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Sensory World: Building a Resource to Manage Sensory Needs in the Caregiver-Child Relationship

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INTRODUCTION

Clinic Background: Harbor Children's Therapy is an outpatient pediatric clinic in Gig Harbor, Washington, specializing in the treatment of children with sensory processing impairments. In a project proposal submitted to the University of Washington Division of Occupational Therapy, clinic leaders noted that many caregivers lack awareness of their own sensory preferences and that this frequently impacts relationships with their children. Furthermore, they found limited support available to assist daily interactions between caregivers and their children, given their sensory preferences.

Objective: The purpose of this project was to create a resource to support the interplay of caregiver-child sensory needs across various environments.

METHODS

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Examined existing trends in research on sensory processing
- Identified lack of research on sensory processing and relationships

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- Conducted qualitative interview with clinical specialists
- Administered caregiver questionnaires
- Corresponded with nationally recognized experts in the field of sensory integration

THE SENSORY TOOLKIT

TOOLKIT DEVELOPMENT

- Synthesized parent and clinician feedback from needs assessment to inform content
- Collaborated with web developer to create online resource

BETA TESTING

- Launched pilot with caregiver focus group from Harbor Children's Therapy
- Applied caregiver feedback to guide final edits

THE TOOLKIT

<http://hctherapy.com/resources.html>

A caregiver identifies their own sensory type as *Overreactive*

A caregiver identifies their child's sensory type as *Underreactive*

1. Click anywhere in the boxes below to select your type:

Overreactive (Caregiver) You may find many of the following statements to be true if you generally have a high sensory responsibility. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• You have trouble focusing when more than one thing is happening at once• It bothers you to be touched by people you are not close with, and you often feel like you need more personal space• You are bothered by background noises like loud dishwashers, outside traffic, or faucets dripping• Intense patterns, bright colors, and lights are distracting More Details	Neutral (Caregiver) You may find many of the following statements to be true if you generally have a neutral sensory responsibility. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is not a problem to read a book while sitting at a table in a busy coffee shop• You do not feel anxious or upset by bright lights or loud sounds• Riding in the car, passing through sharp turns or going up and down steep hills does not scare or disturb you• You don't mind typical forms of physical contact, like hugs, kisses and high-fives from familiar people More Details	Underreactive (Caregiver) You may find many of the following statements to be true if you generally have a low sensory responsibility. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• You like activities with a lot of movement• Large crowds are exciting to you• You don't notice when people are trying to walk past you or trying to get your attention• You like to touch other people when you speak to them More Details
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2. Click anywhere in the boxes below to select your child's type:

Overreactive (Child) You may find many of the following statements to be true if your child generally has a high sensory responsibility. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your child dislikes being touched and asks for personal space• Your child shies away from "strong" foods (spicy, sour, salty, etc.)• Your child gets motion sick• Sudden noises are surprising or upsetting to your child• Intense patterns, bright colors, and lights are distracting to your child More Details	Underreactive (Child) You may find many of the following statements to be true if your child generally has a low sensory responsibility. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your child does not notice when they bump into things• Your child does not notice when people are trying to get their attention• Your child eats food with lots of flavor (garlic, onions, spices, sour, etc.)• Your child likes a lot of color in their room, clothing and art projects• Your child touches things as they walk past them More Details
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3. Review relationship summary and activity suggestions:
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Relationship summary:

Overall, you are much more sensitive to the sights, smells, sounds, and sensations in the world than your child is. You may prefer quiet and calm environments, while your child may prefer bright lights, loud sounds, and extreme movements. Places and activities that your child enjoys may be too stimulating for you to fully enjoy. Your child may also seem bored or appear to have a hard time calming down during activities that you pick out.

If you identify with this description, please see the suggested activities and information and try them out with your child. We hope that through projects, activities and environments that meet both of your sensory needs, it will be easier to focus on bonding and shared enjoyment in your daily life.

In the Community	At Home	With Relationships
Social Events	Meal Time/Meal Prep	Bonding Time
Running Errands	Morning Routine	Screen Time
Public Places	Bedtime	Physical Affection
Bathroom Time	Bathroom Time/Bathing	Play Time/Leisure
Toileting and Sensory Processing Some creative strategies to manage toileting with your child	Chores/Homework	
Adults with Sensory Sensitivity and Public Restrooms Guidance and advice for adults who experience challenges in public restrooms	Play Time/Leisure	
Tip: Create a Social Story Talk to your child about what to expect when going into a public restroom and remind them before entering. Use pictures, videos, or sound effects as needed. Give them the opportunity to ask questions		

Description of interacting sensory needs

Targeted resources consistent with caregiver needs

Specialized activity suggestions and environmental modifications to support the relationship

SENSORY PROCESSING

Sensory processing refers to the way that a **variety of sensory stimuli are integrated** in the nervous system to develop appropriate motor and behavioral responses.

Different sensory types are found **along a spectrum across all age groups** and in varying intensities depending on context or environment.

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) theory proposes that a dysfunction of sensory signals creates challenges when interpreting and responding to sensory information.

Manifestations of SPD may include (but are not limited to) behavioral challenges, lack of coordination, disproportionately low/high levels of arousal, and difficulties in emotional regulation.

DISCUSSION

- The toolkit presents a unique opportunity for caregivers to explore and manage their own sensory needs by providing specific resources organized by matched caregiver-child sensory needs.
- This resource for caregivers and children has the potential to normalize sensory needs in daily life, promoting healthy relationships.
- Expanding the toolkit to include other supports and topics will broaden its relevance to additional populations and contexts.

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