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Treatment and better quality of life

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The first step toward helping children with sensory integration disorder is diagnosis and treatment.

"When they need to seek treatment is when it becomes a problem. It's interfering with their ability to play or to develop their motor skills or social skills because their nervous system isn't tolerating all that sensory input," said Stephanie Adam, an occupational therapist with the Pediatric Therapy Center in Papillion.

Adam said therapists will focus on movement, touch and proprioceptive input (sensations from joints, muscles and connective tissues that lead to body awareness) when treating a sensory disorder.

For example, children with sensory integration disorder are often called clumsy because they often don't have a good awareness of where their feet are in relation to their bodies. They trip or run into objects and other people because their brain isn't getting good feedback about where the rest of their body is in space or they're not processing that information correctly, Adam said.

This "unawareness" not only affects walking but other basic functions such as eating.

"If your brain can't process where your tongue is and your mouth and where food is in your mouth then you can't eat. For some kids, it gets down to that level where it's interfering with everything," she said.

In addition, therapists use auditory programs that focus on high- and low-end ranges of sound to help a child's nervous system develop and tolerate different sensory experiences. Therapists also develop a sensory diet for these children, which involves a program of activities that will them "normalize" and desensitize their systems, said Karen Felderman, an occupational therapist with Children's Hospital.

An overstimulated child may need to push a cart from his classroom to the principal's office and back before he sits down and works on an activity. A sluggish child who can't engage in his environment may need to jump on a trampoline or sit on a ball before tackling a task, Felderman said.

Whatever the treatment, the goal is the same - to give these children a better quality of life and help them learn how to tolerate and integrate sensory input.

"The goal is to get them to a place where it's not interfering with their ability to do whatever they want to do or need to do into adulthood. They probably will always have preferences for the things their nervous system tolerates or maybe doesn't tolerate quite so well," Adam said.

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