Sensory, Behavior or Both?

This question is best answered by those in direct contact with the child. The answer quite often is it could be both. Keeping a log of the behavior with its antecedent, behavior and consequences may help determine if the action is behavior (self motivated) or a sensory sensitivity.— (Is it Sensory or Both, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tantrum Behavior</th>
<th>Meltdown Sensory</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) Driven by a want or goal</td>
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<td>B) Usually its because they want something</td>
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<tr>
<td>C) Child checks to make sure you are paying attention to the behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D) Child acts this way in front of an audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>E) Once the child gets what they want, the behavior will end abruptly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>F) No Autonomic Nervous System signs. When goal is achieved, child returns to normal activity in under 5 minutes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both</td>
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<tr>
<td>Screaming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kicking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shouting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stomping</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swearing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Throwing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hitting</td>
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<tr>
<td>A) Driven by a reaction to something.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B) A reaction to overload or feeling overwhelmed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C) Child does not care if anyone is paying attention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D) Behavior will continue even without an audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>E) There is no goal. The behavior will only cease once the child has calmed down or when a loved one has helped them to regain control.</td>
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<tr>
<td>F) Autonomic Nervous System signs seen which are not under the child’s control such as red ears, sweating, flatulence, dilated pupils. Will take 45-60 minutes to return to normal activity.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Disclaimer: This monthly newsletter is not intended to endorse people, products or methodologies. Its sole intent is to be a source of awareness for teachers or staff working with students with autism. Pictures used in the monthly newsletter are copied from Google Images.
Sensory Sensitivities to Think About

**SIGHT**
**Under-sensitive**
- Central vision is blurred but peripheral vision quite sharp.
- A central object is magnified but things on the periphery are blurred.
- Poor depth perception, problems with throwing and catching, clumsiness.

**Over-sensitive**
- Distorted vision - objects and bright lights can appear to jump around.
- Easier and more pleasurable to focus on a detail rather than the whole object.
- Has difficulty getting to sleep as sensitive to the light.

**SOUND**
**Under-sensitive**
- May only hear sounds in one ear, the other ear having only partial hearing or none at all.
- May not acknowledge particular sounds.
- Might enjoy crowded, noisy places or bang doors and objects.

**Over-sensitive**
- Noise can be magnified and sounds become distorted and muddled.
- May be able to hear conversations in the distance.
- Inability to cut out sounds – notably background noise, leading to difficulties concentrating.

**SMELL**
**Under-sensitive**
- Some people have no sense of smell and fail to notice extreme odors (this can include their own body odor).
- Some people may lick things to get a better sense of what they are.

**Over-sensitive**
- Smells can be intense and overpowering. This can cause toileting problems.
- Dislikes people with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.

**TASTE**
**Under-sensitive**
- Likes very spicy foods.
- Eats or mouths non-edible items such as stones, dirt, soil, grass, metal, feces. This is known as pica.

**Over-sensitive**
- Finds some flavors and foods too strong and overpowering because of very sensitive taste buds. Has a restricted diet.
- Certain textures cause discomfort - may only eat smooth foods like mashed potatoes or ice-cream.

**TOUCH**
**Under-sensitive**
- Holds others tightly - needs to do so before there is a sensation of having applied any pressure.
- May self-harm.
- Enjoys heavy objects (e.g. weighted blankets) on top of them.
- Smears feces as enjoys the texture.
- Chews on everything, including clothing and inedible objects.

**Over-sensitive**
- Touch can be painful and uncomfortable - people may not like to be touched and this can affect their relationships with others.
- Dislikes having anything on hands or feet.
- Difficulties brushing and washing hair because head is sensitive.
- Only tolerates certain types of clothing or textures.

(Sensory Differences, 2017)
So Do You Really Know Me? (Picture from Google images)

**So You Know Me - Now What?**
Here are a few suggestions for support

**SIGHT:**
Modify the environment if possible. Reduce fluorescent lighting, provide sunglasses, use blackout curtains, create a workstation in the classroom - a space or desk with high walls or divides on both sides to block out visual distractions. Try colored overlays or printing homework and reading materials on pastel paper. Try grey, tan, light green, light blue, light pink, light yellow, and other pale colors (Grandin, 2017).

**SOUND:**
Under-sensitive - You could help with the use of visual supports to back up verbal information. Make others aware of the under-sensitivity so that they can communicate effectively. You could ensure that the experiences they enjoy are included in their daily timetable, to ensure this sensory need is met.
Over-Sensitive - Shut doors and windows to reduce external sounds; prepare the person before going to noisy or crowded places; provide ear plugs and music to listen to; create a screened workstation in the classroom and position the person away from doors and windows.

**SMELL:**
Under-sensitive - You could help by creating a routine around regular washing and using strong-smelling products to distract people from inappropriate strong-smelling stimuli (like feces).
Over-Sensitive - You could help by using unscented detergents or shampoos, avoiding wearing perfume, and making the environment as fragrance-free as possible.

**TASTE:**
There are some common items to try; rule out medical problems; build acceptance to new foods through gradual exposure; pay attention to textures; play with the food; take foods out of their brand boxes; have a set time for meals.

**TOUCH:**
Under-sensitive - For smearing: offering alternatives to handle with similar textures, such as jelly, or flour and water
For chewing: offer latex-free tubes, latex-free chew toys
Over-Sensitive - Warn the person, if you are about to touch them - always approach them from the front; remember that a hug may be painful rather than comforting; change the texture of food (e.g. purée it); slowly introduce different textures around the person’s mouth, such as a flannel, a toothbrush and some different foods; gradually introduce different textures to touch (e.g. have a box of materials available); turn clothes inside out so there is no seam, removing any tags or labels; allow the person to wear clothes they’re comfortable in.

(Sensory Differences, 2017)
Sensory Issues and Meltdowns

Students with ASD can be over stimulated or under stimulated by the senses. Knowing your child / student helps prevent meltdowns.

**Anticipating a Meltdown**

Many people with autism will show signs of distress before having a meltdown, which is sometimes referred to as the “rumble stage”. They may start to exhibit signs of anxiety such as pacing, seek reassurance through repetitive questioning or physical signs such as rocking or becoming very still. At this stage, there may still be a chance to prevent a meltdown. Strategies to consider include distraction, diversion, helping the person use calming strategies such as fiddle toys or listening to music, removing any potential triggers, and staying calm yourself.

**Identifying the Causes**

A meltdown is a reaction to an overwhelming experience. If your family member or the person you support has meltdowns, identify what is overwhelming for them. Complete a diary over a period of time. Record what happened before, during and after each meltdown. Patterns may emerge. You may find that meltdowns occur at particular times, in particular places, or when something particular has happened.

**Minimizing Triggers**

Once you have a clearer idea of what may be triggering meltdowns, think about ways you might minimize that trigger. Everyone with autism is different, but sensory differences, changes in routine, anxiety, and communication difficulties are common triggers. (Sensory Differences, 2017)

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Parent - Teacher Collaboration

Parents can be your most valuable asset when it comes to working with any student, especially those with disabilities. For parents of children with autism, collaboration is a must. Building a collaborative relationship starts with compassion and understanding. Schedule time to meet with a parent that will facilitate open discussion and allow you, the teacher, to hear and relate to the parent’s struggles, frustration, and fears. Unless a parent has had nothing but good experiences with service providers and teachers, they feel like they have to equip themselves for battle and often approach meetings with trepidation. Don’t assume a parent doesn’t care because they are inactive, they may simply be tired/overwhelmed.

**Tips to Building a Collaborative Parent Teacher Relationship:**

- **Approach the relationship with respect.** (PBS Parents Education, 2017)
- **Listen to parents** (Aguilar, 2017) Parents may not know all the technical terms related to autism or other disabilities but they know their children. Collaboration may help minimize issues and build support from home.
- **Create a detailed Student Information sheet** - Creating a detailed student information sheet (Williams, 2017) will help you and the parent better understand the child. Ask questions about sensory sensitivities, eating habits, meltdowns, likes, dislikes etc. This information will help with classroom management. Provided is a link containing sensory questions you can add to a student information sheet. [https://www.sensorysmarts.com/StudentSPD.pdf](https://www.sensorysmarts.com/StudentSPD.pdf)
- **Communicate often and in various forms** (Aguilar, 2017) - A mode of communication can be established during the initial meeting. Many teachers send home daily logs with an area for parents to send responses and write notes. Provide information about what's going on in your class, what students are learning, and what you’re excited about. Highlight the student’s accomplishments no matter how small. Remember parents need to hear the good.
- **Establish realistic expectations and create obtainable goals together.** Working together can help ease tension and may increase the use of classroom techniques at home and across environments.
Study Finds Sensory Integration Therapy Benefits Children with Autism

A small but rigorous study backs parent reports that sensory integration therapy improves daily function in children with autism. To read the article, cut and paste the link below into your web browser.


Free Autism Trainings

http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/

http://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules

http://www.ocali.org/project/asd_training_pd

References:


Is it Sensory or Both. (2017, 02 06). Retrieved from The Anonymous OT: https://theanonymousot.com/2013/03/28/is-it-sensory-behavior-or-both/

