

Chapter 11

Making Sense of the Eight Senses

We've spent some time together now reflecting on what might be going on for your child when they 'misbehave' and how this may tie in to their sensory experience. Viewing your child through this sensory-smart lens can help you perceive what is going on *inside* your child's body and how this can cause them to act out. What you're probably recognising now is that what most people term as your child's 'misbehaviour' is likely to be 'stressed behaviour'. Once you begin to understand your child as someone who is experiencing sensory sensitivities, you can begin to imagine what it is like to live in their bodies and experience their discord. And then their behaviour makes sense.

When the realisation first dawns about how it must be to live with extreme sensitivities, it can be heartbreaking to view your child through this new lens. It can be difficult for a child to live in a sensitive body, especially considering that our society is probably in the most intensely overstimulating time-period in the history of humankind.

A sensitive nervous system would be enough to deal with, but the child's overwhelm is often compounded by being misunderstood. They are often scolded or criticised by adults who perceive their behaviour as inappropriate, disrespectful, insensitive or rude. Very few people perceive the link between the child's inner experience and their reactive behaviour. This lack of understanding has consequences for the sensorily sensitive child. They are doing the very best they can in that moment, but repeatedly they fall short of adult expectations. This leads to them not having a good opinion of themselves, because many of the adults around them don't see their inner struggle. And this leads to low self-worth. But it doesn't have to be this way.

We can change the narrative. We have the power - and the science - to reframe our understanding of their behaviour in a new light. Not as misbehaviour that they choose, but as stressed behaviour that they need help with. With this altered mindset, we can stop interpreting challenging behaviour as '*deliberately defiant*' or '*just their personality*'. We can avoid negative labels that many children end up carrying with them for a lifetime, and instead we can provide the support they need to retrain and integrate their senses. **The good news is that sensory-smart understanding can entirely change our thinking - which can potentially change everything!**

An easy first step is to begin by observing your child through this new 'sensory' lens. Discover how your child's body works; every child is unique and has a particular sensory profile of their own. It can sometimes be challenging to make heads or tails of what might be going on for your child. As you have read these chapters you may have become aware of sensory quirks in yourself and others: 'Ooh, I'm a picky eater.' 'She hates loud sounds.' 'I'm clumsy!' 'He can't stand clutter.' Every one of us experiences life through these eight senses - and we each have a different constellation of sensory attunement. And each different permutation is part of what forms our unique personalities. To make this even more complex, some of our senses may be extremely attuned (hyper-sensitive) or some may be dulled (hypo-sensitive). It's part of our design as humans. And whilst we all experience a unique combination of these sensitivities, if your child experiences an extreme level of hyper or hypo sensitivity, then it's important to get the help they need to rebalance, so that they can thrive.

With this awareness of how your child's nervous system may be functioning, you can get to know your child in a deeper way. Listen. Observe. Ask open-ended questions that lead to discussions that can help you and your child to make sense of their experiences. As your understanding of your child's sensory reality increases and you begin to better understand your child's reactions, you're likely to tap into a greater compassion towards your child. This makes it easier not to go into reactive mode when your child acts out. The labels such as 'naughty' or 'too fragile and needs to toughen up' fall away. You gain clarity and you intuitively respond to your child's behaviour with greater insight. Somehow your child senses the shift - and a shift in them happens too. Not all at once, but over the days and months, you may find yourselves in a new way of being in relationship.

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