



Being sensational: A clinician's perspective

Chris Everdell



About the author – Chris Everdell, BSc, OT Reg(ON), is an occupational therapist who has been working with children for 26 years, with the last 15 in private practice. In her experience, each of us faces sensory challenges on a daily basis and our enjoyment of life is dependent on the little coping strategies we develop. She enjoys exploring sensation from a clinical perspective and passing on these strategies to anyone (friends, family, strangers...you name it!) who will listen.

I am an occupational therapist, I am married, I have a family, I have two dogs, I am a Canadian. I look and act “normal”. But perfume makes me sick, loud sounds distract me, and quick movement makes me dizzy. These are some of the many little issues that drive me crazy on any given day. Most people think I am just “quirky” because my little issues don’t stop me from leading a very full and joyful life. That’s what I used to think too. I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t handle something when the people around me could. I can’t begin to describe how I feel when I am eating a really lovely meal, in a really lovely restaurant, with my really lovely husband, and all of a sudden I am enveloped in a cloud of another person’s perfume. I can no longer enjoy the meal, the environ-

ment, or the company. I am an adult with bags full of knowledge about sensory processing and there I sit barely able to cope. Well, I do cope. This is my story about me, and about the children I work with.

I often cope in ways that many people might find embarrassing (you can speak to my daughter about that) or silly, or way too easy. “What do you mean that chewing gum helps you feel calmer? If it’s therapy shouldn’t it be more scientific and way more expensive?” When I go to the movie theatre, I bring a vanilla “Lip Smacker” to rub around my nostrils (then all I smell is the vanilla which is a scent that I like and can tolerate) and a scarf (which I wrap around my head) or ear plugs so that the sound of people chewing popcorn doesn’t distract me from Daniel Craig (aka

James Bond). I sit near the back so that the fast visual input doesn’t make me sick to my stomach and I chew gum. I enjoy the movie, I feel okay, and I haven’t really bothered anyone else with my coping techniques.

This stuff works for me. I don’t want my poor processing skills to stop me from enjoying life. Convincing other people that my strategies are okay and that they are part of me is the challenge. Without these strategies I would become very sick. It is devastating to my health to let these sensations take over my body. On the outside, people see a person who doesn’t look like she has anything wrong with her. So do I really need all of these relatively simple solutions and strategies? You bet I do! Thank goodness I spend my days working in a therapy clinic that focuses on such things. It is where I belong: working with children who are wonderful human beings but who need some help tolerating the world around them and convincing the world that they need some help with it. They are not spoiled children whose parents have let behaviours get out of hand, which is often implied by those who don’t understand sensory processing, especially when it isn’t working well. These children often don’t look any different from their peers, but they work so hard trying to be like their peers that the adult perception is one of poor behaviour.

As an occupational therapist working in pediatrics, I have taken the time and had the ambition to support the development of my knowledge of sensory processing. When I started working in pediatrics 25 years ago, I knew I was missing something when all I did was gross and fine motor assessments. Since coming to the realization that sensory processing could fill in that missing piece of the puzzle, I have grown both personally and professionally.

I am passionate about the children I work with and even more so for the area in which I have developed extensive knowledge and skills: sensory processing. I love sharing my own knowledge but sometimes I wish I could just hook up a tube to the parent of a client and transfer what I know right into their brain. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way. I am continually astounded by, and celebrate, the amount of new information bombarding us with regard to sensory

processing. Fifteen years ago there were very few books available, especially in user-friendly versions for parents and teachers. Now, with easy access to the internet and so many great books available, parents, caregivers, and teachers can find some answers to their questions and some strategies that might assist them. Leaders in the area of sensory processing such as Winnie Dunn, Lucy Miller, and Carol Stock Kranowitz have made life so much easier for all of us.

Though we don't realize we are discussing them, sensory topics are common conversation topics: "Hey, can you smell that wonderful lasagna", "wow, those tarts look fabulous", "I love to listen to this music", "it feels so cold in here", "did you enjoy the spectacular spring weather today?" Sensation is all around us, every moment of the day, but few of us choose to pay attention to it or examine how it affects us from moment to moment.

In my job I spend a lot of time analyzing sensations and trying to figure out why someone (a child in particular) reacts the way he/she does. I spend time

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reading and attending conferences to learn more, but the best learning for me occurs with the children around me. They fascinate me, they have so many brave and cool ideas of what to do with their bodies. All of what appear to be my great ideas really come from them. I just put them into a user-friendly format for their parents and those adults around them who are struggling with the "whys" of the behaviour. My standard line in order to help people understand some of the strategies used is that chewing gum is just as important to help me pay attention as my glasses are to help me see or a hearing aid that helps my grandmother hear.

I spend a lot of time educating those around me, whether it is at work, a family gathering, or a social event. I love watching how sensation affects how we behave or respond to different situations. I recently visited my brother and his partner in Virginia. We spent an evening talking about their sensory processing, especially with regard to food and smells. It was fun, interesting, and they had so much to say about it.

One of my big goals in dealing with adults who help the children I work with is to educate them about their own bodies. I feel that without some knowledge of their own sensory processing it is very difficult to try and help a child. It's sort of like the flight attendant telling you that you "have to put on

your own oxygen mask before you can help someone beside you". It is vital that you have an understanding of your own body (what makes you feel good and keep feeling good, what allows you to learn, work, and have fun) before you can ever become the sensory detective for a child or anyone else. We all process sensation differently and that processing varies from moment to moment throughout the day. Sometimes it's great, sometimes it's not. One day your sensory processing state will allow you to have a good day, the next it might be a bad day. Having an understanding of the process is necessary in order to help either yourself or someone else. I feel driven to help people understand that there may not always be an immediate answer or a clear strategy but if you understand why and how sensory processing works then you will be that much closer to finding it.

I recently presented a workshop to parents, teachers, and therapists. My goal was to teach them about their own bodies while engaging them in sensation in order to maximize their learning. We had fidgets, seat cushions, gum, movement breaks, and visual, auditory, and participatory activities. The time was spent examining sensation and the individual and diverse reactions and coping strategies. Feedback from this workshop was overwhelmingly positive. Many people felt that they had a better understanding of the sensations they process, the absence of a real "normal", and how to become a detective when looking at sensation.

When I see a child I always consider: (1) If the behaviour/reaction/response to the sensation is safe and (2) If it is socially appropriate to the situation. If not, then I will work with the child, the parents, and the other adults involved (for example, at school) to

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find an alternate form of the sensation that meets the above criteria. This is no easy job. Lots of resistance is met along the way from all involved. Change is not easy.

Think of a child who can't tolerate floral scents living with a parent who wears scented body lotions and perfumes daily. Sounds like a simple change. Believe it or not, this type of change is one of the hardest to sort out and to deal with. First of all, determining what is really bothering the child is a challenge. Then asking the parent to change what she has been doing as part of her daily routine is the second challenge.

The parent might need the scented products to help her be alert and feeling in a “just right state”. The child becomes extremely hyperactive around the floral scents and may go into a meltdown. How do you meet the sensory needs of both individuals? It takes lots of experimenting, a willingness to change, and never giving up.

Since there is no specific recipe card for dealing with sensory processing difference and often what you try one day may not work the next, helping can become quite frustrating. Convincing caregivers that the child’s actions are not purely behaviour-based, or actions of a spoiled child, is another barrier. The fact that many of the strategies don’t require expensive therapy equipment tends to make people put less faith or value in them. Follow-through can often be impeded by these attitudes. I often receive comments from adults that if all it takes is a wiggle cushion then it can’t really be that serious and the child just needs to put up with it. This can be very discouraging. When this happens I start educating again. I point out what makes good sensory processing happen and that it is a 24/7 process for everybody, everywhere. Just because it doesn’t look broken (like a cast on a broken arm) doesn’t mean that it’s working.

Sensory processing should be a standard area of learning within all occupational therapy programs. It affects every age group and every type of person. How can we ignore it? I encourage all therapists to read, attend a conference, or delve into whatever type of education that will help you learn about sensory processing. It affects us all. It is with us from moment to moment. We can’t ignore it anywhere or anytime, in any walk of life.