

## SENSORY MELTDOWNS OR BEHAVIORS - TIPS AND IDEAS FOR THERAPISTS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS



Many times we struggle with our children when they exhibit difficult behaviors. Frustration creeps in and we find ourselves feeling helpless. There are many ways to help your child and provide strategies to deal with sensory meltdowns and behavioral outbursts. The plans are different for each so in this situation, knowledge is powerful! Here are some of my 'Out of the Pocket' tips, strategies, and information for you.



**Is It SENSORY or  
Is It BEHAVIOR  
Course**

Check out our courses for therapists, teachers, and families. [www.PocketOT.com](http://www.PocketOT.com)

Occupational therapists understand how to assess and create programs for our children with sensory processing differences. They use written questionnaires and watch a child interact and play in order to understand how a child processes information. Don't worry, the therapist's job is to play with your child since our kids learn critical skills by interacting with other kids and toys. Sometimes a child shows difficulty with crossing over the middle of his/her body. It can be tough and frustrating for kids when a task involves using both hands. This can actually frustrate your child and cause behavioral issues....it's true! How would you feel if you couldn't do something that your co-workers could with ease?

### Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

Understanding the eight senses is the first step. Our bodies take in sensory information through receptors in the skin, organs, mouth, nose, ears, muscles and so many more. We all process and interpret this information differently based on our body and our past experiences. Since we are all different, we 'see' sensory information in different ways. This is why some children love to crash into pillows and others avoid movement on the playground. Maybe you like eating crunchy food, but your child prefers soft food.

### How does sensory affect behavior?

We know that sensory information forms the foundations for our entire body. How we sit in a chair, hold our posture, plan our movements and learn depends on our ability to effectively process sensory information. When a child is NOT processing effectively or is constantly fearful or distressed, he/she cannot focus on the task at hand. Simple things such as brushing teeth and completing a homework assignment may be very tough. The energy needed to focus is exhausting and sometimes frustration creeps in. Behavior also affects our ability to follow rules and make friends. If we don't feel well, we might act out. Can you remember

## **REGULAR SENSORY ACTIVITIES**

Done regularly and every few hours, activities can improve your child's behavior! This is because keeping the body in a state of clamng 'regulation' helps to feel more consistent and decreases highs and lows in our sensory system.



### **What's a Calming Activity?**

Many times rocking in a back and forth manner such as using a rocking chair or playground swing is rhythmic and calms us. Other ideas are using big muscle groups such as pushing, pulling, lifting, and carrying.

Ideas used in small spaces include

- Pushing up against the wall
- Carrying a heavy backpack
- Sitting under a weighted blanket or quilt
- Use of a lap pad filled with sand, rice, or poly-pellets
- Deep breathing
- Playing with dough or a fidget item.

Other activities can be calming and should be practiced on a regular basis. They include:

- Listening to calming music or those with deep drum beats
- Using deep breathing and counting to four while you take a breath in and then a breath out
- Reading a social story or book
- Time with the guidance counselor or in a calm-down room/area

a time when you were tired or had a sinus infection and felt dizzy or just grouchy. Your mood matched your body's feelings. It's the same for our children.

## **PHYSICAL SIGNS of STRESS**

Our bodies show stress in different ways. When we see something we interpret as painful, upsetting, or dangerous a chemical reaction releasing adrenaline occurs. When this happens, we are powerless to stop it! There's no 'shut off' button. The goal is to keep the child safe and avoid injury. He has NO control since at this time; his brain is not in thinking mode, it's in SURVIVAL mode! Look for the following:

- Red face with a look of discomfort
- Sweating and increased heart rate
- Increase in self-stimming behavior
- Rigidity in behavior or tightening of body/muscles
- Shutting down of social interaction
- Physical movement to avoid the situation such as fleeing.

There can be several types of reactions to stress. Some people leave or flee the situation and have no idea where to go, Their body's goal is to move to safety.

Others feel a freeze response, thus they cannot move.

Many people fight or use their body to defend themselves. So hitting, biting, kicking, and spitting would fit into this category.

**\*\*Whichever way a person reacts, the ultimate goal is SAFETY!**

- Eating crunchy or chewy foods such as dehydrated fruit.

**What types of interventions/preventions are there?**

Being pro-active is so important. When a person has experienced a bad thing or sensation, there can be a great deal of worry and anxiety. This is the case for many of us with and without special needs. In fact, anxiety can be paralyzing!

It's a very real feeling, and teaching children to feel and understand their bodies is very important. *But how?*

- Draw a picture of what worry looks like. Is it a monster, fire, or animal?
- Ask the child where in their own body they feel worry. We know that worry affects heart rate, stomach, causes headaches and so many more symptoms.
- What makes your body feel better when you worry? Let the child tell you in a CALM time what they experience in times of anxiety. Write it all down.
- Make a plan with options that you've chosen and let the child choose which will be in the plan.



**Use BREAK cards. Create your own or use cards in our Pocket OT store.**



Cards should be small and should have a few options for sensory breaks.

- Get a drink of water
- Go to the guidance office
- Go to the calming area
- Take breaths
- Walk to the office or designated room.

**What to include in calm-down areas:**

- Fidget items
- Weighted lap pad or blanket
- Headphones that cancel noise
- Calming music
- Books
- Visual glitter bottles or liquid timers
- Soft squeeze balls or putty/dough

**Remember that any plan should be reviewed and rehearsed with the child & team.**

Please visit [www.PocketOT.com](http://www.PocketOT.com) for more resources.