



Supporting Caregivers with Challenging Children
Strategies and Tools to Help You and Your Child Stay Regulated Together

Sensory Basics

Important Points

- **Awareness of Ourselves and Our World** – Our senses give us information about our world and our place in it so we can effectively interact and engage.
 - Vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch tell us about the external world.
 - Body awareness (proprioception and interoception) and our sense of balance and motion (vestibular) provide information about our bodies. Proprioception gives us awareness of our body position and the vestibular sense detects gravity and lets us know how fast and where we are moving. Interoception provides information about what our body feels or needs regarding rest and sleep, hunger and thirst, toileting, and other internal sensations.
- **Safety and Protection** – Protecting us is an important job of our sensory system. Light touch, sudden or loud sounds, abrupt movement, and seeing things moving quickly in our peripheral vision alert our brain to potential danger. When our sensory systems sense danger, our body reacts automatically, for instance brushing an insect off our arm or reaching out to catch ourselves during a fall. If the threat is serious, our nervous system will trigger a fight, flight, or freeze response.
- **Foundational and Functional** – Sensory processing lays the groundwork for the development of many other skills, such as gross and fine motor skills, self-care skills, play, focus and attention, academic learning, regulating our emotions and behavior, and engaging in relationships. No one's sensory system is "perfect." When sensory systems are functioning reasonably smoothly, one is able to develop higher-level skills and get a "clear picture" of their world and themselves that is good enough so they can do the things they need to. See Figure 1 below.
- **Harder and Harsher** – When sensory processing is not working smoothly we may not fully develop the higher-level skills most take for granted. Things that are simple for most are more difficult and take more effort, such as getting dressed or grooming, completing routines, or even sitting up unsupported with little effort. For others, our nervous system does not appropriately filter incoming information so our system gets easily overloaded. In both of these cases, the added frustration and overload often results in frequent frustration, meltdowns, and other big behaviors.

- **Supporting Our Kids Using a Sensory Lens** – As caregivers we have a lot of influence on our children and their world. There are three main ways we can help our child’s sensory system be more organized.
 - **Body-based Strategies** – Some sensory input is inherently calming. This includes heavy work (e.g. pushing, pulling, climbing, lifting, chewy snacks, and stretching), deep pressure (e.g. hugs, pillow squishes, and compression shirts), and deep breath (e.g. suction top water bottles, cotton ball blowing games and bubbles). Working these activities into you and your child’s day can help “fill their bucket” so they have more reserves when things are hard.
 - **Environmental Strategies** – For kids who are sensitive to sensory input, having cozy, calm, and quiet spaces available for them to retreat to can be helpful. For kids who need a lot of input to feel calm having access to spaces where they can move their bodies safely can help them regulate. Many kids will need both.
 - **Relationship Strategies** – Everyone’s sensory system is unique. When caregivers engage with their child with empathy and understanding for their experience they can help the child better tolerate their experience and gain skills. Sometimes the sensory needs and sensitivities of a child and their caregiver can be a mismatch, but having awareness of this can help the caregivers care for their own system while supporting their child.

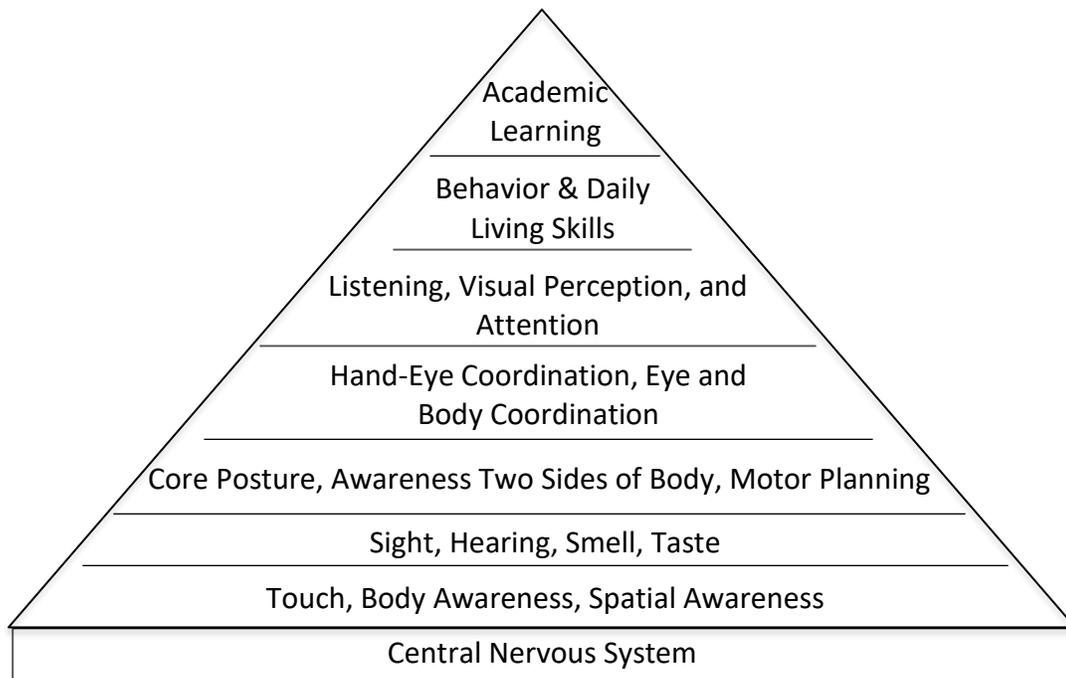


Figure 1. Skills and Learning Pyramid (adapted from Williams & Shellenberger)

3 Easy Things to Try

- Reflect on three things you the caregiver do for yourself to feel organized and calm. What are those sensory inputs?
- Observe what your child is seeking from a sensory standpoint when they are organized and at their best.

- Be a detective when your child is struggling. What are they seeking or avoiding when they are having a hard time? Be curious about the preceding moments or hours before a meltdown.

For More Information

Short and Sweet

- Understanding Sensory Processing Disorder - <https://sensoryhealth.org/basic/understanding-sensory-processing-disorder> (Star Institute Website)
- Sensory Minis – https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRlp_tHeeTI0Q50XBxLvIF_IOPfhiaSoQ (Short YouTube Videos)

Deeper Dives

- ***The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*** by Carol Stock Kranowitz (Book)
- ***Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Processing Issues*** by Lindsey Biel and Nancy Peske (Book)
- ***Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)*** by Lucy Jane Miller (Book)

For more information on this and other topics link to the podcast based training series found on our website, www.ctn-madison.com