

Making Sense of Sensory Differences: Helping Children Thrive Through Sensory Smarts

Native American Child and Family Conference



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3:00-4:30 PM**



Facilitators



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Head Start Regional TTA Network

During Our Time Together

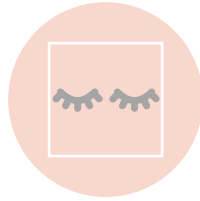
- Understand how children's senses shape their behavior and learning.
- Recognize how sensory experiences guide the way children move through their day.
- Adapt environments and expectations to help children improve developmental outcomes.



Consider What Makes You a Sensory Being?



We experience the world through our senses every day, often without noticing.



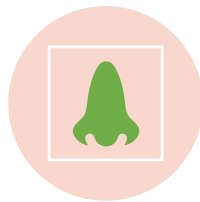
See? What visuals capture your attention? Color? Light? Movement?



Hear? What sounds calm you or energizes you?



Feel? What textures or sensations bring you comfort or alert your body?



Smell? What scents spark memories or shift your mood?



Taste? What flavors remind you of home or make you feel grounded?

Sensory Learning

How do babies learn about the world around them?



Sensory Systems

The 8 Sensory Systems

Auditory

What you hear, space-time relationships, influences regulation, spatial awareness, muscle tone and balance



Visual (sight)

What you can see, visual cortex at back of skull; connected to vestibular and proprioceptive systems

Olfactory (smell)

What you can smell, olfactory bulb directly connected to the limbic system



Gustatory (taste)

Taste and motor processes for eating, breathing etc.
Sensations: chewy, crunchy, salty, sour, sweet, spicy, hot and cold



Tactile (touch)

Touch receptors send feedback about pain, vibration and temperature, deep pressure and light touch have different receptors

Vestibular

Any time you move you are getting vestibular input, the vestibular system in the inner ear detects gravity, motion, movement and space-time relationship, important for balance.



Proprioception

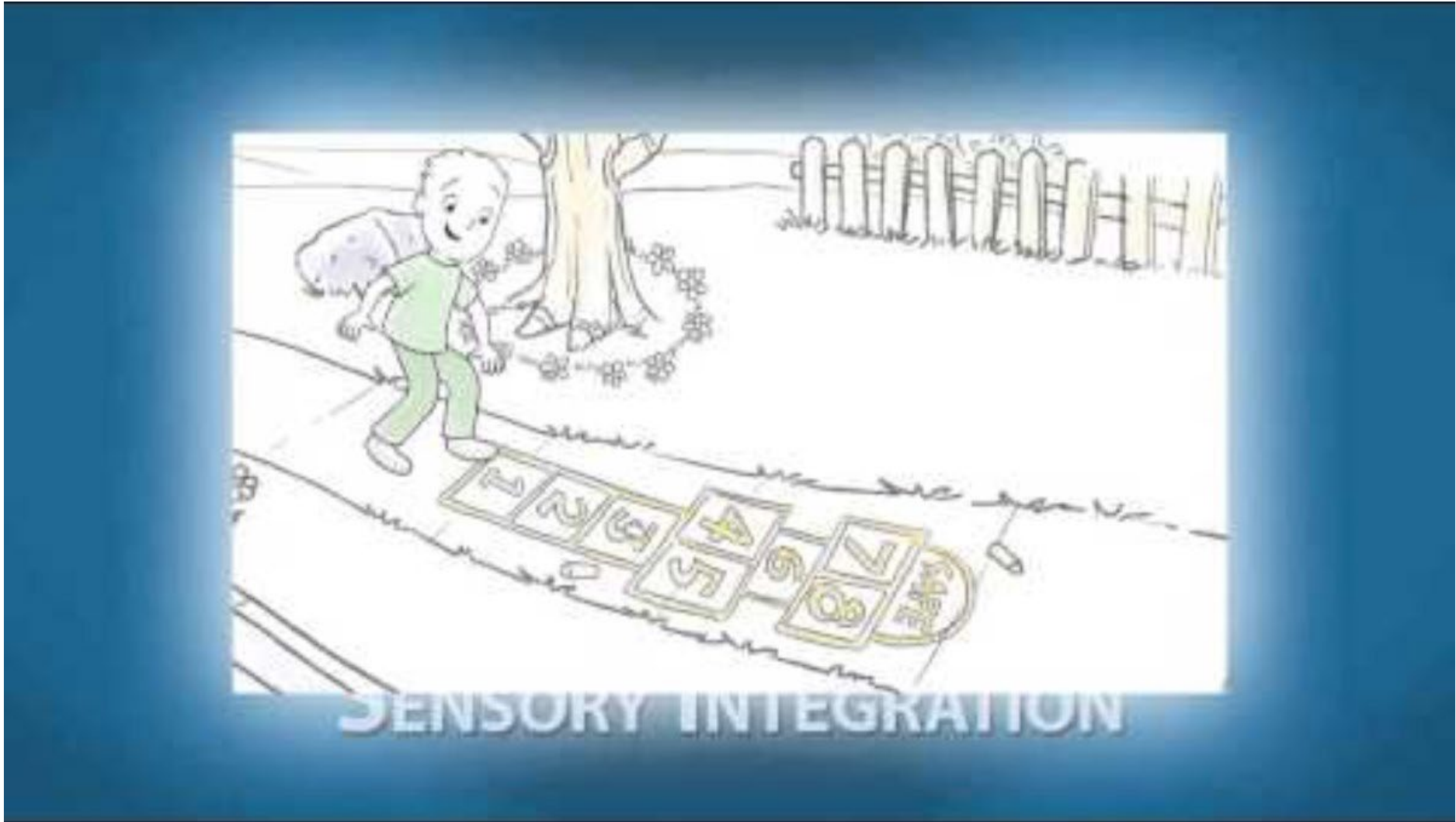
Sense of your body in space, body boundaries and what is self; works with vestibular and tactile to create a foundation for efficient movement, body map and orientation

Interoception

An awareness of your internal states (hunger, thirst, emotion, temperature etc.) and systems (heart, kidneys, bladder, skin, hormones, lungs, stomach, intestines)



Sensory Integration



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Activity: String Game



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Sensory Processing Disorder

Sensory Processing Disorder happens when a child's brain has trouble organizing and responding to sensory input.

Children may be **over-responsive** (too sensitive) or **under-responsive** (not sensitive enough) to sounds, textures, movement, or touch.



Sensory Processing Differences

What You Might Notice:

- Big reactions to noise and touch
- Picky eating or avoiding messy play
- Covering ears or avoiding certain textures
- Constant movement or seeing strong sensory input

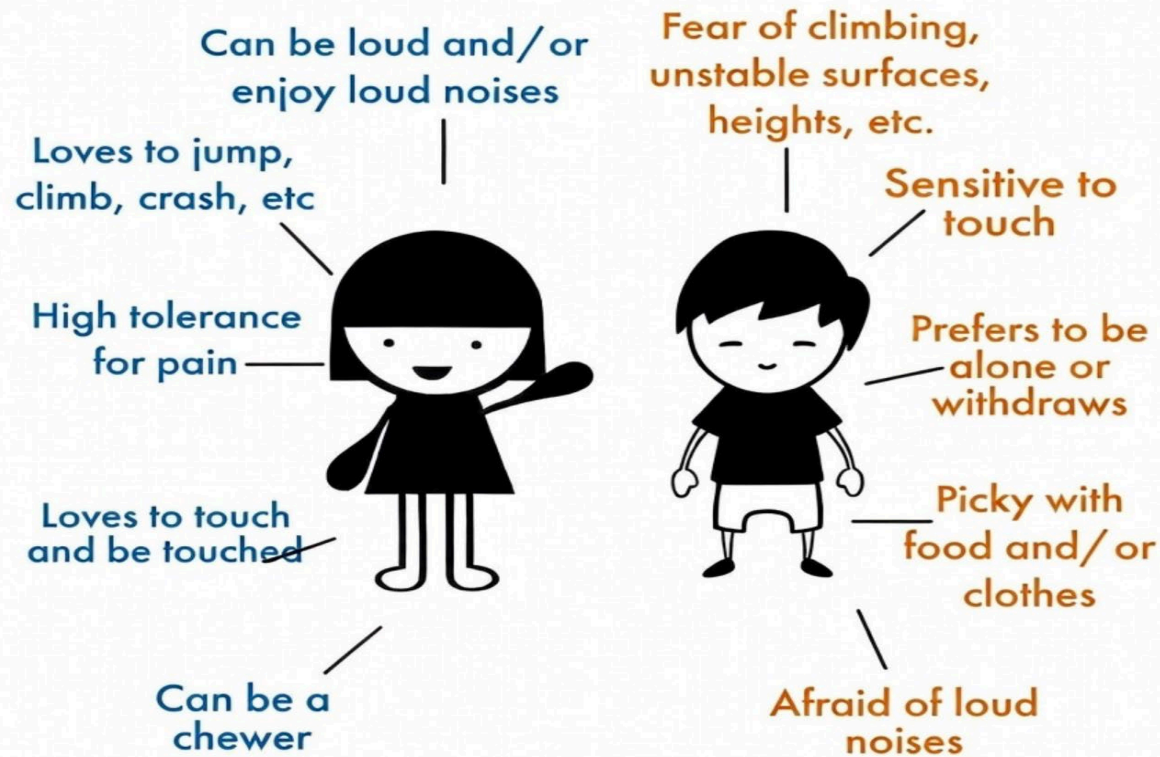
Why Early Support Matters:

Early intervention – often with an occupational therapist (OT) helps children

- Improve participation in daily routines
- Build emotional regulation skills
- Increase comfort and success in the classroom



Sensory Seeker VS Sensory Sensitive



Understanding Sensory Differences

Group Activity

- **Sensory Triggers:** What might dysregulate a child?
- **Sensory Glimmers:** What helps a child feel calm or happy?
- **Regulation Support:** How can you to do support a child that is dysregulated?



Teachers that are Sensitive and Have High Regard for Children...



Educator plans for instruction

Child is ready for learning



- Are **proactive and intentionally** plan for interactions.
- Are **aware and responsive** to children's emotional and behavioral needs and cues.
- Connect through planned **back-and-forth** exchanges to solve child's problems.
- Encourage children to **problem solve, share feelings and ideas, and promote independence.**

Sensory Differences Impact on Daily Life

How Sensory Differences Show Up in the Classroom

- **Transitions:** Extreme difficulty switching from one activity to another.
- **Self-Care:** Struggles with dressing, grooming, and hygiene.
- **Eating:** Refusal to eat certain foods due to texture, smell, or taste.
- **Social Interaction:** Difficulty understanding personal space and potential to accidentally hurt peers during play.



Key Sensory Behaviors in Preschoolers

- **Emotional & Behavioral:**

Frequent, extreme meltdowns and tantrums, difficulty transitioning between activities, rigidity, and being overly controlling or bossy.

- **Motor Skill Challenges:**

Poor coordination, clumsiness, difficulty with fine motor tasks like using crayons or scissors, or low muscle tone.

- What sensory behaviors have you noticed in your classrooms?



Making Sensory Differences Manageable

- Understand your children's behaviors and cues.
- Design **supportive environments** (visual cues, social stories, a buddy, timers).
- Use behavior cues, proactive behavior strategies, and positive commenting to support children during transitions.



Making Sensory Differences Manageable

- **Environmental Accommodations:** Creating "quiet zones," using noise-canceling headphones, and reducing clutter to minimize sensory overload.
- **Routine:** Maintaining a predictable, structured, and consistent daily schedule.
- **Sensory Diet:** A personalized activity plan developed by an OT, incorporating movement breaks, heavy work (pushing/pulling), and tactile, visual, or auditory stimulation to keep the child regulated.



Traditional Ways of Making Sensory Differences Manageable

- **Connection to nature** – time outside, land based play, nature immersion for grounding and sensory regulation.
- **Smudging and sensory rituals** – using sage/smoke, essential oils, or calming scents for emotional/sensory calm.
- **Storytelling and cradle board lessons** – traditional stories teach harmony; cradleboards provide deep pressure and security.
- **Ceremonies, prayer, and community involvement** – community, family participation in healing circles or songs or collective support.
- **Sensory-friendly cultural activities** – drumming, dance, art, basket weaving for regulation and engagement.



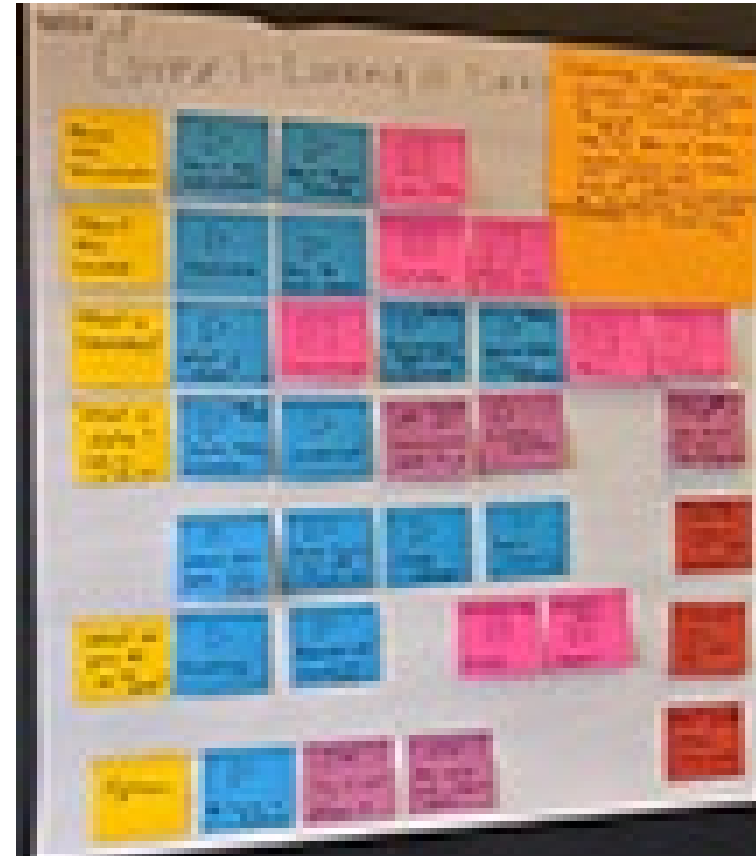
Connecting Daily Practices to Sensory Needs

Group Activity

Purpose: To recognize how classroom and outdoor spaces are setup, materials, and routines can support children with different sensory needs.



Gallery Walk



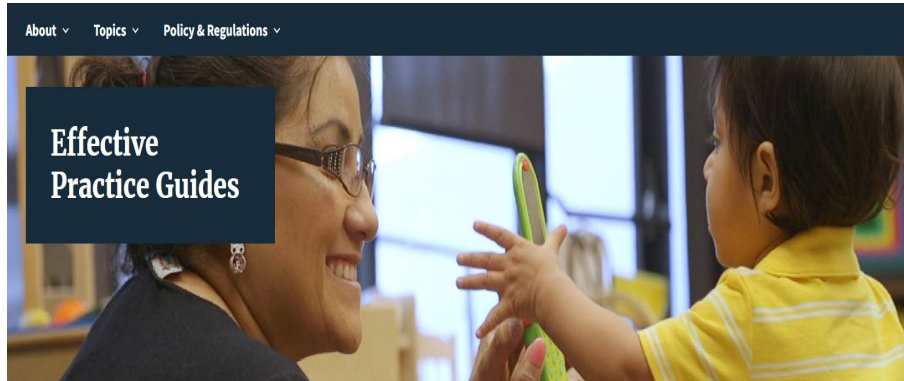
Helping Children Thrive Through Sensory Smarts

What is one change you can make in your classroom next week to support sensory needs?

- Environment
- Materials
- Routines
- Teacher response



Professional Development Resources



[Head Start.Gov Training Resources](#)



Tribal Language Revitalization Report



AIAN Teacher Webinar Series



Schedules and Routines in AIAN Programs



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- **AIAN TTA Mission:** To build strong partnerships with AIAN communities to enhance Tribal Head Start program capacity.
- **AIAN TTA Vision:** “Stronger Partnerships. Stronger Programs. Stronger Tribal Futures.”

Thank you!

