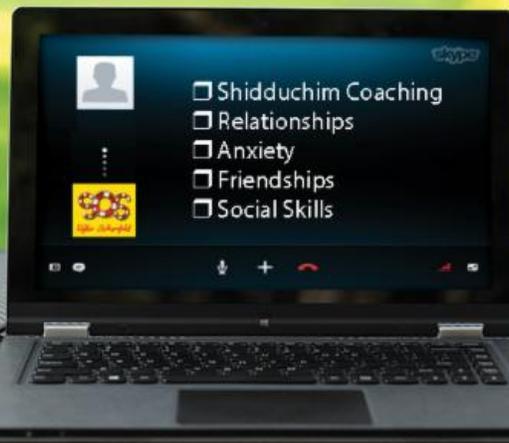
Perhaps the most challenging aspect of living with a child with SPD is that they are often bright and motivated, yet cannot seem to function in an orderly fashion. For that reason, it is important to remember that the inability to function smoothly is not because the child won't, but because he can't. Once you are able to recognize this, helping your child decode and interpret the sensations around him becomes significantly simpler.

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