SENSORY OR JUST PICKY?

Decoding Sensory Processing in Young Children



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1. Why This Guide Matters

Some children hate brushing teeth. Others crave spinning or make loud noises all day. While some of this is normal, persistent behavior could be a sign of sensory processing difficulties. This guide helps you understand what's normal, what's not, and what you can do as a parent.

2. What is Sensory Processing?

It's how the brain receives, organizes, and responds to sensory input—from touch, sound, movement, smell, sight, taste, and internal sensations like body position or hunger.

3. Types of Sensory Sensitivities

- Visual: Overreacts to bright lights or cluttered rooms
- Auditory: Covers ears for normal sounds
- Tactile: Dislikes tags, messy play, or hugs
- Vestibular: Seeks constant movement or avoids swings
- Proprioceptive: Crashes into things, enjoys deep pressure
- Oral: Chews everything or rejects most foods

4. How to Recognize Sensory Issues

- Strong reactions to textures, noises, or lights
- Difficulty sitting still or constant movement
- Easily overwhelmed in noisy or crowded places
- Avoids or seeks specific sensory input excessively

5. Sensory-Seeking vs Sensory-Avoiding

- Sensory-seeking kids love jumping, spinning, crashing
- Sensory-avoiding kids withdraw, cover ears, refuse touch

Some children can show a mix of both behaviors in different contexts.

6. Everyday Signs Parents Often Miss

- Meltdowns during grooming (haircuts, toothbrushing)
- Extreme reactions to foods or clothing

- Prefers same routines, avoids new environments
- Doesn't notice injuries or constantly bumps into things

7. What Causes Sensory Processing Issues?

- Immature sensory system in early development
- Premature birth, birth trauma
- Underlying neurological or developmental conditions
- Sometimes, no clear cause—just a unique sensory profile

8. Simple Home Observations

- Track what situations lead to distress or calming
- Note any food, clothing, or sound patterns
- Observe reactions in noisy vs quiet places
- Record what helps them feel regulated (e.g., swinging, chewing, cuddles)

9. Activities to Support Sensory Regulation

- Sensory bins with rice, sand, or beans
- Heavy work: pushing, pulling, carrying
- Calming tools: fidget toys, weighted lap pads
- Water play, trampolines, swings
- Oral input: chewy snacks or safe chew tools

10. When to Seek Professional Help

- When behaviors interfere with daily life
- When meltdowns are frequent and intense
- If your child avoids typical activities
- If you feel overwhelmed managing their reactions

11. How Occupational Therapy Can Help

- Trained therapists assess sensory needs
- Create sensory diets and routines

- Teach regulation strategies
- Help with daily life skills and transitions

12. Final Words for Parents

You are not imagining it. Sensory challenges are real—and your child isn't being difficult on purpose. With the right understanding and support, you can help them feel safer, calmer, and more connected to the world around them.