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Making sense of sensory integration disorder

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Keelan Irving-Gass, 3, and his mom, Melissa, greet Waldo, Keelan's therapy pony at Heartland Equine Therapeutic Riding Academy in Omaha. Keelan does horse-riding therapy as part of his treatment for sensory integration disorder, a medical condition that makes it difficult to process and act upon information received through the senses.

A shirt tag or haircut wouldn't bother most children once they became used to them, but for a child with sensory integration disorder, these minor sensations could send them into a frenzy.

That's because children with sensory integration disorder, also known as sensory processing disorder and sensory integration dysfunction, have trouble processing sensory information, which can lead to learning and socialization problems if not treated properly.

"It's just the way their body interprets, perceives and uses sensory input and whether they use it efficiently or whether they don't," said Karen Felderman, an occupational therapist at Children's Hospital who treats children with the disorder.

Sensory integration disorder is becoming more and more common in children, said Stephanie Adam, an occupational therapist at the Pediatric Therapy Center in Papillion.

Why, however, is unknown.

"We don't know the reason - if it's because we have better tools to diagnose it now or if there are really more children who have the disorder," Adam said.

Adam and Felderman speculate medical professionals are more aware of the disorder than they were 10 to 20 years ago, thus more diagnoses.

One in every 20 children experiences symptoms of sensory integration disorder that are significant enough to affect their ability to participate fully in everyday life, according to research by the Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation.

Felderman said about 70 percent of her caseload deals with sensory integration dysfunction.

What causes sensory integration disorder is unknown. Prenatal and birth complications are cited as predictors, along with heart and respiratory issues. The disorder tends to affect boys more than girls. It's rarely an intelligence issue.

"They're usually very intelligent kids," Felderman said.

Where to get help, more information

The Pediatric Therapy Center in Papillion offers free screenings for sensory integration disorder.

For more information, call 932-2782.

Consult a pediatrician if you suspect your child has sensory issues or call Children's Hospital at 955-3980.

With sensory integration disorder, a child either seeks out excessive sensory input or avoids sensations altogether.

Excessive sensory input examples include bouncing, liking to touch and smell things and liking loud noises more than usual as compared to other children.

On the other hand, such sensations can produce a meltdown in children on the other end of the spectrum. They can't tolerate loud noises, playing with other children or something as simple as trimming their toenails.

Some children have a mix of both.

"It can be a wide variety. You just have to analyze each child and try to figure out where they are on the spectrum and how can we get them more toward the middle of that bell curve as far as their tolerance and inhibit some of that response to negative stimulus," Felderman said.

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