

Sensory Issues and Attention

Attention is dependent on the interdependent three parts of thinking - attention, concentration and tracking. The ability to pay attention is necessary to concentrate which is then necessary to stay on task.¹ The child, who is overactive, easily distracted and moves from one activity to another may seem unable to follow social rules and is “overstimulated by the outside world...” (Barley, 1983)² Attention difficulties can also trouble the child who is slow-moving and seems unmotivated but also seems unable to follow social rules or stay on tasks. This child seems over-stimulated by the inner world, their own mind.

Sensory issues can affect the capacity for maintaining attention - smell, taste, noise, touch or light. If the child is hypersensitive in any of these areas it will probably prioritise their attention away from the task at hand and make concentration most difficult. Your observations become most important in recognising what the particular sensitivities are – a tag on clothing, flannelette sheets, competing background noise such as building construction at the school or people talking in the background.

Strategies

- Simplify the environment – remove any clutter, shut down extraneous noise and reduce lighting.
- Limit the length of time to expect a child to stay on task or break into smaller parts
- Provide a lot of one to one physical presence.³
- Take steps to avoid sensory triggers – lighting (especially fluorescent), noise, clothing textures, colours of walls and furnishings, cluttered rooms.
- Desensitize the child to her/his environment. Use trial and error to work out what feels good to the child and what doesn't – sunglasses, ear plugs, looser clothing.
- Establish a space for 'self-calm' – a private area which can be used by all people in the family. In this space, offer some comforts – bean bag, pillows, a big woolly jumper, a blanket, a beanie, music to listen to with ear phones, water to drink. If the space can be covered, it will help reduce lighting and instill calm but do not enclose the area completely.

¹ Mc Creight, 1997:17

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³ Sharing Stories, Finding Hope