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## **STUDY: SENSORY EXPERIENCES CAN IMPACT THE ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN, ENJOY**

### ***Children with Sensory Processing Disorders Have Less Enjoyment of Activities with Rules, More Limited Social Networks***

**Bethesda, MD** — Participation in social aspects of daily life is crucial to children's development. Although disability status is recognized to affect children's ability to participate in social activities, little is understood about the impact of sensory processing disorders (SPD), related to diagnoses such as autism, on children's social participation. A new study by researchers at the University of New Mexico and the University of Utah - Salt Lake City examined the social participation patterns of two groups of children ages six to nine: (1) children with SPD and (2) their typically developing peers. Results revealed that the two groups of children demonstrated similar patterns of activity preferences and use of free time. Significant differences were in areas related to intensity and enjoyment of involvement in their social networks.

The researchers found that children with SPD – who are either more or less sensitive to the stimuli around them – tend to have less enjoyment of activities that have rules and pre-determined outcomes (e.g., organized sports, puzzles, board games) than their typically developing peers.

"This is something people should be aware of for all children," said Joanna Cosbey, PhD, OTR, lead study author and assistant professor of special education at the University of New Mexico, "but it is particularly important for children who tend to over- or under-respond to the sensory input present in everyday activities."

Additionally, children with SPD tended to have more limited social networks than their typically developing peers, potentially putting them at risk for social isolation. They reported spending most of their time with immediate family or alone, whereas their peers reported spending most of their time with extended family and friends.

"While most children show a shift from engaging socially with immediate family to peers as they get older, the same shift wasn't seen in the children with SPD in this study," said Cosbey. "Parents, occupational therapy practitioners, and educators should be aware of their limited social networks and provide structured opportunities for social interaction with age-appropriate peers. Ideally, these interactions should blend the activities that the children with SPD enjoy and can feel successful at with the social component."

Because play and social interactions promote the development of life skills such as cooperation, empathy, and independence, play should be recognized and valued as an important developmental activity for all children, particularly those with SPD. The data indicates it may be useful to examine the nature of activities children enjoy and those they don't enjoy in order to identify the prominent sensory features that support and also limit their social participation.

"An increased awareness of the sensory features of tasks can help children learn to identify those tasks at which they'll likely be most successful and have the most enjoyment. These activities can be targeted as activities to use during play to promote social participation with peers and to encourage ongoing social and cognitive development for these children," said Cosbey.

**Authors:** Along with Cosbey, study authors included Susan S. Johnston, PhD, CCC-SLP, professor of special education at the University of Utah - Salt Lake City, and M. Louise Dunn, ScD, OTR/L, pediatric coordinator and assistant professor of occupational therapy at the University of Utah - Salt Lake City.

**Reference:** *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Vol. 64, No. 3.

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