

TIP SHEET

How Oral Sensory Processing Affects Dental Care



Developing positive oral health habits can be difficult for children who have oral sensitivities due to Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). SPD affects the way a child's brain detects, interprets and responds to sensory stimuli. A child with SPD can be either hypersensitive or hyposensitive to oral stimuli.

Symptoms of SPD

Oral sensitivities can make oral care and feeding difficult, distressing and even painful at times. Some children might not allow a toothbrush into their mouth, and others might only eat a limited diet of foods that promote tooth decay. Even the simple act of allowing a dental professional to look into their mouth can be very challenging for some children with oral sensitivities.

- **Hypersensitivity** in the mouth occurs when children have a more intense reaction to a specific sensation than a typically developing peer. The sensory threshold is lowered, and it takes less sensory input for the desired response. For example, a child with oral hypersensitivity might perceive the touch of a toothbrush on his or her tongue as being ticklish.
- **Hyposensitivity**, also known as sensory defensiveness, is not necessarily when there is too much or too little sensory input; it is the inability to discriminate between noxious and pleasant input. Certain stimuli often can trigger the child's "fight or flight" response. For example, a child might perceive the sound of an electric toothbrush as painful.

Treatment techniques

It can take extra time to develop strategies and build trust, but children with SPD can have successful dental experiences. One method is to provide calming strategies that involve the entire body.

The following are techniques that can help a child prepare for the stimuli he or she will experience during a dental visit.

- Encourage the parents to have their child do some physical activity prior to the visit, such as pulling a loaded wagon, jumping on a trampoline or skipping.
- Apply pressure to the child's joints and large muscles; these "proprioceptive" activities can help decrease a child's tendency towards overreaction to touch. Provide deep pressure through bear hugs, back rubs, or body massages.
- Place a weighted vest to the legs or torso to supply extra calming sensory input. You can fill the pockets of a vest or jacket with beanbags, or you can use a leaded X-ray apron if available in your dental office.
- Use a handheld massager or a vibrating pillow to deliver relaxing vibrations. As a safety precaution, be sure that the child doesn't put the massager on his or her neck.
- Wrap the child's arms, legs, or trunk with elastic bandage wraps. Be careful not to get the bandage too tight. Start with the wrist or ankle and wrap your way up the arm or leg. This can be turned into a fun game of "mummy" or "doctor."

Disclaimer: This information is provided for reference only. Consult your dentist before engaging in any procedures, practices, or treatments. Please also refer to Improving Sensory Tolerance for Brushing Teeth.

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