Introduction: What Is Sensory Integration?

You have probably discovered, often without conscious thought, the things that help you to relax, concentrate, or just feel good in various situations. You probably use many different techniques, depending on the requirements of different circumstances. Perhaps music helps you to concentrate when working but is distracting during conversations. Sometimes rough-and-tumble play with the kids makes you come alive. Other times you may not want to be in contact with anyone. A cup of coffee before work might be perfect, but at night a warm cup of cocoa is much more appealing. We often develop preferences because certain types of sensory input (activities, sounds, textures, and even foods) have helped us to respond appropriately in a given situation.

Our brains must be able to organize and process this sensory input, and to use that input to respond appropriately to a particular situation. To do so, we must integrate information we receive through all of our senses and from movement and gravity. It is easy to imagine how difficult life is for those who cannot hear or see adequately. It is more difficult to imagine what it must be like for those who are unable to understand what they hear and see. It is more difficult still to imagine what it is like for those who cannot understand the input they get from their tactile (sense of touch) and vestibular (movement and gravity) systems. The ability to learn even the simplest things and to behave appropriately in different situations, however, depends on these abilities.

Children, even very young children, must be able to take in information through all channels and perform many skills automatically. They must know and be comfortable with where their bodies are in relation to their environment; they must feel safe and know where and how they are being touched. They must also know, without being taught or told, what information to pay attention to and what to ignore.

Many children, however, don't know how to cope with the different sensory input they receive. They have difficulty organizing information and performing the many complex tasks necessary for learning and functioning in the world and, as Ayres has noted, "When the flow of sensation is disorganized, life can be like a rush-hour traffic jam" (1979). Children who, unlike the majority of their peers, are unable to process and use the sensory input they receive often have a sensory integrative disorder. A common component of this type of disorder is sensory defensiveness, in which children are unable to tolerate various kinds of sensory stimulation (Wilbarger and Wilbarger 1991). A sensory integrative disorder may, however, exist without sensory defensiveness.

It is not always easy to live with and love children. It is sometimes less easy to live with and love children who have a sensory integrative disorder. Sensory defensiveness can cause children to seek to control every aspect of their lives by being excessively demanding; unreasonably, explosively angry; picky; and bossy. But these children need all the help and support we can give them in order to prevent their lives from becoming so frustrating and unpleasant that they give up.
trying to learn and to please us and themselves. It is very easy to give them the impression that they can do nothing right and very difficult to let them know how much we love them and how very special and important they are. As Wilbarger and Wilbarger note, "treatment begins with understanding" (1991).

In the next few pages you will find a very brief, simple discussion of the tactile and vestibular systems as well as a discussion concerning praxis and arousal. If you are interested in learning more, refer to the bibliography. Chapter 6 includes information concerning how a sensory integrative disorder affects your child's life as well as your own, information about therapy and school, and some suggestions for meeting the challenges ahead. You may want to share this information with other family members and friends as well as teachers. Appendix B contains suggestions for teachers. If your child receives therapy, your child's therapist can provide you with more specific information.

A teacher's awareness of individual needs can make a difference in school performance and success.