

Helping Your Overly or Under-Sensory Responsive Child Get to Sleep

White noise, firm massage strokes and a weighted blanket can help your child fall asleep more easily.

What is sensory processing?

Some children respond to their surroundings with more or less intensity than others. Sensory processing is the ability to take in, filter, and respond correctly to sensory input like touch, movement, vision, hearing, taste and smell.

Does your child have trouble with sensory processing?

Problems with sensory processing can take many forms in children. Some children are overly sensitive. They are felt to be “sensory avoiding” or “sensory-defensive.” They feel bombarded by common experiences like touch, lights and sound. Some children are under-sensitive – “sensory-seeking” or “sensory under-responsive.” They seek intense stimulation, bashing and crashing around, and seem less aware of pain and touch. Other children have trouble using sensory inputs to plan and perform gross and fine motor tasks. This is called “dyspraxia,” or motor planning disorder. (Definition adapted from adoptmed.org).

If this sounds like your child, they may benefit from some special techniques to help them sleep.

Try some of these bedtime tips:

Bedtime routines

- Plan and keep consistent bedtime routines.
- Use visual aids. Place pictures of the bedtime routine up in the room.
- Read special age-appropriate bedtime books talking about the importance of sleep.
- Try this 10-minute relaxation technique as the last bedtime routine. Go into the bedroom to tuck your child in. Talk to them and remind them to calm their brain and body.
 - Play soothing music, dim the room lights and turn on fun holiday/festive lights or a lava lamp. These help distract your child.
 - For 5 minutes, quiet the brain by talking about favorite part of the day, or what good things to dream about.
 - For 5 minutes, quiet the body with no talking. Work on deep-breathing and have your child stay in bed to encourage sleep. Let your child know if they don't quiet down then you will leave the room.
 - (Don't let them fall asleep while you are there. This establishes negative sleep association. They may wake up at night expecting you to be there.)

The bedroom environment

Make sure your child's sleep area is:

- Dark. Close the blinds or pull down the dark window shade.
- Quiet.
- Has some type of background noise. A fan, air purifier or white noise machine running can be calming to some children.
- Whatever your child sees and hears when falling asleep should be the same all night long.

In-bed use of massage and weights

- Massage your child's back, arms or legs. Try calming scents like lavender or vanilla lotion. Use downward strokes and firm pressure for about 5 minutes. Do not use soft touch or touch on stomach (this can actually increase sensory problems).
- Do not let your child fall asleep while you are rubbing them, then they may expect this with middle and night wake ups.
- Use a weighted blanket. You can make your own. It needs to be 30% of your child's body weight. Sew pockets into any blanket and add small weighted bean bags. You may also use compression sheets or lycra material that may be soothing to help your child settle.
- Fill a sock with dried beans and lay it over your child's legs.
- Place warm towels from the dryer over your child's legs.

Activities for your child to do 1 to 2 hours before bedtime

- Jump on a trampoline.
- Push and pull weighted objects around (like the clothes hamper).
- Carry a weighted backpack on their back or have your child sit and do an activity while you press down on their shoulders. You can also use a sock with dried beans in it and lay it over your child's shoulders.
- Walk on uneven cushions. This offers core work and balance.
- Do sensory input activity play. Play with Play-Doh, step with bare feet into sand or dry beans or just play with these textures. Push coins into a slit in a tennis ball.

Books and resources on the Web for more information

You can find these books at your local library, bookstore or online.

- The Floppy Sleep Game Book by Patti Teel
- The Out of Sync Child by Carol Kranowitz
- Visit adoptmed.org. Go to topics and click on sleep.
- Google "heavy work" for more information on this treatment.