

# **Welcoming Special Needs Children @ Your Library**

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## Sensory Integration and SI Dysfunction

Most children with special needs have some degree of sensory integration problems. We learn about and understand the world through our senses. Sensory integration is how we use the information provided by all the sensations coming from within our bodies and the environment to function in the world. People with SI dysfunction don't automatically take in and use sensory information the same way.

Sensory problems result from being "wired" differently. The central nervous system responds to sensory input inefficiently, so they're not always getting an accurate, reliable picture of their bodies and the environment.

### Prevalence of SI dysfunction

- At least one child with sensory issues in every kindergarten classroom
- 50-80% in a classroom of students with autistic spectrum disorders
- High incidence in children adopted from overseas institutions, premature infants, birth trauma, prolonged hospitalization, or exposure to heavy metals.
- Frequently a "co-morbid" symptom of diagnoses such as autism, ADD/ADHD, Down Syndrome, Fragile X, anxiety, and mood disorders.

### Three kinds of sensitivity

- Hypersensitivity
  - nervous system threshold is set too high
  - tends to be a sensory avoider
- Hyposensitivity
  - nervous system threshold is set too low
  - tends to be a sensory seeker
- Mixed Reactivity—*most common*
  - nervous system is inconsistent
  - seeks some sensations, avoids others
  - can change from hour to hour, day to day

## Common signs of SI dysfunction

- Oversensitivity or undersensitivity to touch, sounds, sights, tastes, or smells
- Problems with vestibular (movement) and proprioceptive senses (body awareness)
- Intense reactions to challenging situations: “tuning out” or “acting up”
- Auditory processing problems
- Vision and visual processing problems
- Poor attention and focus
- Difficulty with transitions
- Uncomfortable in group settings
- Developmental delays

## What To Do

1. Offer extra support and accommodations

Consider adding the following to your intake form:

\_\_\_ Yes, my child has special needs.

If so, how can the library help make your child’s visit to the library a positive experience? \_\_\_\_\_

Encourage parents to bring in any assistive device or seating aid the child uses at school or home. Encourage parents to share behavioral strategies used successfully at school or home.

2. Consider diplomatically referring the child to appropriate resources and/or for an evaluation. (Note that the child may already be receiving therapeutic services or the parent may not be *ready* to hear this yet.)
  - *Safe strategy:* provide a handout to *all* families such as the article on sensory issues—  
[parentguidenews.com/articles/October05/SensorySmartParenting.php](http://parentguidenews.com/articles/October05/SensorySmartParenting.php)
  - Refer to an informational website about sensory issues such as [sensorysmarts.com](http://sensorysmarts.com) or [spdnetwork.com](http://spdnetwork.com)

- Refer to a parenting book like *Raising A Sensory Smart Child*
- Refer to an early intervention agency if the child is under age 3 (see [www.sensorysmarts.com](http://www.sensorysmarts.com) for a list of state agencies)
- Refer to the local school district if the child is over age 3
- Refer to a private or hospital-based OT

### 3. Make accommodations and change the library environment

#### **Story Hour/Circle Time**

For kids with special needs, sitting still and staying attentive can be difficult even if they are interested in the activity.

- Kids with low muscle tone lack the neuromuscular strength and stability for extended floor sitting. Kids with poor body awareness also have difficulty.
- Children who NEED to move have a hard time staying still.
- A child with auditory processing problems hears well, but may struggle to listen and follow along.
- A child with an undiagnosed vision problem will have trouble visually attending.

#### **How to help:**

- Rethink the duration of seated story time
- Consider seating placement. Does the child need to sit near you? At the edge of the group? Give each child a mat to sit on to help organize their space.
- Don't insist on crossed leg sitting; allow any sitting position as long as the child is attending. Consider seating devices like pillows from home, bean bag chairs, inflatable seat cushions (Disc O'Sit, Move N'Fit, Ball Chair, Swiss Disc) or a floor seat with a back like the HowdaSeat.
- Consider a visual aid like the Time Timer to help children know how long they must remain seated and attentive.
- Encourage parents to bring in items that are helpful at school like an inflatable cushion, weighted vest, weighted lap pad, or compression garment.
- Kids who need to move, will move. Incorporate movement before, during, and after seated activities.
- Provide hand fidgets (related to the story you are reading, or theme you are discussing, Unifix cubes, koosh balls, hand squeezers, etc.)

- For kids who chew on their clothing, encourage parents to bring “chewies” such as the ark grabber, the chewy tubes, and Chewlery (necklaces and bracelets).

## **Transitions**

Many children with special needs have difficulty with transitions between activities which require them to shift attention, process new instructions, and plan the movements she needed.

### **How to help:**

- Increase predictability. Review the schedule of activities verbally and using a picture schedule. This helps kids to learn the sequence of activities, and mentally prepare for changes.
- Always use clear directions. Avoid using confusing idioms such as “hold your horses,” “bite your tongue,” or “I smell a rat.” A concrete thinker takes what you say literally.
- During clean-up, assign a concrete two-step task using simple directions, e.g., get all of the glue containers and put them in this bin. Allow a sensitive child to do a task on the sidelines such as placing books on a cart on the edge of the activity.
- When having children line up, consider putting a piece of colored electrical tape on the carpet and asking children to stand on that tape. (Home Depot is a good resource.) Give the child who doesn’t want to be bumped a special role such as line guard at the back of the line.
- Use transition times for movement and “heavy work” that uses bigger muscles. Suggestions: Jumping Jacks, reach for the sky and for the earth, “Head Shoulders Knees and Toes,” the Hokey Pokey, wheelbarrow walking, alternating giant steps and baby steps, or alternate noisy monster steps and quiet mouse steps, carry heavy items, move furniture, etc.

## **Tabletop activities**

- Use size-appropriate chairs and tables. Feet should be able to be flat on the floor, knees at a 90-degree angle, and arms resting comfortably on the tabletop. Provide a chair with arms to a child with poor body awareness. Examine the

- child's posture. A low tone child might appear slumped, craning his neck to look up. Provide a chair with back support (you can use a pillow) and/or a positioning wedge (such as the Move N' Fit). A child may need an inflatable cushion, a ball chair with feet, or a strip of stretchy tubing or lycra on the front chair legs.
- Consider seating arrangement. The child who dislikes casual touch might do best at the short end of a long table. A child easily distracted by noise should sit away from a hallway or window
  - Forewarn auditory hypersensitive children about fire drills. Allow them to wear earplugs or headphones to muffle noise. Put tennis balls on the feet of chairs.

### **Adapting Crafts**

- Have good ventilation during craft time. Pass out mints or strong tasting candies.
- Many kids can't tolerate smocks with itchy closures. Cover the closure with soft material or ask parents to send in an oversize shirt.
- If a child dislikes getting fingers messy with glue or paint, encourage them to rethink the experience, but never force them.
- Desensitize, e.g., have kids rub hands briskly before starting.
- Provide a damp paper towel to wipe hands.
- Increase the time between handwashings.
- Provide squeeze glue containers, glue sticks and paintbrushes. It may be hard enough for a child with special needs to participate at all, so *how* they participate is secondary.
- Provide tweezers or tongs like Zoosticks for applying decorations.
- Use firm touch rather than light touch when assisting.

### **Some alternative materials**

- Break crayons into smaller pieces for a child with grasp problems
- Weighted pens and paintbrushes
- Pencil grips and built up handles ("The Pencil Grip," Write Start Grip)
- Vibrating pens: Squiggle Wiggle Writer and Tran-Quille
- Writing and drawing on a slanted or vertical surfaces improves wrist position and

- are easier for many. Use a slantboard or wall.
- Use Fiskars or Crayola scissors with one small and one large loop. Consider adapted scissors from therapy catalogs.
- See therapy catalogs for a wide variety of adapted crafts and writing tools.

### **Sequencing Problems**

- Break down multi-step directions into smaller, more manageable units.
- Provide a step-by-step model.
- Provide written plus verbal instructions.
- Teach what may seem obvious.

### **Environmental Modifications**

Most kids benefit from *reduced* visual stimulation. Behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, hand flapping, or hyperfocusing may be a way for a child to tune out overwhelming stimuli.

#### **How to help:**

- Avoid noxious colors and patterns on floors and walls.
- Avoid fluorescent lighting. Use natural lighting when possible. If you must use fluorescents, use Cozy Shades (Integrations catalog) to filter out some of the visual flicker. Or turn the overhead lights off and use an incandescent or halogen floor lamp.
- Use opaque storage bins, and put unnecessary toys and materials out of sight.
- For a child with hyperacute hearing or problems with selective attention, consider an FM unit. (You speak into a transmitter and the child listens to a tabletop or headphone receiver.)
- Use collapsible carrels that block out distracting visual input.

### **Avoid meltdowns before they happen!**

- Post rules about behavioral expectations which you also distribute to caregivers. Politely underscore the point that it is *their* responsibility to do something to help an unhappy child rather than the librarian busy working with a group of

- children. You may need to teach caregivers calming strategies.
- Remove a child from the room before he goes into overload. Let him climb stairs, get water, go outside and jump around or do wall push-ups. He may return when he has composed himself.
  - Take a short movement break and/or remind children that the activity will be over in a few moments.

## **15 Ways to Calm a Child in the Library**

1. Dim the lights.
2. Lower your voice.
3. Have the child breathe deeply 10 times.
4. Be sure the child isn't overheated--remove a sweater or bring near air conditioner or fan.
5. Change where the child is sitting, e.g., move closer to librarian or caregiver.
6. Offer the child a bear hug or cuddle or rhythmically, firmly rub back or press downward on shoulders.
7. Give the child water or something to suck on like a hard candy if permitted in the library. Crunchy food like goldfish crackers can also soothe, as can an oral comfort item like a "chewy."
8. Bring the child to a less busy part of the room for a few minutes—not as punishment, but to enable the child to self-regulate.
9. Let the child listen to calming music using headphones.
10. Take the child to a "cozy corner" to relax. This space may have a bean bag chair, soft lighting, and a book or a soft toy to enjoy until he regroups.
11. Have the child sit in a rocking chair or bounce on a ball chair.
12. Help the child do wall push-ups or chair push-ups.
13. Provide a hand fidget like a koosh ball, provided the child does not throw it.
14. Take the child outdoors for a few minutes to jump around and get the wiggles out--or have him climb up and down stairs.
15. Repeat a soothing phrase over and over such as "It will be okay" or "everything is alright."

For more information on special needs and sensory issues, modifying environments, handling behavior issues, and more, please see *Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Integration Issues* by Lindsey Biel, OTR/L and Nancy Peske. Or visit [www.sensorysmarts.com](http://www.sensorysmarts.com).



## Therapy Catalogs

Achievement Products for Children, 800-373-4699, [www.specialkidszone.com](http://www.specialkidszone.com)  
Integrations, 800-850-8602, [www.Integrationscatalog.com](http://www.Integrationscatalog.com)  
Pocket Full of Therapy, 800-PFOT-124, [www.pfot.com](http://www.pfot.com)  
Sensory Comfort, 888-436, 2622, [www.sensorycomfort.com](http://www.sensorycomfort.com)  
Southpaw Enterprises, 800-228-1698, [www.southpawenterprises.com](http://www.southpawenterprises.com)  
Therapro, 800-257-5376, 508—872-9494, [www.theraproducts.com](http://www.theraproducts.com)  
Lakeshore Learning, 800-421-5354, [www.lakeshorelearning.com](http://www.lakeshorelearning.com)

## Web sites

[www.sensorysmarts.com](http://www.sensorysmarts.com) The informational web site for *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* Includes sensory diet activities, practical tips, web resources, books, and more  
[www.parentguidenews.com/articles/October05/SensorySmartParenting.php](http://www.parentguidenews.com/articles/October05/SensorySmartParenting.php) link to “Sensory Smart Parenting” article from *Parent Guide News*.  
<http://www.childrensvision.com> The Children's Vision Information Network has excellent information about vision problems and the vision-learning connection.  
<http://www.nclld.org> The National Center for Learning Disabilities has invaluable information on learning disabilities, including symptoms and testing.  
<http://www.autismwebsite.com> Autism Research Institute offers great articles and information.  
<http://www.aspergersyndrome.org> Online Asperger Syndrome Information & Support (OASIS) is an outstanding source of information, support, and resources about Asperger Syndrome for parents, professionals, teachers, and people diagnosed with AS.  
<http://www.speechville.com> Speechville Express offers information about various speech/language impairments and delays, including children's books that target specific sounds.  
<http://www.dotolearn.com> Free line drawings you can download to make visual to-do lists for children who have difficulty with transitions.  
[www.weightedwearables.com](http://www.weightedwearables.com) High quality, attractive weighted vests, blankets, and other products that provide calming input.  
[www.Earplugstore.com](http://www.Earplugstore.com) Pediatric earplugs and white noise CDs.

## Great Special Needs Books/Magazines

- Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Vintage, 2006.
- Temple Grandin, *The Unwritten Rules of Social Communication*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, 2005.
- Ellen Nothbohm, *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, 2005.
- Ellen Nothbohm and Veronica Zysk, *1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, 2004.
- Demitri and Janice Papolos, *The Bipolar Child*. New York, Broadway Books, 2002.
- Dawn Prince-Hughes' *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*., Harmony, 2002.
- *Autism Asperger Digest Magazine* published by Future Horizons.
- Thomas Armstrong, *Myth of the ADD Child*, New York: Plume, 1995.
- Patricia McAleer Hamaguchi, *Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know*, New York: Wiley, 2001.
- Lindsey Biel and Nancy Peske, *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*. New York, Penguin Books, 2005.

See other recommended parenting books and web resources at [www.sensorysmarts.com](http://www.sensorysmarts.com)