

How Sensory Strategies Can Help Your Child Cope During Emotionally Challenging Times

Written by Jen Krull, OTR
Occupational therapist and Owner
Children's Therapy Network, LLC

If you have ever sought out a neck massage following a particularly stressful day, chewed the top of a pen to shreds when nervous, or found yourself slowly rocking back and forth on your feet when frightened or bored- you have successfully used sensory regulation strategies to help you remain calm and present through a period of emotional stress. As an occupational therapist specializing in sensory regulation and sensory processing, I have worked with children and families dealing with many types of challenges over the years. It has become increasingly clear to me that emotional/relationship work and sensory regulation, or the ability to "remain alert and attentive in the moment" go hand in hand- one supporting the other and neither happening in isolation.

Many children are not able to successfully attach meaning to the onslaught of sensory information coming into their nervous systems each and every day. This may happen due to neurological or neurobiological reasons, developmental differences or early life experiences. For children who experience early caregiver interruptions, in addition to the attachment concerns that frequently arise, many learn to live in a constant state of hyper-vigilance or "fight and flight". When this occurs, typical childhood experiences such as, taking a bath or sliding down a slide, can be an excruciating experience or simply too difficult to make sense of. Often children shut down, or are not able to be "present", during relationship or attachment work. By giving children, and their parents, the language to recognize a "calm alert state" and strategies to help strive for this, children can begin to remain in the moment. This is especially important when working through more difficult emotional processes or novel routines. Activities that are designed with the specific child in mind- such as using small spaces, different textures for a child to touch, things for the child to use in their mouth and organizing movement experiences- can elicit the decrease in neurological arousal that is often necessary for a child to be able to attain a calm alert state.

Recently, I have begun to work directly with parents to help them not only learn to monitor their child's regulation state- but also their own! By teaching a process sometimes referred to as co-regulation, we teach the parent to attune to, and then use, their own regulation abilities to help their child respond adaptively to the sensory environment around them. By using specific sensory regulation strategies as well as teaching the child and parent how to regulate together, children are making faster changes and that the parent child relationship often reaps the benefits!

Some questions to help get you started with understanding your own child's sensory regulation needs:

- 1) Does your child consistently do anything- however inappropriate- when upset or emotionally vulnerable? How can your child get this same type of input in a safe and appropriate way?
- 2) Is your child putting things in their mouth frequently?
- 3) Does your child tend to move around a lot, or remain still during their play?
- 4) What type of touch does your child seek out- or avoid?

If you are interested in learning more about sensory processing and regulation, please feel free to contact me at jen.krull@ctn-madison.com

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