

One in 10 may suffer from sensory sensitivity

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Editor's Note: The following story is a first person account.

"I need to talk to you about your son," said "Nurse Karen." "Adam is displaying signs of 'sensory sensitivity.'"

After reciting a list of symptoms that my 5-year-old showed, the school nurse handed me several pages of written material and her phone number.

Sensory sensitivity? "Sure," I thought. "Some condition that some drug company created to sell more medicine."

So I did what any "good" parent would do: I ignored it. Until those symptoms surfaced time and again. Then I did what any good reporter would do. I researched it.

And I discovered that not only is he sensory sensitive ... so am I. It is a very real condition. It cripples our processing of information. It affects our daily lives. And no medicine is on the market.

For "Mr. Eagle Eyes" Adam, that means visual stimulation. He studies everything. A hairline crack in the paint? You bet he'll notice. A person he has not seen since he was 2 years old? He'll remember the face. The kid could literally find a needle in a haystack.

Imagine the overload. New environments, toy packages, even grocery shopping — are all subject to the memorization of every last detail. Then his mind

speeds up to keep up with the visual input. That can create hyper and risky behavior.

An example? When he was 18 months old, I had to bolt every piece of furniture to the wall because he would climb everything to see what was up there. One time, I actually caught him on the top of the refrigerator!

He will follow a fly around the house for hours because it is in his peripheral vision. The curtains need to stay closed because "The sun burns my eyes, mommy." And a picture on the back of a cereal box is so mesmerizing that it will distract him from doing anything else (such as eating the cereal).

"The information comes in, a response goes out, but the response isn't lined up with the information," said Lucy Jane Miller, Ph.D. and author of *Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children With Sensory Processing Disorder* (Penguin, 2006).

My own sensory condition is auditory. Background noise plays through my head like the loudspeaker at a rock concert. I seem to lack the gene to filter it out. Every noise in the room becomes the focus of my full attention.

The difference between my son and me is that my mind shuts down.

Crowded auditoriums have driven me

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Symptoms often are misdiagnosed as attention deficit disorder

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to tears. I have run from noisy restaurants before my food even arrived. And if the television is turned on, my capacity to think about anything else is turned off.

Others might experience a different set of symptoms. Some are olfactory; others are tactile. Many times, the problems overlap. For those with any type of sensory sensitivity, such things as hot weather, tight pants or the smell of rubbing alcohol can cause a major problem.

Dr. Brock Eide, who runs the Eide Neurolearning Clinic in Edmonds, Wash., said, "In the nervous system, all the senses balance each other out, and sometimes one sense is at the heart of a problem that affects the others."

Sensory dysfunctions are estimated to afflict 10 to 15 percent of the population. The actual statistics are unknown because the symptoms are varied and confusing. Therein lies the biggest problem.

Children as well as adults are often misdiagnosed as having attention deficit

disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or Asperger syndrome. And sometimes, sensory sensitivity even overlaps with one of these other conditions.

Because research is insufficient, though ongoing, sensory disorders are not yet recognized by much of the medical community. The first study was pioneered by occupational therapist Jean Ayers in the mid-1900s. It was first called disorder sensory integration dysfunction (SID) and later dubbed dysfunction in sensory integration (DSI). Some now refer to it as sensory processing disorder or sensory sensitivity.

Of course, everyone experiences some hypersensitivity from time to time. A hectic day at work. Rush-hour traffic. Then a house full of screaming kids can send anyone into overload.

But as "Nurse Karen" pointed out, some people truly suffer from this on-going neurological disconnect. "Adam is truly a bright kid," she said. "But we need to find a way to manage his condition. Otherwise, it might hold him back from a lot of things in the future."

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Signs of Sensory Sensitivity

Here are some symptoms of sensory sensitivity (aka sensory processing disorder). To date, the most successful treatment has been occupational therapy.

1. Are you easily overwhelmed by large crowds? Do you avoid events and festivals that you would like to attend?
2. Do you need to create a predictable environment in order to feel secure?
3. Does the thought of a busy schedule, or an out-of-the-ordinary appointment, make you feel nervous?
4. Are you often distracted by something minor and thus forget important things? (For example, you pay for gas, then notice an unusual car and forget to fill your tank?)
5. Does hot or cold weather bother you more than it does most people? Do you cut off the tags on the back of your shirts, gasp when there is a strong smell, refuse to shop at malls because of the stimuli, or need complete silence in order to think?

For more information about sensory disorders, visit the Highly Sensitive Person Web site at www.hsperson.com or the Sensory-Sensitive Child Web site at www.sensorysensitivechild.com