

Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile

Case Study: Joyce and Sam

Joyce is a 29-year-old single mother of a 9-year-old boy, Sam. Recently Joyce and Sam started seeing a family therapist primarily because Joyce is seeking assistance with parenting. Joyce is recently divorced and has primary custody; Sam spends alternate weekends with his father. Since the divorce, Joyce finds herself perplexed with many of Sam's behaviors and with how she should respond. The day-to-day relationship between Joyce and Sam has become strained. Sam is acting more defiant than he has in the past, and Joyce is afraid that enforcing more rules will strain their relationship even more. Sam says he is sad that his father no longer lives at home, but he is glad to be living in the same house as before his parents' divorce, and in the same neighbourhood with his friends. Sam says his mother is angry with him a lot, but he doesn't understand why.

The family therapist suggested that information on sensory processing preferences might help Joyce and Sam get a better handle on their own needs. Joyce filled out the *Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile* on herself and the *Sensory Profile* on Sam. The family therapist scored the forms and set an appointment to discuss the results with Joyce.

Scores

An examination of the *Quadrant Summary Chart* (in the *Summary Score Sheet*) revealed that the Sensory Sensitivity and Sensation Seeking quadrants have the most extreme scores. Joyce falls within the Much More Than Most People classification on the Sensory Sensitivity quadrant and within the Much Less Than Most People classification on the Sensory Seeking quadrant. Joyce has moderate scores on the Low Registration and Sensation Avoiding quadrants, with classifications of More Than Most People *and* Less Than Most People, respectively. Within the sensory processing categories, Joyce tends to have high scores for passive items and low scores for active items. Joyce said she has always found herself to be highly distracted. She also described herself as very disorganized and “sort of out of step with what is going on in the world around me. Life just seems to happen; I can't seem to get a handle on things.”

By contrast, Sam's scores are very different from his mother's. The *Sensory Profile*, which was administered to Sam, has a somewhat different classification system and scoring summary from that of the *Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile*. The classifications in the *Sensory Profile* are Typical Performance, Probable Difference, and Definite Difference. Summary scores are computed for factors and sections rather than for quadrants. The *Sensory Profile* and the *Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile* use a classification system that is based on differences in scores between the respondent and a comparison sample. Similar dimensions of sensory processing are explored in both instruments, allowing general comparisons to be made between the parents' and their children's sensory processing patterns. Sam scored in the Definite Difference classification on the Sensory Seeking Factor and the Emotionally Reactive Factor. All other factor scores are in the Typical Performance classification. The family therapist noted that Sam actively explores his environment and is constantly moving and making noise. He is quick to respond emotionally to frustrating situations.

Interpretation

Joyce's quadrant scores indicate a rather sharp preference for passive as opposed to active sensory processing responses. She simultaneously notices (Sensory Sensitivity) and misses (Low Registration) information, which suggests that her modulation of responses is erratic. Furthermore, Joyce rarely is involved in creating or reducing sensation. She tends to respond as the sensation happens to her rather than control the environment to achieve the desired degree of sensory input.

Meanwhile, Sam is a very active seeker of sensory input. His seeking can be puzzling and irritating to Joyce. Sam also tends to be highly emotionally reactive, which can be especially challenging to someone with sensory sensitivity. Although Sam has a high need for sensory exposure, he probably could benefit from increased structure and predictability in his environment in order to reduce frustration and increase feelings of safety.

Intervention

Joyce found the information about her and Sam's sensory processing preferences very enlightening. Often, Joyce has felt that she and Sam are out of sync, but now she has a better understanding of how the friction arises in their interactions. Now, Joyce can better appreciate Sam's need for sensory input, but at the same time, she recognizes that Sam's need may conflict with her sensory sensitivity. Joyce also realizes that her passive response to the sensory environment may not be meeting Sam's need for more active involvement and structure.

The family therapist explored with Sam the activities that he most enjoys and then she reviewed this list with Joyce to identify ways that Joyce can engage with Sam in these activities without becoming overwhelmed by the environment, or ways that Sam can continue to pursue these activities without her (e.g., through sports teams or clubs, when he is with his father).

The family therapist also had Sam and Joyce engage in activities together while she observed them. The therapist then helped Joyce learn to detect more quickly Sam's frustration so that she can intervene more quickly. Joyce and the therapist worked together to establish a more structured morning routine that supports Sam's need for sensory input (e.g., incorporating extra movement in getting dressed, playing music he enjoys) while at the same time providing clearer guidelines and more consistency.

The family therapist also talked to Joyce about ways she can better meet her own sensory needs. She suggested that Joyce incorporate strategies that better organize sensory input (using lists, adopting more consistency to daily routines, organizing closets and drawers) so that she is less distracted *and* more able to identify salient cues. Joyce may also benefit from establishing opportunities for time to herself.