



A Sensory Life

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“Fight or Flight” Response

Understanding and Addressing the Sympathetic Nervous System

Research shows that children with sensory processing disorder and sensory processing differences have a greater tendency to switch from the PNS (parasympathetic nervous system) to the SNS (sympathetic nervous system) based on adverse sensory input or an environment with new or a great amount of sensory stimuli. This is often referred to as sensory overload.

Parasympathetic nervous system: This is where our nervous remains most of the time and when we are at “ready state” for learning, social interaction, and alert and awake.

Sympathetic nervous system: The state of “fight or flight”. This part of our nervous system is intended for safety and the ability to react in a dangerous situation.

Why do we See our Sensory Kids in “Fight or Flight”?

Children with sensory defensiveness or over-register sensory input perceive their environment as dangerous and painful based on how they process sensory information. Therefore their nervous system switches to the SNS and displays a “fight or flight” response. A child who has a difficult time processing and modulating sensory input can also have the tendency to switch to “fight or flight”. And almost all sensory kiddos have a difficult time with self-regulation, in turn, a greater risk for “fight or flight” episodes.

What Does “Fight or Flight” Look Like?

There are many different manifestations of “fight or flight” but some common responses may be:

1. Hitting, kicking, biting, spitting, pushing (especially while standing in line or in new challenging/overwhelming situations or activities)
2. Trying to run or escape from the situation
3. Trying to hide under something like a desk, table, or chair
4. Burying themselves in a teacher’s arms, avoiding all eye contact, or trying to curl up in a ball on the floor or at their desk
5. Covering ears or eyes
6. Crying or screaming
7. Shutting down completely and not speaking or responding
8. Even falling asleep unexpectedly

What Do You Do? How to Respond

1. Do NOT treat it from a behavioral stand point; your efforts will be fruitless. The brain is not responding in a cortical manner (thinking, judgment, and reasoning), it has shifted to brainstem level during a “fight or flight” episode.
2. Remove the child from the adverse stimuli and decrease sensory stimuli to a minimum
3. Provide a “sensory retreat” for the child, such as a play tent loaded with pillows, a pillow cave, or a squish box in a quiet and low stimuli environment. In the sensory retreat include calming sensory tools such as soft music, vibration, an oral sensory tool, a fidget and/or a weighted blanket.
4. Allow for the child to come out of the sensory retreat on their own terms
5. Do not try to talk the child through it or calm in that fashion, this in itself can be overwhelming and the child’s brain is not ready for that type of interaction yet.

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