

ALL BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION



All behavior is a form of communication. Adults and children are communicating something through their behavior every part of every day, whether they are aware of it or not. The goal as an educator is to understand what is driving the behaviors. Certain behaviors can indicate to a teacher that the child is having an easy or hard time with things such as paying attention, readiness to learn, and ability to play with their friends.

Some behaviors communicate a desire for attention, a certain activity, sensory stimulation, or a break; while other behaviors that a child may want to avoid something, such as a loud noise, a crowded group setting, or a transition. Imagine you have a student in your group who refuses to sit still at circle time. It may be easy to jump to the conclusion that the child is being difficult or choosing to not cooperate. If instead we can switch to think “this child may need

a break” or “this child is not feeling heard” it changes how a teacher responds to that child. Switching how we think about a child’s behavior with the perspective that all behavior is communicating something creates opportunities for teachers to figure out what that need is.

There are also many behaviors such as pushing in line, avoiding group activities, putting hands over their ears, or refusing to put on clothing that is itchy or scratchy that teachers can misinterpret or mis-label as “bad behaviors” when in fact there may be something bigger going on. These types of behaviors can indicate that the child is having a hard time processing sensory information. This is often related to a child having what is referred to as a sensory sensitivity or sensory processing disorder.

Understanding Sensory Processing

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Humans have eight senses that make up our sensory system. These senses help us take in, process, and respond to all types of information from the world around us. These senses include: Hearing, sight, smell, taste, touch, awareness of our bodies in space (proprioceptive input), awareness of our body's movement and relationship to gravity (vestibular input), and awareness of our own bodily functions and feelings (interoceptive input). All people process this sensory information in different ways and with different preferences and thresholds. Some people notice a small amount of sensory information very quickly, while other people need a lot of sensory information to even notice it. Some people like the feeling of a certain kind of input and want a lot of it, while some people may be more sensitive and tend to avoid that input. Sensory processing is something we all do and every person's sensory system is unique to them. It is important to remember that a sensory processing difference does not always indicate a sensory processing problem!

When to Refer to an Occupational Therapist:

Sometimes a child's sensory system can be so unique that it interferes with their ability to participate in daily routines like eating, getting dressed, sitting down to read a book or play a game, or playing with friends. As a preschool teacher if you start to notice any of the kinds of behaviors listed below and these behaviors are interfering with the child's classroom participation, that child may benefit from specialized help. Set a time aside to have a conversation with the parents about what you are noticing. In these conversations you can refer a parent to consult with their pediatrician and to get an evaluation from an Occupational Therapist. The goal of occupational therapy is to help the child participate in the things they want and need to do throughout their day, including at home, at school, and out in the community. An Occupational Therapist will work with the family and child to come up with a treatment plan and goals. This may include identification of what kind(s) of sensory input a child is struggling with and developing a list of activities or strategies that can help the child process and respond to sensory input in a way that helps them participate more successfully in their learning experience.

Behaviors that may indicate the need for an Occupational Therapy Evaluation:

1. Distracted by or frequent commenting on sounds, textures, or smells more often than peers.
2. Avoiding or becoming distressed by messy play, such as mud, playdough, glue, food, paint, etc.
3. Highly distractible, difficulty with attention or learning new concepts during stationary tasks.
4. Difficulty sitting still in their seat, fidgeting, wanting to get up and stand or walk during stationary classroom tasks.
5. Poor awareness of where their body is in space, clumsy, frequent running into peers or equipment, hitting their head or limbs when climbing, very high pain tolerance
6. Frequent slumping or leaning their trunk or head down on their desk.
7. Often mis-calculating their own strength, such as breaking pencils or crayons during coloring or writing or accidentally using too much force during play with peers



O pours bucket after bucket of water on her face to cool down. S sits in a whiskey barrel of lavender, enjoying her time at the PlayGarden.

Examples at the PlayGarden:

At the PlayGarden we spend most of our school day out in the garden. Here are a few examples of behaviors we have noticed amongst our students with sensory sensitivities and how that translate to their time in the garden:

Sensory Seekers

Children that are sensory seekers may do a range of different things in the garden to meet the need for sensory input. They may enjoy dropping gravel down the drain, jumping into the mud pit and covering themselves completely in mud, or picking the tops of flowers off their stems and watching the petals fall to the ground over and over again.

Some of these behaviors can appear to adults as disruptive to the class, the main activity or the garden. However, using the perspective of all behavior is communication, an inclusive educator sees these behaviors not as disruptive but as a reminder that that behavior is doing something important for the child's emotional and physical regulation.

Ask yourself:

- What could that behavior be doing for the child?
- What are they trying to communicate with their actions?

For example, dropping gravel down a drain may at first seem annoying or unnecessary to an adult but in fact that the act of scooping and pouring gravel and listening to the pebbles fall into the drain may be helping a child feel calm and at ease or it may help them release pent up energy after having been at circle for thirty minutes right before.

Sophie is a young girl with Autism. She loves to pick flowers and pull off all the leaves and petals. We do not know what this behavior is doing for Sophie but we do know it is important for her and proves to be incredibly calming. If picking flowers in this way is not conducive to your garden space, you can encourage the child to continue picking flowers but direct them to do it in a more contained way.

Sensory-Avoidant

You may have a child in your group that you want to introduce to the garden but they are sensory avoidant. For example, they may be averse to having their hands get dirty or are uncomfortable with different temperatures or textures.

There are many ways to help students with sensory disabilities engage with the garden in a way that is still comfortable for them. Do your best to figure out what element of the

gardening is making them uncomfortable (such as the temperature of the soil, the texture of the worm, or the smells of certain things) and remove that element if you can.

Remember that even if a child pulls away from an activity such as planting with their hands they may still want to watch. In this case, help them to experience the various elements by narrating what you see, what you feel and what you notice.

There are signs you can look for that will help you better understand if a child is having trouble processing sensory information. Some examples include:

- A child covering their ears around loud noises such as at circle time.
- A child avoiding the snack or lunch table. This could mean the child is overly sensitive to smells and there are too many smells around the table to process or that the table is too crowded, cluttered, with other students
- A child avoiding group activities as they could be too overstimulating for them.

