

Calming/Organizing Strategies for the “Over-Responder”

Sensory stimulation surrounds us. We are constantly taking in visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and vestibular/movement information from our environment. Our brains must “register” this incoming sensory information and then organize it in such a way that we can understand it’s meaning and respond to it appropriately. Some children “over-respond” to the incoming sensory information from their environment making it difficult at times to attend to tasks, follow directions, successfully participate in motor and academic demands, and maintain a “well regulated state” which assists with good behavior. Following are suggestions for a child that appears to be an “over-responder”:

- Whenever possible, follow a predictable routine for daily activities such as dressing, grooming, feeding, and bath time. Routines can be organizing for the child. The less surprises, the better!
- Provide verbal “warning” when a transition is needed. “Tommy, in 5 minutes we will be putting your toys away and washing our hands for dinner”.
- Dim lights indoors; use sunglasses or a hat outside to decrease bright lights. You can also de-clutter surroundings to decrease overall visual stimulation.
- If a child has escalated (i.e. become dysregulated) use very little language and when you do speak, use a monotone and soft voice. This decreases the auditory input so the child does not feel “bombarded” by additional environmental stimulation.
- If your child has a difficult time with busy, visually stimulating ,and loud environments such as restaurants or malls, try going at less busy times. You can also request a corner booth at a restaurant (away from the kitchen) and incorporate the use of noise-canceling headphones or ear buds to decrease extraneous auditory input.
- Be sensitive to your own use of fragrance, scented lotions, scented laundry soaps, scented candles, etc. Even cooking odors can be difficult for over-responders to tolerate.
- Unexpected touch can be difficult for over-responders to tolerate. Watch for your child’s cues as to whether an unexpected touch on their skin or hair, or even a hug, is tolerated or if they demonstrate an aversive reaction or withdrawal. For those children that over-respond to tactile input (grass, sand, tooth brushing, tags in clothing, touch from others, messy hands, engaging with wet media such as finger paint) providing deep pressure input can help calm this light touch. Deep pressure can be provided through heavy blankets, roll child up in a blanket, hugs if tolerated, or massage if tolerated.
- Vestibular/movement input can either be disorganizing to an over-responder or calming. Typically, slow, linear, rhythmical swinging is calming. You can also do slow rocking over a therapy ball or use a hammock or rocking chair.

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Sensory Strategies for the “Over-Responder” (cont. from front)

- Chewing resistive foods such as gum, raisins, gummy bears, or crunchy foods can be calming for children.
- The use of fidgets commonly has a calming and organizing influence. Ideas include squeezing a stress ball, rolling an item such as a marble back and forth between thumb and fingers, repetitive pressing/squeezing on a gel-filled plastic bag (can use hair gel or other pliable material).
- Create a “calm zone” in your house. A zone can be created by portioning off an area with bookcases or other objects. Place soft pillows or beanbag chairs around and keep the lights off. Sometimes being contained in a small area such as in a play fort or pop-up play tent helps to decrease incoming sensory information.
- Over-responders often do well when provided with a “sensory diet”. Rather than waiting until they become extremely disorganized or have a “meltdown”, make sure to provide calming sensory input at regular intervals throughout the day. This can be accomplished by providing resistive activities (i.e. “heavy work”) such as tug-o-war, wall push ups, carrying heavy objects as well as by providing opportunities for deep pressure input and encouraging “breaks” in the calm zone.
- Using bed sheets containing some Lycra or similar resistive/stretchy material can be calming at night as well as the use of heavy blankets.