

Fight/Flight/Freeze

Imagine walking down a dark alley alone, late at night. You may jump if you see something in your peripheral vision, pull away quickly if something brushes your arm, or freeze because you hear a noise – only to find out that it was nothing at all! Your brain is working in a heightened state, and it's as if you can see, hear, & feel everything.

This is a fight/flight/freeze response. It is a necessary neurological & physiological reaction to stressors that is meant to keep us safe. But, imagine feeling like this all day long. Wouldn't that be exhausting?

Sensory processing challenges can make everyday occurrences – such as transitions, sharing toys, mealtime, or playing with a peer – feel stressful and threatening, leading to a constant state of fight/flight. It may look like the child is overreacting to ordinary things, when in fact their brain is interpreting danger & responding in ways they feel will protect them. Occupational therapy helps diminish this response over time by teaching appropriate coping techniques, training the sensory system, & working with parents & caregivers to encourage a sensory friendly approach at home.



Because each child is different, it is important to utilize your therapist's guidance to maximize the benefits of these strategies & meet the needs of your child as an individual. We always encourage parents to participate in treatment sessions, ask questions, & set up parent conferences. Consistent communication with your child's therapist is key!



TLC's Guide to: Sensory-Friendly Parenting





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Is it sensory or behavioral?

We believe this is the wrong question to ask. The truth is that it doesn't matter – as a parent, the best response will be the same. Behavior is communication, & part of sensory friendly parenting is learning to see the message being conveyed. We are all interacting with and responding to the stimuli in our environments constantly. For instance, if something tastes good, you might ask for more, take another bite, & even smile; if something tastes bad to you, you might withdraw, push the plate away, or decline the meal.

In children with sensory processing challenges, reactions to stimuli may appear too big or too small. Rather than simply push a nonpreferred food away, a child struggling with sensory processing may throw the plate, cry, or even meltdown. It can be difficult to understand these reactions when we are not processing things in the same way our child is, and this often leads to frustration in the home.

Our goal at TLC is to emphasize the importance of parent & family education in treating sensory challenges.

Instead of giving attention to undesired behaviors, we urge parents to encourage & reinforce positive behaviors. Being proactive now prevents being reactive later, & every step toward a sensory friendly approach helps improve regulation. It takes practice, but it's worth it!

Meltdowns

WHAT ARE MELTDOWNS?

Meltdowns are escalating negative emotional reactions due to an unregulated limbic system (responsible for controlling emotions). These reactions include behaviors such as kicking, screaming, biting, aggression, & bad language.

WHAT CAUSES MELTDOWNS?

- Placing demands
- Waiting or having to stop doing something that they enjoy
- Threats to self-image
- Attention
- Transitions
- Overwhelmed
- Disorganized Sensory system
- Need for control

HOW TO MANAGE & PREVENT MELTDOWNS

- Find the trigger
- Plan ahead & set up for success
- Teach calming strategies
- Review strategies

- Practice/role play/tell stories
- Give two acceptable choices
- Give free will choices; "Its cold outside, you might want a coat."
- Allow failures when the price tag is still reasonable
- Make requests gently; "Would you please" & "I need ____, could you help me with that?"

How do we change the behavior?

- Consistency
- Change your reaction to their actions
- Increased attention to behaviors that you want
- Decreased attention to behaviors that you don't want
- Create opportunities for desired behaviors
- Use sensory strategies
- Use natural consequences
- Use "no" as little as possible
- Create clear, consistent rules & boundaries
- Do not be sarcastic
- Model behaviors that you want
- Remember that fight/flight/freeze responses look like a meltdown
- Stressed children stay in defense mode
- Validate their feelings
- Always consider biological strategies
- Give your child chores to promote independence & self-worth