## The Emotional Needs of Children with Sensory Processing Issues



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eeting the emotional needs of children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) requires having an understanding of their world. They can experience emotions differently than typically developing children do. They can also experience a lot of pressure to change and become a different person. These two factors have a profound effect on a child's self-image and self-esteem. It's difficult to communicate to anyone, "I love you just the way you are," while trying to change them or how they feel. The difficulties children have with coping emotionally and exhibiting appropriate behavior can lead to social judgments about them that are hurtful. All of these elements affect not only how emotional needs must be addressed, but also what those emotional needs are.

Here are a few guidelines to help you figure out what your child may need.

### See the World through Your Child's Eyes

When your children are upset, it's natural to want to make them feel better. However, trying to make a child feel better may accidentally send the wrong message. For example, if my son is upset and I tell him there is nothing to be upset about or try to change his feeling, I am communicating to him that his feeling is not okay or, worse, that even if he feels bad, I need him to pretend he is feeling okay. This makes it more difficult for my son to manage his feeling.

We all become better at managing an emotion when we feel understood. Trying to talk someone out of how he feels makes him feel misunderstood. This is even more important with children who have SPD, because they can experience being misunderstood more often than other children.

The first step in meeting children's emotional needs is to see the world through their eyes, so they feel supported and understood. It's simple to do, but not easy, because we have to let go of trying to get our child to feel the way we want and simply accept the feeling our child is having. For example, if your son is hurt because the kids at school don't seem to like him, instead of trying to stop him from being hurt, simply acknowledge the ting upset or try to teach her not to be upset. This can result in my walking on eggshells or giving in to my daughter and robbing her of the chance to develop coping skills. Instead of trying to keep my daughter from getting upset or changing her feelings, I need to focus

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hurt by saying, "I understand your feelings are hurt, and you're feeling lonely and left out at school." This communicates that you understand and that you are willing to be with your son in the pain, so he doesn't have to be in it alone.

## Correct the Behavior, Not the Feeling

We all become overwhelmed with feelings sometimes, but children with SPD can become overwhelmed more often, more intensely, and more easily than typically developing children. If my daughter is upset often and more easily than my son, what may happen is that I try to keep her from get-

on changing her behavior when she is emotionally overwhelmed. My daughter needs to learn the socially appropriate behavior associated with the emotion she is experiencing.

To focus on changing a child's behavior, rather than trying to change a child's feelings, you can use "ACT Limit Setting." This is a great tool to enhance your child's coping skills and increase her emotional intelligence. A stands for acknowledge the feeling: "I know you are really angry." C stands for *communicate the* limit: "But, I'm not for hitting." T stands for target the alternative: "You can tell me you're angry, or you can hit a pillow." What you are teaching your child is, "It's okay to feel whatever you are feeling, but you

can't act in an inappropriate way when you feel those feelings. You can act in this (more appropriate) way." You might notice that there is not a punishment associated with this first level of setting limits. It's important to first teach your child the appropriate behavior, before you give a consequence.

# Focus on Being Skilled Rather Than Trying to Control Your Child's Behavior

While trying to teach your child an appropriate behavior, it's important to remember that you can't take responsibility for his behavior. For example, if I am trying to get my son to remember to brush his teeth in the morning before school, and I keep asking him and reminding him and trying to get him to do it, I am taking responsibility for something he should be responsible for. My son may even become resistant to cooperating because he feels I am trying to control his behavior. Instead, I can make my son responsible for his decisions by setting up choices and consequences. For example, I can say, "If you choose to brush your teeth

before school, you choose to get a dessert in your lunchbox! If you choose not to brush your teeth before you go to school, you choose not to get a dessert at lunch." If your child is upset about the choices you have set up, remind him that he gets to decide what to do. Explain to him that if it were up to you to decide, you would choose for him to brush his teeth and get to eat dessert! Once you establish a choice, it's important to let the choice do its work. Don't remind him. All you have to say from this day forward is, "I see you've decided to have a yummy dessert" or "I see you've decided not to have any dessert today." This only works if you let your child experience the consequences of his choice. Children need to understand that every decision they make has a consequence.

#### **Mindfulness**

There seem to be two broad and vastly different experiences of emotions that children with SPD have. In some children, SPD may manifest as extreme sensitivity to sensory input, while in others, it may be just the opposite—an insensitivity to sensory input, to the extent that there seems to be no awareness of the body. Body awareness is integral to

emotional awareness, because every emotion has a physical sensation. For example, when people are very sad, they describe their heart as "breaking." The research shows that people

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experience the physical sensation of a breaking heart as intensely painful as a scalding cup of hot coffee being poured on them! If children are overly sensitive to bodily sensation or not sensitive enough, it affects the way they experience and process emotions. Healthy emotional processing means being able to cope with the experience of emotion without

pushing it out of your awareness or acting out. Practicing mindfulness exercises with your children can help them learn to cope with their emotions, so they can experience the emotion and still choose the appropriate behavior.

A simple way to practice mindfulness is by asking your children to sit down with their feet on the floor or in a crosslegged position, hands folded, back straight, with their eyes closed or half open, looking down at the floor. As they sit quietly, you ask them to focus on their breath, counting each exhale breath up to 10, then starting again at one and counting up to 10 again. You can also teach your child to tune into his senses by sounding a bell and asking him to listen for the fading sound until it is completely gone or by holding a cold metal object and paying attention to the cold disappearing into warmth. Being attuned to senses helps children become centered. Similarly, children can learn to "sit with" their emotions. When a child is experiencing an emotion, learning to tune into the physical sensation of the emotion can be very helpful. Ask your child to imagine what color or shape the emotion might have, and have him draw it.

### **Check Your Expectations**

If your child receives a diagnosis of SPD, it is important to check your expectations often. Expecting too much puts too much pressure on your child, and expecting too little can weaken her skills or her ability to cope. Remember, though, to check your expectations of yourself, too. Allowing yourself to make mistakes and simply apologizing for mistakes and correcting the ones you can, while remembering to be kind

to yourself, is one of the most important lessons you can teach your child. ◆

Theresa Kellam, PhD, is the author of The Parent Survival Guide: From Chaos to Harmony in Ten Weeks or Less. Dr Kellam bases the book on something called child-parent relationship therapy, a technique that helps parents and children use structured playtime to reconnect with each other and grow. Read more at www.theresakellam.com.

