

- Some children may have a *mixture* of sensory problems. Their behaviours do not show a regular pattern.

What should parents do if they believe their child has regulatory difficulties?

Parents should keep a record of the behaviours they are concerned about. This will help them to understand how their child reacts to different sensations. It will also help them to figure out what causes the behaviours. Some sensory problems may be outgrown, or they may continue as the child grows. Regulatory difficulties may also happen in children who have other developmental problems.

Parents who are concerned should speak with their doctor, who may refer the child to another health professional for more assessment.

What can parents do to help a child with regulatory difficulties?

Most importantly, parents need to understand how sensory difficulties play a part in their child's behaviour. Parents can then be more successful at understanding the behaviours and responding sensitively to their child's needs.

Changes to the physical environment may be needed:

- Limit the child's exposure to stimulation that may be overwhelming.
- Add a variety of sensory activities to help a child to focus her attention and organize her actions.

- Provide predictable, consistent routines and slow, gradual changes.

Changes to the social environment may also be needed:

- Help the child to calm with slow, rhythmic rocking and quiet talk.
- Maintain calm and controlled emotions when the child feels uncomfortable or out of control.
- Provide active, stimulating social interactions and games to arouse a child's attention.

Children with regulatory difficulties or disorders need extra practise and gradual exposure to situations they find overwhelming. This will help them learn to cope.

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

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health information

Regulatory Disorders: What Should I be Concerned About?



All children have their own way of taking in information from their senses (vision, hearing, taste, touch, smell). This information helps them learn about their world and their bodies. As they grow and learn, children begin to organize the experiences from their senses in a way that helps them to regulate or manage their own behaviour. They learn to sleep through the night, comfort themselves when upset, play with others, and explore their world.

Most children learn by themselves how to process and react to sensations. Some children are born having trouble with processing sensations. This makes it hard for them to automatically react in an appropriate way. The result may be what is called a *regulatory disorder*. Regulatory disorders interfere with a child's ability to feel comfortable about herself, relate to others, cope with ordinary demands, and learn.

What are regulatory disorders?

Regulatory disorders have two features:

- trouble managing information coming in from the senses
- different patterns of behaviour

The child's behaviours show the trouble he is having with information from his senses.

Regulatory disorders are usually first seen in infants and toddlers. They affect the way young children adjust to new situations and relate to others.

What behaviours are parents likely to see first?

Infants may:

- have problems feeding and sleeping
- be fussy, irritable, and cry a lot

Toddlers may have problems:

- adjusting to changes
- with temper control, sleep, and behaviour at mealtimes

Pre-schoolers may:

- have behaviour problems
- have trouble playing alone or with others
- be fearful and anxious

What kinds of sensory trouble and behaviour patterns do you see in these disorders?

Some children *over-react* to sensory experiences like touch, noises, bright lights, smells, and textures. An infant may show he doesn't like being touched or held. A young child may be distracted, hyperactive, and overwhelmed in a busy, loud environment. Different kinds of behaviours may be seen in these children as they try to control their feelings of discomfort:

- Some children may be fearful and cautious, worried that sensations and movements will be overpowering. They may dislike changes in routines, cling to caregivers, be easily upset, and have trouble calming themselves.

Other children may be more negative and defiant. They are fussy and difficult as infants, and stubborn and controlling as pre-schoolers. They will want to have things their way. Interactions with others may often be negative. They may like to have things "just so". They need repetition and slow, gradual change.

- Some children *under-react* to sensory experiences. They may be withdrawn or absorbed in their own thoughts, activities, and emotions. An infant may be quiet, inactive, or tire easily. A young child may look disinterested, uninvolved with others, and have trouble playing in the same way as other children his age.

Children who are under-reactive to touch may crave physical contact, often touching others, and wanting to be touched in return. If they are under-reactive to movement, these children may seek physical sensations like running, climbing, and swinging.

- Some children act without thinking. Their physical movements seem disorganized. They have problems controlling and planning their movements. They have trouble holding their attention. Their activity level is high, they take risks, and they seem fearless. Their behaviour is often seen as aggressive. However, it comes from their excitability and poor planning rather than aggressive thoughts or plans.