Where You Are

S7 Episode 3 — Re-Release: Understanding Sensory Processing Challenges in Kids

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Courtney Hall: Sensory processing is on our continuum. I would say myself, I do have some sensory needs or sensory awarenesses, and I think everybody does and often, we're not aware of it until it does become a problem or affects daily function.

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Char Black: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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Bryn Askwith: And I'm Bryn Askwith. Today, we're exploring sensory processing challenges in children and youth. Our senses, sight, sound, smell, touch and taste help us interpret the world around us by absorbing information for our brains to organize. This organization or sensory processing is the foundation of many daily tasks. However, some children have difficulties with sensory processing. They receive information from their senses, but their nervous system doesn't interpret it effectively, leading to trouble responding in typical ways, self- regulating and functioning in social situations like making friends. When sensory challenges interfere with a child's daily routine, parents and caregivers may need some extra support.

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Char Black: So in our episode today, we'll talk about different types of sensory preferences like hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity, look at other conditions that can go along with sensory processing issues, offer tips for parents and caregivers to support a child with sensory processing challenges and share resources that can help, should you need extra support. Let's get into that conversation.

Our first guest today on the podcast is Courtney Hall, an occupational therapist at BC Children's Hospital Healthy Minds Center. Welcome to Where You Are.

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Courtney Hall: Hi, thanks for having me. I'm super excited to be here today.

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Char Black: Well, we're super excited to have you. Courtney, why as parents and caregivers, should we be listening to a podcast episode about sensory processing challenges? Why is this a topic relevant to all parents and caregivers as they support their child's mental health and overall well- being? I know that's a big question.

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Courtney Hall: I was going to say it's a big question, but a really great question. I think in terms of being aware of sensory processing is just really being aware of how we interpret or process our environment and everything around us. So as a parent, just that other extra layer of how to be attuned or being aware of maybe what's going on for your child in that moment. There are five different senses in how we interpret our environment. There's a sense of sight, taste, touch, sound, and smell. There are also three hidden senses that we aren't always aware of. So that's how our body processes movement. The fancy term is vestibular. How we process our own body awareness. Again, a fancy term for proprioception. And then how we process our internal state. Also has a fancy term interoception. So that's if we're feeling hungry or tired and how we process that.

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Char Black: You just blew my mind with these three other senses. Can you speak a little bit more around why is it relevant to a child's mental health and over wellbeing?

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Courtney Hall: For sure. I'm going to target interoception because that definitely can even do with our feelings. So we think about mental health, if interoception is harder for us that being aware of our internal state, maybe we're not picking up on those early warning signs of being frustrated, or disappointed, or irritable/ As a child, we don't really expect them to be 100% aware of their own regulation needs, but if they're not picking up on that, that's really where we might start to see those 0- 60 or 0-100 meltdowns, which I'm sure any parent would agree with can be very challenging to manage on a daily or even weekly basis. So just even helping to figure out that internal functioning is imperative and very helpful to mental health.

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Bryn Askwith: I also want to bring into the conversation Tammy, who's joining us on the podcast today, who's a mom of two fabulous kids and has experienced supporting a child with sensory challenges. So welcome to the show, Tammy.

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Tammy: Thank you so much for having me.

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Bryn Askwith: Tammy, when did you first notice these sensory processing challenges were a part of your child's world?

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Tammy: She was, I would say 18 months old. Textures of things really bothered her or she needed to touch things. We'd walk past something and she had to feel it to register it instead of just see it and then rejected a lot of things. Didn't like the way things touched. My daughter is very sensitive to smell. I would say that was probably one of our highest sensory needs. Even if you are in a room and I change my shampoo, she'll notice right away. So anything unfamiliar or

not in its natural state, she does not do well with. She doesn't seek a smell, she rejects it. So smells are very tough for her.

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Char Black: So it sounds like you can't make any assumptions at all, Tammy. So you talked about those earlier signs when she was 18 months. So how has it developed over time and what does it look like now?

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Tammy: I think learning your child's needs of what you think your child will be and what they are, are polar opposite. So you have to really relearn them. She has a very unique profile. She's got rejecting, seeking and craving, which is very difficult because all those needs have different things. So we've learned clothing is very difficult for her. So we make sure that every item is safe for her and comfortable and we process through them. Once a month we go through to make sure that they're safe clothes. So they don't have glitter, or tags, or sparkles, or too tight. Sometimes we only wear shorts, sometimes we only wear spinny dresses. So you never know what it's going to be and you have to keep checking back in. Food, we don't eat at a table together sometimes because the smells of our food just is too hard to process. And then we learned about this craving, which Courtney was so helpful with, is the movement. She has to flip to feel good and if she doesn't flip she doesn't feel good.

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Bryn Askwith: That's really interesting to hear and learn about and there's so many pieces of that I want to dive into. Courtney, I just want to check in with you because I also know through some of the research and information you've shared, there could be other conditions that go along with sensory processing challenges for families and I'm wondering if you can just speak a little bit about what some of the common ones are.

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Courtney Hall: For sure. No, there can definitely be coexisting conditions, certain mental health conditions, thinking anxiety, ADHD, can definitely overlap with sensory processing or lead to what Tammy was saying, that sensory sensitivity, or sensory rejecting or avoiding, or even thinking about that ADHD, that sensory seeking or that need to get that strong input. Other neurodevelopmental conditions including fetal alcohol syndrome disorder and autism spectrum disorder. Also, don't want to minimize trauma and how trauma or stressor- related disorders can definitely have that overlap with sensory processing. Again, leading to maybe a bit more sensory sensitivities, sensory avoidance or even missing cues in their environment needed to participate. Alternatively, some children just take in way too much information, so they're not able to focus on the task at hand. There's no clear answer. There's a lot of overlap between a lot of different conditions and sensory processing is on our continuum. I would say, myself, I do have some sensory needs or sensory awarenesses and I think everybody does and often, we're not aware of it until it does become a problem or affects daily function.

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Bryn Askwith: Yeah, I think that's a really helpful piece as a reminder that we all have sensory needs, right? Sometimes we don't think about that in this way. So I think that's a really helpful way to frame it.

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Char Black: I am still going to stick with you Courtney. We heard from Tammy earlier that her child has a few different sensory preferences. So the craver, the seeker, the rejector. Are there different types of sensory challenges that kids can experience and can you share some examples of common ones?

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Courtney Hall: For sure. There is a lot of different terminology and other people will refer to sensory processing and their needs in different ways. Like Tammy said, the rejecting, the seeking the craving, a lot of people will refer to it as hyper or hyposensitive at times. So that hyper is that really being sensitive to that different input. And it sounds, Tammy, like you were saying about your daughter, that very hypersensitive to smell, hypersensitive to touch and then hyposensitive to movement, really needing that movement, really craving that movement.

And it is important to be aware that a child can have both of those profiles. In terms of some examples, Tammy already did a great job highlighting those. That picky eating and that sensitive to smells is one that we often see kind of overlapping a bit. Often hear about teeth brushing and nail cutting. In terms of hyposensitivity, really not being aware of maybe how strongly their touch is. So these might be the children that really want those big deep hugs or they're not aware that maybe when they're touching someone, it might be hurting that other individual, but it's just their own awareness of their body isn't in tune to what it needs to be in that moment.

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Bryn Askwith: Tammy, I suspect every day might look quite different for you as a parent of a child with sensory processing challenges. So what helps you prepare for each day as a parent?

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Tammy: So a daily thing I feel like helps the most is a bit of predictability by putting in a daily routine so she knows what to do. So we have it on her door, she knows what time to get up, brush her teeth and reminders and then less input, less demand is easier for her to process. So she can visualize with less talking. It's easy for her to continue on following through to be more successful. Because we know that clothing is going to be difficult as well.
So we usually put her hardest task at the beginning. So we get her out of bed and then she gets stressed right away. So we know we have a lot of time to be able to deal with that sensory part and then we know food's difficult. So then we put that next. So we make sure that the hardest tasks are the first tasks, so then we could get her back to a regular baseline before we put her into an overstimulating school. It's got to be very stable and structured so she can stay structured. So our daily routine is checking the weather, making sure we're prepared, having boots and gloves and hats and shorts and everything in the backpack. So she has all these

things accessible for her. And it goes throughout the day like, her backpack for school, her backpack for dance, her backpack for therapy and treatment, all has all the tools and stuff for her to be able to use throughout the day.

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Bryn Askwith: I love how you summarized the importance of routine there and how visual tools can be a big thing and then the hardest task at the beginning of the day. There's so many great takeaways in there. And then of course, all the different backpacks that you mentioned, I want to get to that in just a moment too.

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Char Black: Yeah, I think it was really helpful for you to talk about the hardest task at the beginning. That really made me think about myself and all children. Courtney, why don't we focus on some practical ways that parents and caregivers can support a child with sensory processing challenges. So Tammy's already explained how she prepares for her days. What are some key ideas that you share with the families you work with?

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Courtney Hall: Well, clearly you can see that Tammy and I have worked together even if it was ever so brief in time because being a sensory detective, being aware of what are the things that might come up and as a parent just having that plan in place or even just that awareness. So if something does come up, how are you going to maybe deal with that, mitigate that or be flexible? The other one is how can you think about adjusting the environment, to either give them more sensory input or limit some sensory input? Tammy, you're doing such a great job really highlighting your priorities. You want her to eat, so you're going to make the table a safe place for her and there's going to be those times and those places for those family meals or those family connections, but you're just really prioritizing her intake. Tammy also highlighted tools and I always like to say when we do think about sensory tools, it's the right tool at the right time for that child.

I think we're all aware of fidgets that exist. I know myself doing this podcast right now. I have a fidget in hand just to help me with that regulation a little bit. And then in terms of just thinking about that sensory problem solving. And we really do want our children to become those sensory problem solvers as parents and caregivers, that is really initially falling to us. But we do want to start slowly keeping in line a child's ability to do so but building their capacity in order to think about that. And this might just be as simple as saying, "Hey, I know where we're going, it's going to be really loud today. What do you think might help? Would it help for us to get there early before all the noise happens or do you think you want to bring your headphones along?" And just starting to do some of that sensory problem solving with them so that they start to think about that and maybe be aware of that. Again, being mindful of a child's age and where they are on that readiness to engage in those conversations.

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Char Black: You are listening to Where You Are. I'm Char Black. To learn more about sensory processing challenges, including resources that can be helpful to parents and caregivers, visit our website, keltymentalhealth.ca/ sensory-processing. Are you busy and feeling a bit overwhelmed supporting your child's mental health and wellness and could use someone to talk to who can relate? Contact a trained Kelty parent peer support worker who can offer a non-judgmental listening ear and connect you to mental health resources in your community. Connect by phone, email or via Zoom. Find out more at keltymentalhealth.ca/contact-us.

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Bryn Askwith: I definitely want to loop back to Tammy some of the things you were mentioning around the backpacks, how you had different ones for your kids. So can you, hearing the strategies that Courtney's mentioned and underscored many of what you're already doing, are there one or two other ones that you would like to highlight? And then can you also talk a little bit about your backpacks?

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Tammy: Yeah, I'm actually sitting in my daughter's room right now and I'm just looking around at how we have so many sensory things for all of her different needs. We have a loft bed with a swing on it for when she needs to be calm. We have a mat right beside me for when she needs to do cartwheels. Right now I'm sitting on one of those big ball chairs that she can bounce on while she's sitting here. So when she's seeking, she will either go on a swing, or be on her mat, or sit on the ball while she's sitting watching a show, so she's getting output while receiving. So many different tools we tend to use all day long and they become natural parts of her environment. Her environment just looks a bit different than everybody else. So she knows as she grows to use what tool to help with the processing. And then her backpack obviously, because she's a child and we have to go to school and we have places and treatments. We got her a squishymallow backpack that you can hug and it comes into the car with us. So if we know that we're going to have more of a challenging day or go to therapies or treatment, we bring that with us so she can hold it in the car. And she also uses as a sense of security that in her backpack we have her headphones, her fidget, her pens, her notebook, different things that she can use at different times. If she is very sad, it gives her comfort and a sense of security as well that if she needs it, she has it, but she doesn't always use it. And she knows that her backpack is a tool and not a toy, that they are mainly for keeping her regulated. And she does tend to help me pack it. Like Courtney said, "We're going to go to a birthday party. What do you think you're going to need?" So we've learned to bring things to different places that we know are successful for her. It's just helping her to be successful.

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Char Black: That's amazing, Tammy. I want one of these backpacks for myself. But also, what I got from what Courtney was saying and what you were just saying is that giving your child or children some independence around picking options or offering solutions so they're part of the problem solving and giving them some responsibilities.

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Courtney Hall: Sometimes it can be tricky to tease out what is the sensory processing tool or strategy and what is a regulation tool and strategy. There's so much overlap in between. And really, we do think in terms of regulation, sensory processing is what can help support regulation. One other thing I really want to stress is there are these tools but then there's also these concepts and we always want people to be more aware of what is the concept behind this tool because tools do go missing, get lost, might not be available and whatnot, but if we know what the concept is that helps with that regulation or that sensory processing, then we can help that in a different way or meet that need in a different way. So that is one thing I always do really want to make sure parents are aware of, just so that we don't get stuck on the tools.

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Bryn Askwith: Tammy, I also wanted to ask, how has putting some of these practical tools in place to help your child manage their sensory processing challenges impacted other aspects of their mental health and wellbeing?

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Tammy: It definitely has been difficult because my daughter is super sensitive to her surroundings. So she knows she's different and sometimes she doesn't have the confidence to say, "I need a break. I need to walk away." Because she does want to fit in and she still wants to be a part of the class. So she'd rather struggle and fit into society than to be able to use what she needs. So it's like navigating the mental health and understanding the needs. I think there's always still going to be a huge bridge to gap. I don't think it closes to be honest, because she has to find the confidence in herself to be comfortable with using the tools and that only comes with age and acceptance.

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Bryn Askwith: Do you think any of the tools for sensory processing challenges has helped address some of those other mental health challenges as well?

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Tammy: Most definitely. I think, for example, the anxiety of sound, right? So the sound creates anxiety, so it's limiting the anxiety and having a sense of control. So being able to put headphones on when we're walking through a crowd, limits the anxiety and the mental disruption. But then also it's like putting in the routine helps her to be able to function. It is very helpful. It's all hand in hand. Unfortunately, it's a big, crazy spectrum and you have no idea where you're going to land until you're in it and then you just have to cope with it and figure it out. But definitely, each part triggers each other and they also help each other. So it really is a maze that you're trying to navigate through.

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Char Black: I do want to come back to Courtney. So Tammy did mention just now around how her child in general wants to fit in sometimes, so she restricts what comes naturally to her. How can parents talk to other caregivers in their family community to disrupt the myth that kids with

sensory processing challenges are actually disruptive children? Can you offer some helpful language they could use?

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Courtney Hall: Good question. I think sometimes it's just bringing it back to the function and just really pointing out the area that a child is having a hard time with. I'm always trying to support families on developing that partnership with the other caregivers and really starting those conversations of problem solving. Just to use school as an example, as much as possible, having these supports or strategies being more universal, so they're more available for all the children. So it's not just one wearing headphones, "Hey there's four headphones, anyone can use them," and letting that be appropriate in the classroom setting. And then I think sometimes it does fall to us as adults, caregivers, parents, individuals working with children with sensory needs, to model the use of these strategies and really to normalize them. And sometimes it's just breaking it down or just setting it up more as an experiment.

I always like to say, "Let's just see what happens. Let's see if you wear your headphones. What do you think if you wear your headphones for three minutes or five minutes? Do you really think other kids in the class are going to point this out? And if they do, what is something maybe we can say? Maybe there's just a script that we say such as, ‘Noises are hard for me. So I wear my headphones so I can concentrate.’ " And then the child feels empowered to be able to use the tool because they have the script of what they can say, why they need them and what they're going to do to help them in that situation.

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Bryn Askwith: I love the idea of that scripting. I'm just really giving the kids some language to clarify their needs and put their needs front and center. It makes me think of resources that can be helpful to parents and caregivers around sensory processing challenges. Tammy, we'll start with you and then over to Courtney. Do you guys have any resources that were helpful that you would want to recommend to parents and caregivers?

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Tammy: I would say the biggest thing is have a really good team and I know that not everybody can do that, but I do have a very good team. I have an OT, a BI, and a speech therapist and it's really good for them to also talk to our school team, so they can send education to the schools. I think also finding support in other people who might be going to the same thing. That's really important is, being open to discussing your needs and your child's needs and being a community.

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Bryn Askwith: Courtney, anything to add?

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Courtney Hall: Absolutely. As an OT, I do always try to have my recommendations or resources to be somewhat based in evidence. One book I often do recommend is a book called

The Out- of-Sync Child. It is written by a mother who has a child with sensory processing challenges. So there's *The Out-of-Sync Child*, *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, and *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*, which really does speak to the adolescents and adults that also do have sensory processing challenges.

One other resource that I do like is the SPD STAR Center, which is a center in the United States, but they do a lot of sensory research. And I will say research and sensory processing has been a little less than what it could be, but they often do a lot of education and research and have a lot of resources on their website. I will really add to Tammy's point about having a team, even just an occupational therapist you can touch base with at times. Just if any questions do come up. I know that those can be harder to find at times and there are wait lists. But definitely, there are some resources and places to find occupational therapists. You don't need to have a diagnosis or a specific disorder, you don't need to be referred by a doctor. You can often self-refer. And I think that's one thing that people do need to know is that you don't need that referral or that specific diagnosis in order to see an OT.

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Bryn Askwith: Perfect. And as to the specific resources you mentioned, we'll definitely add them to the show notes for this episode.

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Char Black: And we're coming to our final question. We always like to end our podcast with some words of wisdom. So I'm wondering if Tammy and Courtney, you have some words of wisdom to share with our audience?

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Tammy: I think the biggest thing, when I think about my child, I think that I can't change the world for her. It's a different world and I can't change it, but I can guide her through. I have ADHD myself and I said, "I use it as a superpower and one day you'll learn to use it as a superpower too and you just need to hone in on it. And eventually that will come with age and understanding just like all the superheroes." So those are the biggest things. It's just helping your child really understand that it's not a personal thing, it's not you, it's just our world is different and that's okay and all people have different needs. We're all just trying to navigate together through it.

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Char Black: Amazing. I want to be a superhero too. Courtney, do you have anything to share?

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Courtney Hall: For sure. I think just really highlighting the importance of maybe taking that step back in those moments and being that sensory detective and seeing what is going on for a child in that moment. There is always a reason for behavior. So if we're seeing certain behavior and this behavior is affecting function, let's just try to tease that out into why that's happening and

maybe there is that sensory component that we haven't thought about that could be affecting functioning.

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Bryn Askwith: Thank you both so much for making the time to join us today. I have learned so much through this episode and through you both. Thank you for all the examples as well. I know our listeners will really appreciate and connect with those.

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Tammy: Thanks for having us.

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Courtney Hall: Yeah. It was so great to be here. Thank you again.

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Char Black: Thanks so much for listening today. Bryn and I are grateful to have you join us each episode.

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