

# Recognizing and Managing the Difference Between Behavior Issues and Sensory Issues

With Amanda Morin

**Understood**

*for learning & attention issues*

# The First Big Question: What *are* sensory issues?

- **Children with sensory processing issues are over- or undersensitive to sensory input.** That can include sounds, textures, flavors, smells and other sensory input.
- **“Sensory processing issues” isn’t a DSM-5 diagnosis.** It often co-occurs with other learning and attention issues and autism.

# The Next Big Question: Why do sensory issues look like behavior issues?

- **Kids experience anxiety and can have meltdowns.** They may cry, yell, lash out or refuse to participate.
- **Kids may be resistant to change and have trouble focusing.** They may have trouble with transitions and struggle to filter out nonessential input.
- **The line isn't always clear.** Sensory processing issues can cause kids to be irritable or to look like they're pushing buttons, but kids are still kids. Sometimes they're just misbehaving like any other child!

# Some Differences

## Behavior

Child has some control over his actions.

May act out to get what he wants or needs or to avoid something uncomfortable.

May be able to adjust behavior according to the reaction.

May be able to negotiate, adjust intensity and process information.

Stops when he gets what he wants or realizes he won't get what he wants by acting out.

## Sensory

Child cannot control his reaction.

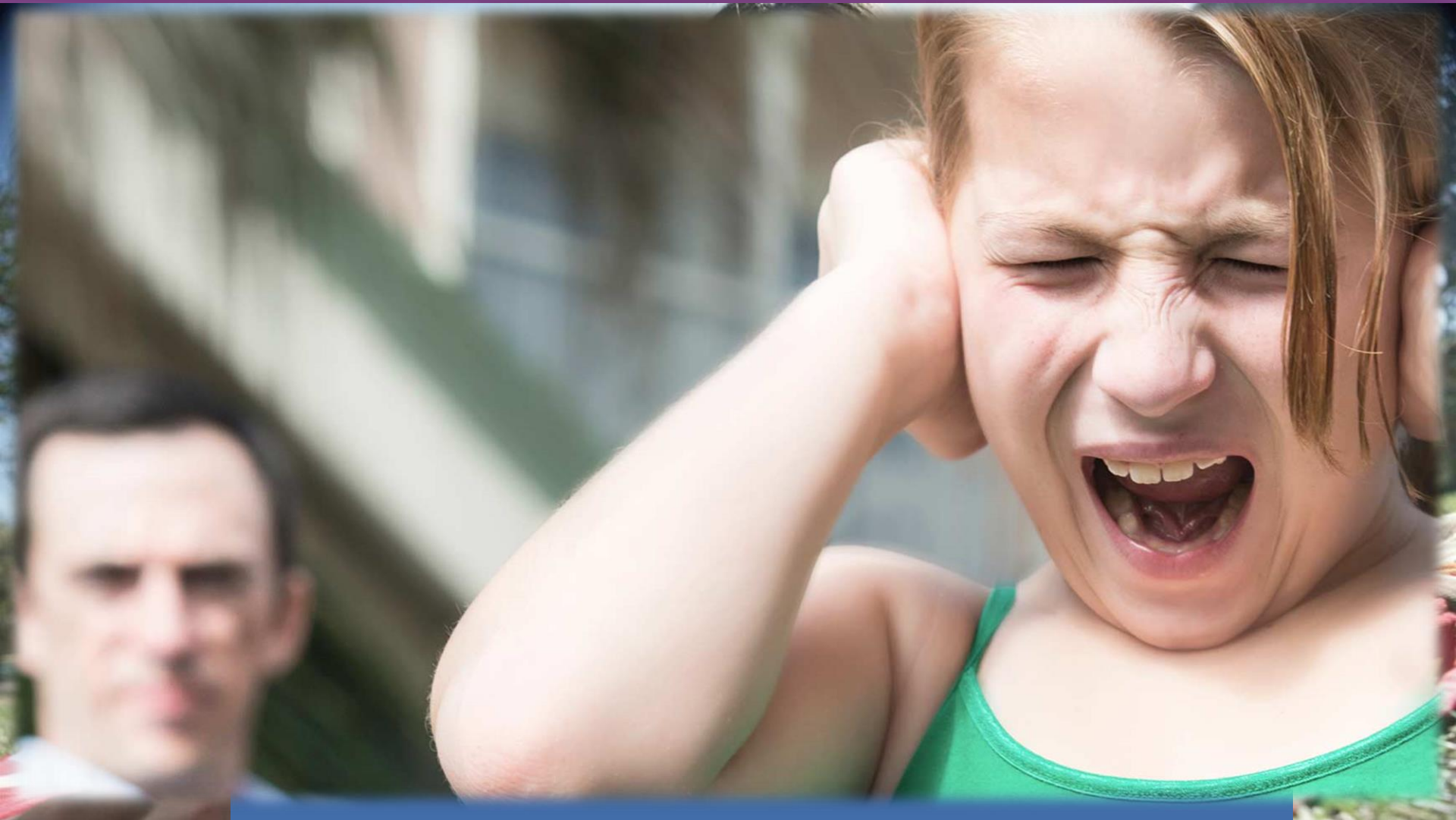
Usually is reacting to feeling overwhelmed ("fight or flight").

May be panicky and not know what he wants or needs.

May be less able to self-calm, solve problems or make decisions.

Ends when child wears himself out or input is reduced enough to restore calm.

VS.



# Sensory Reactions

# Tips for Classroom Management

## Be proactive, not reactive...



- **Set clear expectations.**  
What do you expect? Why?
- **Teach the whole class ways to self-calm.**  
What can they do when they're upset?
- **Identify the issue.**  
What's happening right now?
- **Identify a support person.**  
Who can help?  
Where can a child go to calm down?

# What's Tough at School?

- **Staying Still:** May fidget with objects, rock their chairs or kick nearby desks.
- **Music Class, Assemblies and School Performances:** May be sensitive to the sound/noises of music class or group events.
- **Visual Clutter:** May be overwhelmed by “busy” handouts or boards, making it hard for them to focus on what they're supposed to.

# What's Tough at School?

- **Writing:** May have trouble forming clear letters or gauging the force to use when writing.
- **Lunchtime and Recess:** May be overwhelmed by the noise of many kids talking or by all the mingled smells. May have trouble with motor skills, balance or proprioceptive input.
- **Arts and Crafts:** May be bothered by messy hands, the texture of art supplies or the odor of paint.
- **Announcements and Fire Drills:** May feel panicked by unexpected loud noises like mic feedback or fire drills. May have trouble filtering out unimportant sounds.



# Is a Child Having Trouble?

Some signs to watch for:



Trouble thinking clearly or making decisions



Complaints of physical symptoms (trouble breathing, dizziness, heart pounding, etc.)



Increased agitation and movement



Increased frustration



Trouble answering questions or getting words out

# How Can You Help?

## **Staying Still**

- Put a length of stretchy exercise band around the front chair legs for the child to push his feet or legs against.
- Have the child use a bumpy seat cushion or a stability ball.
- Have fidgets on hand.
- Ask the OT for recommendations and help.

## **Music Class, Assemblies and School Performances**

- Explore using noise-canceling headphones or earplugs.
- Arrange for child to sit near the door and work out a signal he can use when he needs a break.

## **Visual Clutter**

- Find a spot away from busy bulletin boards.
- Find ways to block distracting visual information. For example, fold paper to show only one row of math problems at a time.

# How Can You Help?

## Writing

- Have the child try pencil grips to help him hold a pencil more comfortably and sense how hard he's holding it.
- Try raised-line paper to help the child feel where he's writing.

## Lunchtime and Recess

- Ask the child to explain what's overwhelming. Work from there to find ways to create a better experience. (Ex: Running games instead of swinging. Or a table with a few friends away from the lunch counter.)

## Arts and Crafts

- Determine what's causing stress.
- Find alternate ways to show knowledge. (Ex: Use oil pastel crayons instead of paint to create a color wheel.)
- Brainstorm ways to ease into using materials.

## Announcements and Fire Drills

- Seat child away from the intercom speakers.
- Create a signal to warn about planned fire drills.
- Provide a visual schedule of planned announcement times.

# Ways to Manage: Triggers

1 Keep track of triggers you can identify. Ask parents and student.

You can't avoid *all* the things that may trigger a child. But you may have to compromise.

2 Be proactive in pointing out triggers and potential solutions.

If you don't know what's triggering the reaction, ask yourself:

- Is there another way we could do this activity?
- How important is this outcome?
- If the child needs some time to calm down, will I expect him to complete the work?

3 Know that triggers exist internally as well as externally.

# Ways to Manage: Escalation

1 Have a proactive plan in place and practice it.

2 Manage *your* reaction first. Try to redirect.

3 Be patient and kind.

4 Call for backup if you need it.

Remember the child is probably scared and may feel out of control.

Assess:

- Can you be calm?
- Can you be empathetic?
- Do you need help?
- Do you have signals to use with the child to let him know he's escalating?

# Create a Plan of Action

## Keep it simple.

- **A plan can help you predict.**  
It lists known triggers and signs of escalation.
- **A plan can help you be prepared.**  
It provides ideas of what to do based on past experience.
- **A plan can help you stay calm.**  
Knowing what to do and what to look for can help everybody feel more able to manage stressors.

# What's in a plan?

**Known triggers.**

**A child's signs of escalation.**

**Ways to help child recognize he's escalating.**

**Calming techniques that work.**

**What you'll see during "explosive" overload, what to do and who can support you.**

**What you'll see during "recovery" and where this will take place.**

# Ways to Manage: Sensory Overload

1 Be reassuring.

Coping with an overload situation is about making it through the storm.

2 Provide a safe space for *all* students.

It's important to support a child, give him time and wait until the explosion subsides.

3 Make everything calmer and think about what you'll do when this ends.



# Ways to Manage: After an Overload

**1** Let you, your classroom and the child recover.

Know that you don't have to address what happened right away.

**2** Touch base with parents and decide what you want or need to address.

Some kids may truly not remember what happened during a meltdown, so discussing it after the fact can be tough.

**3** Be brief and go back to your plan of action.



# Takeaways

# Key Things to Remember

1. Many everyday aspects of school can be tough for kids with sensory issues.
2. Sensory reactions may look like behavior issues.
3. Being proactive in managing triggers can help reduce issues.
4. Creating an action plan can help you *and* your student feel better prepared and calmer.

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