

# **Sensory Smarts**

**A Book for Kids with ADHD or Autism  
Spectrum Disorders Struggling with Sensory  
Integration Problems**

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with Christian P. Chara**

**Illustrated by J.M. Berns**



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## Introduction to Parents, Caregivers, and Professionals

Sensation is the detection of stimuli (environmental or bodily events), whereas perception is the organization and interpretation of sensory information. To perceive the world accurately, the senses must first respond with the optimal level of activity needed to most accurately detect the source of the stimulation. Senses that are under-sensitive operate with too low a level of activation, like a camera whose brightness level is set so low that the resulting picture is darker than desired. Conversely, senses that are over-sensitive operate with too high a level of activation, such as with a camera whose level of brightness is set so high that the resulting picture is lighter than desired. Second, sensory stimuli are converted into neural energy and sent to the brain, where a composite of the sense information must be formed into a coherent whole in order for the source of the stimulation to be properly perceived. Disturbances in either the detection or the processing of stimuli can cause sensory integration problems. Children with these problems are often referred to as sensory-avoiding or sensory-seeking.

Children with sensory integration problems react differently from most other children. Sensory-avoiders are often described with such terms as avoiding, overactive, emotional, unstable, and sensory inappropriate. Sensory-seekers are often described as intrusive and impulsive, as well as overactive, emotional, and unstable. It is important to note that some children may be primarily sensory-avoiding, others may be primarily sensory-seeking, and still others may be a combination of both types.

Some children with sensory integration problems may be picky and isolate themselves, while others may be controlling and aggressive. Many of their self-care skills are also disrupted. The symptoms may be mild, moderate, or severe and are often mistaken for signs of other disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) being a common misdiagnosis. Most children on the autism spectrum also have sensory integration problems; in fact, common physiological disturbances may underlie both disorders. Furthermore, many children with sensory issues experience developmental delays.

Sensory integration problems are still not well understood among parents, teachers, and physicians. As a result, our struggle to have our then almost five-year-old son Christian properly diagnosed was difficult at best. We were told many inaccurate things about him: "He is just shy", "He's so disobedient", "What a hyperactive child he is", "Your expectations for him are too high." When we talked to professionals about his developmental issues we were told things like: "He is just a boy", "Einstein had problems too", "He will grow out of it." Unfortunately for Christian, he was our first child so we lacked the knowledge and experience to properly deal with his condition.

Something that really got our attention and started us on the road to making genuine progress in helping Christian was a story that we read about a young child fighting against a haircut. Kathleen, in particular, identified with the struggling barber and recalled the high levels of frustration caused to her and our son when she would cut his hair. (Going to the barber was out of the question!) The author of that story, however, encouraged readers to "pity the child, not the barber." Those words made us stop and think and reframe the problem. Somehow, Christian's

struggle had gotten lost in our own frustration. We felt so bad about getting upset with him without putting ourselves in his shoes. We needed to understand Christian's perspective and the nature of his condition, and to forgive ourselves, in order to overcome a situation that was going to require a lot of work on everyone's part.

It is our sincere hope that telling our story or, better put, Christian's story, will help other struggling families in some small way. For further assistance, we have included a rating scale for symptoms of sensory integration for both sensory-avoiders and sensory-seekers at the back of this book, along with a list of helpful resources. However, none of the pages in this book should be considered medical advice. If you suspect that your child has sensory issues, we suggest that you consult with a certified occupational therapist with specialized training in sensory integration.

Our hearts are with you and your children!

## Sensory Smarts

**M**y name is Christian and I am 12 years old. When I was five years old, my parents learned that I had sensory integration problems. What this means is that my body was not feeling, smelling, tasting, hearing, seeing, or developing like it should. I didn't know others were different from me and others didn't know I was different from them. Maybe you have sensory issues too. If you do, remember that you are not the only kid who has this problem. Lots of kids have sensory issues—we are not the only ones! When kids have problems with sensory issues, things like **touch, sound, taste, smell, temperature, interactions with others, activity/energy level, and sleeping** seem different to us than to kids who don't have sensory problems. Some kids are called **sensory-avoiders**, which means that they avoid or dislike many sensations, such as loud sounds or certain touches. Other kids are **sensory-seekers**, which means that they tend to seek out a lot of sensations—they like loud noises and want to touch everything around them. I was mainly a sensory-avoider, but in some ways I was also a sensory-seeker. Maybe you are just learning about all of this and are just beginning therapy to help you and your family work on these things. Let me tell you the story of my life with sensory issues and then about going to therapy for help! Remember, I got help and so can you!!

I was my parents' first child and was born on June 9, 1991. Early in my mom's pregnancy, she had an infection and ran a fever. Although I was born on time, it was a long, difficult delivery. My dad thought that it was so long there would have been enough time to have another child! The cord that connected me to my mom so I could eat before I was born was wrapped around my neck. My mom said she learned later that birth problems and infections in pregnancy are common with children with sensory integration problems. After I came home from the hospital, I continued to have a hard time. I cried all the time. Have your parents told you things about you that concerned them when you were a baby?



**K**ids like us may have trouble **sleeping**. When I was a baby, I had difficulty sleeping and really only napped a few times a day. My dad said once he got up with me 22 times before 3:00 in the morning and then stopped counting! I think that story is funny (although I don't think my dad did at the time!). Other kids find the sheets in their bed or certain types of pajamas to be uncomfortable. Even dim lights or tiny noises at night-time can be big problems. I found out that sleeping on flannel sheets or warming my pajamas in the dryer before bedtime helped me not be such a restless sleeper. Sensory-seekers may need more rest and have to have an extra nap during the day! After I started sleeping through the night, I also took two- to three-hour naps in the day-time until I was seven years old. I guess I was just making up for lost sleep!

**S**ome kids have problems with the sense of **taste**, which can affect what and how we eat. My mom had a hard time breastfeeding me when I was a baby, so I went on a special formula (easier to digest) and had medication (to reduce gas) after each feeding. Most kids like us continue to be real picky eaters when we get older. A lot of kids like us think that vegetables and foods with cheese taste **HORRIBLE**. Others though, say that strongly spiced foods are their favorites! Go figure. Learning how to eat properly with eating utensils was very hard for me and most people thought I was the messiest eater in the world. My dad thought I was one of the great mysteries of the universe. He'd sometimes say,

“How could a kid eat so little, yet make such a big mess?” Other things like pouring, cutting, and sitting still at the table made mealtimes even harder. Although I wouldn’t eat most foods, I loved to chew on things like pencils, clothes, and toys. Maybe my parents should’ve made my food look like toys!

Well, I bet I drove my parents crazy because I disliked most foods, especially new foods or foods with different textures to them. But I wasn’t trying to drive them nuts—these sensory issues were driving *me* nuts!! How about you—do you have trouble with certain foods? Are there many foods that bother you?

To make matters worse, many kids with sensory issues also have food allergies. One problem on top of another! Then, of course, after mealtimes came brushing teeth—I really hated this!! Some kids cannot take the taste of certain toothpastes. If you dislike the taste of your toothpaste, you should try several different brands of toothpaste—most kids find at least one that they can tolerate. My big problem was that I hated the feeling of brushing my teeth. My parents thought that I was going to become the only kid in town with yellow hair AND yellow teeth! Yuk! Some kids have found the electrical toothbrush to be helpful and extra fun (it is great for sensory-seekers too!).

**S**ometimes kids with sensory issues can have problems with **touch** and **temperature**. When I was a baby, baths were also difficult until my parents started bathing me in cool water. Tags in clothes can bug lots of kids like you and me. My parents always cut the tags out of my clothes because they bothered me. I was also hot all the time and disliked hats, sweaters, and zipping winter coats. Other kids are just the opposite and are cold all the time. They love to wear lots of clothing and keep hats and blankets on them—even in summer! Having my face washed or anything done to my hair was also very stressful to my family and me. Sensory-seekers go the opposite way with touch, wanting to touch everything. This includes such stuff as sucking their thumbs after five years of age, frequently picking at their scabs, or being excessively ticklish. My dad says that I'm the only person he knows that has ticklish elbows. Guess I just have extra funny bones! How about you—what sort of things with touch or temperature bother you? I found out that when people just let me decide whether or not something bothers me, life is easier for everyone.

**S**ounds can be hard for kids like us to handle too! My mom said that although I was a very loud child (sensory-seeker), I hated loud noises from other people or other things (sensory-avoider). Sweepers seemed to especially bother me when I was younger, so one parent would vacuum while the other left the house with me. It is common for kids with sensory issues to hum a lot or avoid loud sounds like fireworks or fire drills. Others seem not to notice certain sounds, like their own names being called (I must admit that this comes in handy at chore-time!). If fire