

COOL CAFE NEWSLETTER:

Week #5: Understanding Our Sensory Needs

THEME:

Understanding our sensory needs and respecting differences. Learning how to advocate for our sensory needs.

Sensory processing is the way we notice and respond to sensory messages from our body and the environment like taste, sound, movement, and touch.

- Sensory preferences impact how we feel and what we like to eat, wear, and do. We are all unique sensory beings and respond to everyday sensory input in individual ways.
- It is important to respect our sensory differences! People with disabilities and/or mental health challenges may have more intense responses to sensory input.

CONSIDER THIS!

There are three additional senses to the five commonly known senses of vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste and include:

- **Movement/Vestibular input:** Provides awareness of where we are in space and helps us be able to stay balanced.
- We all differ in the types of movement we prefer or crave. Some people love to snow ski, for example, while others might be afraid of heights and fast movement.
- Movement also influences our levels of arousal and emotions. For example:
 - Quick, jarring movements (e.g. jumping on a trampoline) or spinning tend to be ALERTING.
 - Slow, rhythmical movements (swinging on a porch swing or in a rocking chair) tend to be CALMING.
- **Deep pressure/Proprioceptive input:** Proprioceptive input refers to deep pressure input to our skin, muscles, and joints which gives us an awareness of our body map, where we are in space, and our movement.
 - Deep pressure to our skin and muscles tends to be calming. Examples: deep hugs, sleeping under weighted blankets.
- **Interoception:** Helps us to feel and understand what is going on inside our bodies (Mahler, 2015).
- Our interoceptive sense tells us when we are hungry, full, thirsty, hot, cold, etc.
- Students who struggle with their interoceptive sense may overeat, undereat, drink too much water or not enough, and have problems regulating their body temperature.
- Interoception plays a role in emotional regulation during social situations.

- This system recognizes internal cues such as blood pressure, heart rate and stomach aches and reminds us to self-regulate.
- Interoception also helps us perceive feeling stressed or anxious, being tired, or angry.

Let's Chat About Mental Health:

- What we experience in the world around us greatly impacts how we feel, what we do, and what we eat.
- Be aware of personal sensory turn offs and how to avoid them. Advocate to have your sensory needs met.
 - If loud noises in the cafeteria are bothersome, wear headphones or ask to sit with friends in a quieter part of the room
 - If you dislike a certain food, politely refuse to eat it
 - If it's difficult to sit still for all of lunch, volunteer to help wipe tables off or clean up trash
 - If fluorescent lights are bothersome, suggest that some are turned off
- Find time for sensory experiences that you enjoy and make you feel good emotionally.
 - Examples: sucking on a peppermint, playing basketball or running, listening to your favorite song, taking a walk in nature, rocking in a rocker, etc.

TIPS

- **Respecting differences.** Every person is a unique sensory being. We all experience sensations differently in the cafeteria such as noise levels, smells, and touch.
- **Sensory overload** can occur when we receive too much input causing us to feel overwhelmed, irritable, or distracted. Some people might find loud noise to be irritating. This is why it's important to talk with students about how to use an 'inside voice' and avoid shouting.
- **Our sensory needs can be met with modifications** — through activities (running, fidgeting, or yoga), environmental changes (calming music, quieter environment, or dimmer lighting), or objects (weighted blanket or headphones).
- **Changing the cafeteria environment to be sensory friendly** can benefit supervisors and students!
 - Music – play calming classical music
 - Plants – green spaces are calming
 - Staggering how students enter and exit the cafeteria to cut down noise and chaos
 - Natural lighting versus fluorescent

Suggested Activities for Students

- Display sensory images on projector and have students raise their hands for things they like
- Have the 'Senses in the Cafeteria' handout on each table and have students talk about what kinds of sensory input they like and don't like (Negrey, 2019)
- Play classical vs rock music and discuss how each song made students feel

Suggested Activities for Cafeteria Supervisors

- Tune into students who seem distracted, irritable or overwhelmed and advocate for their sensory needs. Ex. Finding them a quieter room to eat lunch in or a less crowded table
- Share your sensory preferences with students

Resources

Bazyk, S. (2013). Creating sensory friendly school environments to promote participation for students with and without disabilities. Retrieve from https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kSz7m_gzdiGSfyCYxSnKGpdVmcXhJEf0/view?usp=sharing

Mahler, K. (2015). *Interoception: The eighth sensory system*. Lenexa, KS: AAPC. 166 pp. US\$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-942197-14-0

Negrey, J. (2019). 5 Senses in the Cafeteria. Developed for Every Moment Counts' Comfortable Cafeteria program.

Sensational Kids OT: Parent Information Sheet – Sensory Processing. Retrieved from <http://www.sensationalkidsot.com.au/downloads/Sensory%20Processing%20Sensational%20Kids%20OT.pdf>

Developed for Every Moment Counts (www.everymomentcounts.org)

Every Moment Counts is committed to building capacity of all school personnel, families, and community providers to promote children's mental health and contribute to prevention and intervention of mental health challenges through professional education, website resources, and coaching.

©Susan Bazyk, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, Louise Demirjian, MA, OTR/L, and Masters of Occupational Therapy students: Justine Emig, Dena Assad, Jessica Koverman, & Gabrielle Ciolek

For further information contact: **Susan Bazyk** at s.bazyk@csuohio.edu

