

Therapro Webinar



Are Sensory Sensitivities Interfering with Learning? Strategies for Evaluation and Treatment

Tuesday May 11, 2021 7:00 PM – 8:30 PM

Karen M. Moore, OTR/L

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Handout for the Therapro webinar ***Are Sensory Sensitivities Interfering with Learning? Strategies for Evaluation and Treatment*** presented by Karen Moore, OTR/L - May 11, 2021

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Karen Moore is an occupational therapist, a graduate of Worcester State College, who worked in mental health at Worcester State Hospital and on the Acute Adult Psychiatric Unit at UMASS Medical Center. Her career long commitment to the study of sensory modalities for treatment culminated in the development of the Sensory Connection Program and the publication of three books: *The SCP Activities for Mental Health Treatment (2005)*, *The SCP Self-Regulation Workbook (2008)*, and *The SCP Curriculum for Self-Regulation (2015)*. She studied the relationship of Allen Cognitive Level Screening results and patient demographics, diagnosis and disposition resulting in publication (Henry, Moore, Quinlivan, & Triggs, 1998). She led a clinical research project on the efficacy of using the Wilbarger Protocol, an intensive sensory treatment program, with patients with psychiatric diagnoses along with sensory defensiveness, PTSD, and self-injurious behaviors (Moore & Henry, 2002). Over the years Karen has presented on sensory related treatment to hospitals, behavioral units, community programs, college programs, nursing homes, and numerous occupational therapy conferences including MAOT, NHOTA, OTAC and SSOT/SK. She has provided training on the use of sensory modalities to enhance Crisis Intervention and Restraint and Seclusion Reduction initiatives as well as for Trauma Informed Care.

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Detecting Bothersome Input School Version



Sometimes there are things in the environment or certain sensory experiences or situations that make us uncomfortable or upset. This is a brainstorming activity to help you discover bothersome sensory input.

Consider the following list of times and situations that can be problematic. Make a few notes regarding any bothersome sensory input that you experience during these times. For example, if you are a person who is bothered by being touched by others then going shopping might be troublesome, especially standing in lines. If you are bothered by crowds, taking the bus might be uncomfortable.

Note that there can be many reasons why these situations might bother you but we are trying to focus on sensory experiences that might be uncomfortable or irritating.

If you identify and problematic times or situations use the *Sensory Sensitivities – What Can We Do?* poster to brainstorm possible solutions.

Imagine you are waking up, getting dressed and having breakfast. Any problems?

Imagine you are on your way to school or taking the bus. Any problems?

Imagine your classroom, what do you like and dislike. Any problems?

Imagine being in your classes, what helps you to listen and participate, what things make it difficult?

Imagine recess time, what do you like and dislike about recess? Any problems?

Imagine going back in to the school after recess. Any problems?

Imagine lunchtime. What do you like and dislike about lunchtime? Any problems?

Imagine taking a test. Any problems?

Imagine being in a group activity at school. What do you like and dislike? Any problems?

Imagine having to use the bathroom at school. Any problems?

Imagine going home from school. Any problems?

What do you like to do after school? Any problems?

Imagine taking a walk in the park. Any problems?

Imagine going shopping at the store. What do you like and dislike? Any problems?

Do you play sports or take any kinds of lessons or belong to any clubs or programs? Are they fun and relaxing for you? Any problems?

Imagine going to a party. What do you like and dislike about parties? Any problems?

Imagine your suppertime. Is it hectic or quiet at your house? Any problems?

What do you like to do after dinner? Any problems?

Imagine getting ready for bed. Any problems?

How about going to the doctor's or dentist? Any problems?

Are there any other times or situations that are bothersome for you?

When you are having a difficult time what are some things you do to help yourself?

When you are having a difficult time what are some things the teacher or aide or family member could do to help you?

Name _____ Date _____

SENSORY HISTORY SCREENING – School Version
Karen Moore OTR/L

Name _____

Age _____ Gender _____

Diagnosis: _____ Medications: _____

Contact Parent/Guardian _____

Significant Others: _____

Living Situation _____

Special Support at School _____

Medical History: Check applicable categories - explain

<input type="checkbox"/> General good health	<input type="checkbox"/> Gastro-intestinal problems
<input type="checkbox"/> Seizure Hx	<input type="checkbox"/> Allergies
<input type="checkbox"/> Hearing problems	<input type="checkbox"/> Ambulation/Motor problems
<input type="checkbox"/> Vision problems	<input type="checkbox"/> Past surgeries
<input type="checkbox"/> Headaches	<input type="checkbox"/> Respiratory problems
<input type="checkbox"/> Weight/nutrition problems	<input type="checkbox"/> Adaptive equipment

Check any of the following which are characteristic of individual:

<input type="checkbox"/> History of physical or psychological trauma	<input type="checkbox"/> Overly sensitive
<input type="checkbox"/> Hyperactive	<input type="checkbox"/> Unpredictable explosions of emotion
<input type="checkbox"/> Unpredictable explosions of emotions	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor self-regulation
<input type="checkbox"/> Isolative	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficult to calm once aroused
<input type="checkbox"/> Intense or tense	<input type="checkbox"/> Impulsive
<input type="checkbox"/> Controlling	<input type="checkbox"/> Perseverative verbalizations
<input type="checkbox"/> Passive	<input type="checkbox"/> Perseverative behaviors
<input type="checkbox"/> Obsessive or compulsive	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn
<input type="checkbox"/> Sensory seeking	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor sleep
<input type="checkbox"/> Sensory avoiding	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

Hygiene and Grooming

Area of strength

Circle if appropriate

Comes to school clean and dressed appropriately Takes pride in appearance

Good handwashing habits Other _____

Problem Areas

Circle if appropriate:

Poor grooming Uncomfortable in shower Dislikes hair cuts Dislikes trimming nails

Dislikes brushing teeth Dislikes hair washing/combing Dislikes face washing

Limited clothing preferences Layers clothing Frequently adjusts clothing

Avoids short sleeves Other _____

Nutrition

Area of strength

Circle if appropriate

Eats adequately at lunch Makes healthy food choices Tries new foods

Other _____

Problem Areas

Circle if appropriate:

Prefers liquids Avoids mixed textures Dislikes certain textures Picky eater

Seeks strong flavors Avoids strong flavors Ritualized eating routines

Increased gag reflex Unusual eating habits Other _____

Relationships

Area of strength

Circle if appropriate

Connected appropriately with parents or care-providers Seems well supported

Parents or care-providers are involved Strong relationships with siblings

Positive relationships with grandparents Other _____

Problem Areas

Circle if appropriate:

Difficulty with physical touch Hugs uncomfortable Difficulty trusting others

Short tempered Deliberate distancing from others Pushes people away

Difficulty with authority figures Impaired communication/self-expression Labile

Habits make others uncomfortable Other _____

Socialization

Area of Strength

Circle if appropriate

Socializes well with peers Socializes well with adults Helpful to others Takes leadership role

Has many friends Empathetic to others Considerate Uses good manners

Engaged in activities Shares well Other _____

Problem Areas

Circle if appropriate

Patterns of Isolation Difficulty with crowds Uncomfortable with self-image
Uncomfortable at parties Decreased Self Expression Impaired communication
Short tempered Difficulty with authority figures Labile Lonely
Fear of space being invaded Self-conscious Dislikes unpredictable situations
Embarrassed by habits Hyper-vigilant Other _____

Independence in Mobility

Area of Strength

Circle if appropriate

Independent in mobility Independent with mobility using equipment No problem in lines
Does well in crowded situations Good endurance Other _____

Problem Areas

Circle if appropriate:

Difficulty driving/riding in car Problems with walking Problems with stairs
Difficulty with shopping Problems with elevators/escalators Difficulty with crowds
Difficulty waiting in lines Balance problems Afraid of heights Afraid of wide-open spaces
Afraid of closed spaces Poor endurance Upset by visual stimuli (fast moving/changing images)
Difficulty walking on uneven ground Other _____

School

Area of Strength

Circle if appropriate

Motivated to learn Tries hard Able to focus Listens well Completes homework
Likes coming to school Other _____

Problem Areas

Circle if appropriate

Difficulty with focus Easily distracted Agitated by sounds others ignore Fatigues easily
Bothered by hectic environments Dislikes changes in routine Can't sit still Poor posture
Trouble being quiet Difficulty following directions Difficulty understanding questions
Daydreams Difficulty writing Difficulty with self-control Trouble communicating
Unexplained emotional outbursts Difficulty in lunchroom Problem with free/unstructured time
Difficulty in playground Other _____

Leisure/Hobbies/Exercise

Area of Strength

Circle if appropriate

Plays well with peers Enjoys sports Belongs to organized sports teams Enjoys art
Has interests beyond school Shares stories of hobbies or interests Takes lessons
Enjoys music Plays an instrument Other _____

Problem Areas

Circle if appropriate:

Difficulty in playground Uncomfortable in beach or sports clothes Easily distracted
Avoids unfamiliar activities Withdraws rather than engages Avoids sports
Balance problems Physical effort uncomfortable Upset by noise No interests
Lacks hobbies Dislikes spinning equipment/activities Fatigue Other _____

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of strengths and ways to draw on them for treatment:

Summary of problem areas:

Recommendations for treatment and follow through for school and home:

Signature of Occupational Therapist

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Sensitivities Discovery

Sometimes there are things in the environment or situations that really bother our senses but no one else seems to notice. Our reaction can be mild to severe. If we can identify these bothersome experiences there may be ways to eliminate them or at least minimize them. Read through the common irritants below and circle any that bother you. Beside the circle put an **M** for mild or an **S** for severe.

Vision

Bright lights * dim lights * flashing lights * flickering lights * darkness * strobes * changing light *
flat light * fast moving images * riding in a car (looking out windows) * other (_____)

Hearing

Loud noises * fluorescent lights * crowd noise * too many people talking * yelling * quiet *
fireworks * base drums * background noise * certain music * other (_____)

Smell

Perfume * bathrooms * bad odors * food smells * scented candles * incense * pet food *
other (_____)

Taste/Oral Motor

Lumpy food * strong tastes * messy food * mushy foods * chewing * cold drinks * hot food *
sour tastes * other (_____)

Touch

Being touched * hugs * touching things * being too close to people * sticky/messy stuff * dressing*
certain clothing * walking barefoot * showering * face washing * brushing teeth * sweating *
messy stuff * bare skin * other (_____)

Moving/balance

Exercise * bumpy surfaces * stairs * spinning * riding in a car * heights * moving quickly *
carnival rides * swinging * darkness

Spaces

Small spaces * open spaces * crowds * high places * closed doors * lunchrooms * stores *
being alone * other (_____)

Name _____ Date _____

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WHAT BOTHERS YOU?

GAME



Session 8 - Sensory Connection Curriculum for Self-Regulation

Description: The purpose of this game is to increase awareness of sensory triggers that might be causing stress or contributing to crisis situations. Sensory sensitivities are more common than we realize, especially in the mental health population. As we explore common sensory irritants, participants might find that they are not the only ones bothered by certain sensory input. This game is designed to help participants identify triggers and problem solve for ways to handle the situation. *The Sensory Sensitivities – What Can We Do* poster provides cues for potential solutions.

Objectives: To raise awareness of sensory triggers. To identify personal triggers. To problem solve for ways to handle this bothersome sensory input.

Directions: Pass out one or two of the *What Botherers You?* game cards to each participant. The first person reads a card and asks if anyone in the group has trouble with this type of sensory input. If it is something that is causing someone in the group difficulty, the *Sensory Sensitivities – What Can We Do?* poster is consulted. The card holder and then the person with the problem suggest possible solutions. If a *Sensory Cart* or example tools are available, people could explore the items for potentially helpful tools. Experiences differ, what helps one person may not help another. Participants continue to take turns reading their cards and asking if anyone has difficulty with the sensory input or situation. Be sure to ask if there are things not mentioned that are causing people difficulty. Encourage the sharing of ideas and experiences.

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This game comes from the Sensory Connection Program Curriculum for Self-Regulation. Participants in this webinar workshop have permission to make limited copies of the cards to use with their students and their own facilities.

Noisy places	People chewing gum
High places	Brushing teeth
Flickering lights	Bumpy uneven ground
Crowds	Car rides

Stairs	Standing in lines
Uncomfortable clothes	Sweating
Being touched by someone	Getting dressed or undressed
Loud noises	Certain smells

Showering	Shaving or face washing
Certain music	Mixed textures in food
Sound of chewing	Blocked vision (unable to see)
Bare legs or arms	People yelling

Certain foods	Closed rooms
Messy or sticky stuff	Hugs
Spinning or motion changes	Open spaces
Someone behind you	Confusion

Dim light	Sound of running water
Feeling unbalanced	Spinning
Sounds others would ignore	Complex visual stimuli (lots of colors/movement)
Walking in bare feet	

Sensory Sensitivities – What Can We Do?

Tell someone – ask for help.

Eliminate it.

Avoid it.

Work around it.

Use a sensory tool.

Change the time.

Prepare yourself.

Relax afterwards.

Learning About Comfort Space

Comfort space is a place you can go to decrease stress and escape from sensory bombardment. It is an area of retreat but not “sleep space.” It can be a small room or a designated corner or area of a room. Television and computers are not recommended. You will need a comfortable place to sit, adjustable lighting, and possibly a small table or shelf. Items that help you to calm down should be readily available in this area. You will go to your comfort space to make a conscious effort to calm down and regain self-control if you are anxious or overwhelmed. It is an area for relaxation, practicing deep breathing, and possibly meditation. Quiet time spent in this space prepares you for an anticipated stressful event or to help you recover from such an event. You may want to use the space at designated times during the day for stress management. Ask others in your household to respect your use of this space and to enter into this space only when invited.

Ways to use Comfort Space:

1. One to two hours following any major disruption or stressful event
2. Planned half-hour times in the morning, afternoon or evening
3. One hour before and after an expected stressful event, outing, or appointment
4. One hour after returning home from school, work or day program
5. Time for deep breathing and meditation

Appropriate Places

1. Small room or sun porch
2. Cozy area of den, kitchen, or living room
3. Corner of a room near a window



Furniture

1. Rocker, glider, beanbag chair, soft comfy chair
2. Small table, bookcase, shelf
3. Lamp with three way bulb, light on dimmer switch
4. Screen or room divider or something to make area more private

Items for Calming

1. **Auditory Input:** CD Player or iPod, relaxation tapes, books on tape, music box, sound machine, chimes, gurgling indoor water fountain, fan (white noise)
2. **Visual Input:** landscape scenes, books with beautiful pictures, photographs, plants, flowers, sculpture, art
3. **Oral motor:** gum, fireballs, beef jerky, strong mints, herbal tea, crunchy pretzels
4. **Olfactory:** scented hand cream, scented candle, smell box, scented soaps to smell, cedar pillow, potpourri, aromatherapy items
5. **Touch:** blanket or throw, weighted blanket or lap pad, Heavy Duty Dog (corn filled heavy lifelike stuffed animal), weighted shoulder pad, Koosh balls, stress balls, Chinese Iron Balls, smooth stones to manipulate, bean bags, fuzzy objects, fidget widgets, hand held fan, pillows with interesting texture
6. **Vestibular:** rocking chair or chair ball to sit on and bounce and rock gently (rocking is very calming), vibrating items and massagers
7. **Quiet Activities:** cards for solitaire, knitting or other handwork, books, poetry, art supplies for coloring or simple projects, Sudoku book, crossword puzzle book, word search book, jig saw puzzle, directions for deep breathing, cards or posters with positive affirmations.

Planning Comfort Space Worksheet

Purpose: This exercise is to help you plan a comfort space in your home environment.

Directions: Use ideas from the previous page. Brainstorm with group members, friends, and family members for answers to these questions. Just for fun make a few “wish list” choices and then identify some practical things that you know you can acquire.

1. How will you use your comfort space? In what circumstances do you think it could be helpful?

2. Identify an area in your home that could become your comfort space. What are the pros and cons of this particular space? What steps will you need to take to claim this area for your comfort space?

3. What type of seating and lighting and furniture could you use?

4. What items from each sensory category could you make available to help you calm down and relax?
 - a. Auditory

 - b. Visual

 - c. Oral/motor

 - d. Olfactory (Smell)

 - e. Touch

 - f. Vestibular

 - g. Quiet Activities

5. Picture yourself using your comfort space. Describe what the space is like and what you are doing.

6. What will you need to do to make this comfort space a reality? Who could help you? Make a plan.

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DEEP BREATHING EXERCISES

Deep breathing, also called diaphragmatic breathing; it is the most basic relaxation exercise. By breathing slowly and deeply from the abdomen a person can enter a deep state of relaxation anywhere, anytime, with no special equipment or training. It works best if it is practiced on a daily basis. Even a few breaths can help the body to calm down. Ideally you should work up to ten and then twenty minutes of deep breathing each day. Make yourself comfortable. You can lie down on your back with the head supported by a pillow and possibly another pillow under the knees. One drawback to this position is that people fall asleep. This can be used to your advantage at night, but it is not a full deep breathing experience unless you remain focused on the breathing. You can also sit in the lotus position with the legs crossed in front or in a semi lotus position with one leg extended. Sitting on a pillow makes this position more comfortable for some people. You can also sit in a chair. It is important to be comfortable.

* * * * *

- ❖ Close your eyes and put your hands gently on the stomach in order to feel the breaths. Inhale deeply through the nose feeling the abdomen expand as you breathe in. Pause, and then slowly exhale with your mouth and lips puckered as if blowing bubbles. That helps to slow down the breathing. Exhale until the lungs feel empty.
- ❖ Continue to breathe in and out slowly and deeply—in through the nose and out through pursed lips. Make sure the stomach expands and contracts with the breaths; if the shoulders rise and fall instead, your breathing is still shallow and only expanding the chest area.
- ❖ One way to make the breaths more rhythmic is to count to four slowly as you inhale, pause, and then exhale slowly to the count of four.
- ❖ Focus on your breathing. When your thoughts wander, just bring them back to focus on the breathing. If worries come into your mind, just set them aside and refocus. This becomes easier with practice.
- ❖ Each time you breathe out, try to relax the body a little bit more. If a particular area is tense, focus on relaxing it as you exhale.
- ❖ Continue to breathe for just a few minutes or as long as twenty minutes. When ready to stop, open your eyes slowly and continue a few more breaths and remain still for a few minutes before returning to other activities.
- ❖ The more you practice, the more helpful the breathing exercises will become. It is easier to utilize them in times of stress if you have practiced regularly.

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Learn to” Voo” Breathe

Peter Levine, PhD, founder of Somatic Experiencing, describes a powerful strategy called “Voo Breathing” to help in times of distress.

Voo Breathing is a simple deep breathing technique in which you vocalize a “voooo” sound with the outbreath; it is like a foghorn sound that vibrates the belly. Toning with this type of sound will open, expand, and vibrate the organs in the belly and stimulate the vagus nerve, facilitating calming an overactive nervous system or activating/balancing a shutdown nervous system.

“Voo” Breathing Instructions

1. Sit in a comfortable quiet place with your feet on the floor.
2. **Slowly inhale a full breath. (Approximately 4 seconds) On the out breath say “Voo” as you slowly exhale (Approximately 8 seconds). Say it loud enough that you feel the vibration in your body. Sustain the sound throughout the whole exhalation.**
3. Pause, wait for the next breath to come in on its own. If you like repeat several times.
4. Pause again and notice your body. Notice any parts that feel more enlivened or relaxed.

You can do this exercise many times throughout the day, especially when you begin to feel stress, tension or anxiety.

You can also use “Voo” Breathing at bed-time to settle your nervous system before sleep.

DIRECTIONS FOR BEANBAG TAPPING

Did you know?

Beanbag tapping is an activity that provides strong deep pressure touch input to the body.

- It helps people become more in touch with the sensations of their own body, especially if the sensory system is disrupted by illness.
- It helps to provide a feeling of “alert calmness” that is a comfortable feeling of being stable, composed, and receptive to conversation and activity.
- The brain craves information and tapping provides good feedback from the receptors of the body helping the sensory system to be more organized and functional.
- It gives a healthy touch experience.
- Taps need to be firm enough to reach the deep pressure touch receptors under the skin.
- Light tapping can be irritating and not calming.

What about the beanbags?

- Beanbags can be purchased from catalogs or stores.
- The size depends on the person, but it should fit comfortably in the hand.
- Small beanbag toys can be substituted if their shape is appropriately comfortable.

How to do beanbag tapping:

- Taps should be firm. Tapping should never hurt.
- Taps should be done with an attitude of kindness towards the body.
- Begin by holding the beanbag in one hand.
- Start tapping the opposite hand on both the palm and the back of the hand.
- Work up the arm, experimenting with tapping on various surfaces of the arm.
- Tap shoulders next.
- Then tap across the upper chest on the pectoral muscles.
- Never tap on the neck itself, the face, forehead or stomach!
- Follow up with the opposite hand, arm, and shoulders.
- Tap as much of the back as can be reached comfortably. Move on to the legs.
- The thighs, knees, shins, and feet are tapped.
- Tapping feels especially good on the sole of the foot. Make sure you have clean socks.
- When beanbag tapping is finished, stop for a moment to feel how alive and tingly the body feels.

How to Make a Beanbag.

- Heavy fabrics are best, like denim or corduroy.
- Cut two four-inch squares of fabric.
- Place right sides together.
- Sew ½” from the edge around the square leaving a small opening for stuffing.
- Turn right-side out.
- Fill with beans (rice, beans, popcorn, or seed corn).
- Hand sew opening.

References

Note: A full and updated set of references can be found on the Resources and References page of the Sensory Connection Program website.

<http://www.sensoryconnectionprogram.com/resources.php>

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