A child who lashes out at other students, who does not seem to pay attention in class, or a child who is always in motion can be seen as having behavior problems. Underlying these behaviors may be sensory processing deficits. This means that the child may be having difficulty processing all of the sensory information coming in from their eyes, ears, nose, sense of touch, and even their sense of balance and relationship to gravity. There is interplay between poor sensory processing and behavior. Sensory processing affects how children relate to the world and whether they are alert and ready for learning or not. Understanding how a child processes sensory information can be extremely helpful to understanding why he acts the way he does.

Take the following examples:

Johnny always gets in trouble when it is time to line up in the classroom. He can’t stand still and moves in and out of the line, even after repeated verbal reminders to stay in line quietly. If a classmate happens to brush up against him, he pushes or shoves them away roughly. The teacher reprimands him and sends him to the back of the line. Although it looks like Johnny is a child with a behavior problem, he is actually having difficulty processing touch information. The idea of being brushed lightly by one of his classmates is so uncomfortable to him that he does not want to stand still in line. He moves away from his peers to avoid unexpected touch. If he is jostled, his nervous system interprets this as very negative and he goes into a “fight or flight reaction”, which causes him to strike out at the classmate.

Sarah comes late to class in the morning and although she does not bother anyone, she squirms in her chair, keeps pulling up her socks, and tugging at the label in the back of her shirt. Sarah’s mother confides to the teacher that mornings at their house are a struggle, because Sarah only wants to wear her worn out sweatpants and tee-shirt. She rebels at the idea of wearing socks and refuses to wear her coat, even in the winter. Her mother wants Sarah to dress appropriately for school and for the weather conditions, but the constant fighting in the morning leaves them both exhausted before the day has even begun.

Although Sarah is fighting with her mother every morning, her main problem is that she finds the feeling of labels, seams, and socks falling down extremely unpleasant. Her winter coat feels tight and uncomfortable. It is hard for her to focus on listening to her teacher in class when her clothes are so uncomfortable.

Mike is an exceptionally intelligent student, with many good ideas that he shares with his classmates. However, when he sits down to write something, he struggles to write even one paragraph and his writing is smeared with many erasures. In class, he is always fiddling with something in his hands, chewing on a pencil or paper clip, or tapping on his desk.

Although Mike has excellent thinking skills and can express himself verbally, he has difficulty with his motor skills. He does not have a good sense of where his body is in space and is always seeking out more information for his sensory system by fiddling, chewing, and tapping. Due to his lack of good sensory feedback from his body, he has always had difficulty with the fine
motor aspects of handwriting. His speed of writing can never keep up with the speed and flow of his ideas and he becomes quite frustrated.

**What can be done?**

Helping children with sensory processing difficulties often includes a combination of interventions and may require a trial and error approach. An occupational therapist with training in sensory integration can help you determine if your child has sensory processing difficulties. If so, treatment is available. The therapist can help you develop strategies and accommodations that will help your child function better at school, at home and in the community.

For children similar to Johnny, Sarah and Mike, compensatory strategies and accommodations often help. For example, Johnny’s teacher could have the children line up on carpet squares that are placed a short distance from each other. She could also place Johnny near less active students, or towards the end of the line, so there will be less waiting time. Sarah’s mother may need to find clothing for her that is extra soft, remove all labels, and find socks that have some elasticity so they don’t fall down. Mike may need to have a “fidget” that he can use at certain times in the classroom (with clearly defined rules about its use). He may need to be able to dictate part of his writing assignments or speak them into a tape recorder.

It is important for children to understand what they need in order to function optimally and for them to learn how and when to ask for it. For example, children can learn to ask to get up and get a drink of water if they need to move around in order to stay alert. Some children benefit from having a quiet corner with cushions and low light to take a break from all of the sensory input coming in. They can learn to ask to go to a quiet corner when they need to. Other children may benefit from sitting towards the front of the room, where there are fewer distractions, others may be more comfortable in the back, where they can see everyone and not worry about accidental touch.

The role of the occupational therapist cannot be overlooked. Direct treatment using a sensory integrative frame of reference, provides intervention designed to facilitate development of sensory processing skills and improve the efficiency of the nervous system. Making adaptations and using sensory strategies at home and at school are important supportive elements of a program, but direct therapy will treat the underlying problem by improving the ability of the system to process sensory information adequately.

Sometimes the behaviors a child has developed in order to cope with sensory issues, will remain even after the sensory issues have resolved. For this reason, it is vital to include a clear and consistent behavior program as part of any intervention strategy. Engaging in use of strategies such as a sticker chart or rewards of special privileges for positive behavior are an essential aspect of any program designed to address these types of issues. Children need to learn that even though they have sensory processing difficulties, they still need to control their behavior and follow the rules in order to be successful in life.