



HELPING OUR CAMPERS WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITY HAVE AN EXTRAORDINARY WEEK AT CHURCH CAMP

Picture this scenario: In complete fun one morning, as the cabin is preparing for Morning Prayers, one child throws his shoe at a buddy. It causes the entire cabin to bust out in laughter. Each child giggles and screams and a mini-party of fun breaks out in the cabin. It's going to be a great day at camp!

However, when the time comes for the fun and games to end, and the counselor calls the campers back to the task at hand, which was preparing for Morning Prayers, not all of the campers will be able to return to what they were doing in a timely and age-appropriate manner.

For some of our campers, they may be lost in a state of confusion due to the sensory overload. All the noise and movement, while exciting and fun, may have been confusing. It takes this camper a few extra seconds and even possibly up to a few minutes, to process what happened.

This child with a compromised sensory processing system will need to be given the extra time and may need help in redirecting him/her back to the task at hand. These campers are what is called “sensory sensitive”, and there will be at least 1 out of 6 campers in your cabins who experience it.



What is Sensory Sensitivity?

Sensory integration is a term that refers to how someone uses the information provided by all the sensations coming from within the body and from the external environment.

Many of us think of our senses as individual and separate channels of information, but actually, it's necessary that they all work together. It's what allows us to provide an appropriate and timely interactive response to our world.

Why does this matter at camp?

I'm glad you asked! Because many of our children are sensory sensitive, they can be more sensitive than usual to environmental stimuli, such as noise, light, touch, or temperature. Conversely, some children can have a lowered sensitivity level to the very same stimuli.

What's important for our counselors and staff to remember is that our campers with sensory sensitivity take in and process information differently than other campers. We at Faithtree believe that even the smallest adjustment can make a huge difference for our kids. And cultural competency starts with information.

While none of us on the Removing Barriers team is offering medical or therapeutic advice to our camping staffs, we have gathered some general best practices learned in our professional and personal experiences over the decades. We share them below.

SENSORY INTEGRATION

Here are 3 ways our campers “take in” their environment. We’ve also included examples to help counselors be aware of potential struggles as well as strategies they can utilize to better support our sensory sensitive campers during their time at camp.

1. The Sense of Touch

Unlike many of us, children that are sensory sensitive can be greatly impacted by even the littlest touch or movement. Other children require firm pressure and significant compression to be able to register touch at all.

The sense of touch and how we perceive it is referred to as: *tactile or proprioceptive*.

What it is: *Proprioception* is a fancy word that refers to the sensory input and feedback that tells us where our body is in space and allows us to perceive movement within our environment. Proprioceptive receptors give our muscles and joints feedback to respond to both. Trying to gauge how to best move and navigate their bodies in space can be super stressful and truly alter a campers’ camping experience.

An example: An easily understood example is the following: Let’s say you sit down in the dining hall at camp to a full glass of milk at the table. You automatically know how far to extend your arm forward to pick-up that full glass of milk, how much pressure it is going to take to grasp it and bring it back to your lip to drink it. No big deal, right?

But if you have difficulty processing any of the senses it takes to do this, there are going to be a lot of mistakes and a lot of spilled milk.

Why it’s important: For those children who respond to touch differently, often a fast and/or light touch can be scary to them and their response is an immediate withdrawal or sense of overwhelm. This is a vulnerable and often uncomfortable place for our children to be.

How counselors can help: It’s always a good practice to face the child and touch with a firm/solid pressure. Allow time and watch your pacing so that the child can anticipate the touch. The slightly firm/solid touch provides proprioceptive input to help the child perceive the sense of your touch faster and more accurately.

Also, be prepared for multiple opportunities throughout the day to assist, support or even fix when a camper has misjudged, overshoot, undershot or simply wasn’t precise

in their perception of sensory input. That may be a dropped ball during sporting events, a bunk that isn't even close to military perfect, or a myriad of messes, dropped trays or spilled food in the dining hall.

Maybe most importantly, it might mean that your camper can get overwhelmed when others sit too close to him/her. Conversely, your camper may not recognize spatial boundaries and may get too close to others.

Your awareness of your camper's relationship with the sense of touch will allow you to support them in so many tangible ways.

2. The Sense of Sound

For a lot of our campers, processing auditory input can be a struggle. For some kids, taking in sounds -especially verbal feedback, high-pitched noises, etc.- can be a huge struggle and can generate a ton of stress. It can be over-stimulating and even sometimes, scary. For many of our campers, they struggle with what is called auditory processing.

What it is: *Auditory Processing* is the ability to correctly hear and understand the spoken language. The electrical signals that come from the sound waves into the ear are sent to the brain with a delay and often arrive distorted. This can happen even though hearing is normal. Simply put, the words do not sound the same and processing of spoken words will be slower. This can make it difficult to discriminate, recognize and comprehend what is being said.

An example: As campers are woken up and getting dressed for the day, their counselor says the following: "Today after Divine Liturgy and breakfast, we will be going on a nature hike. So along with bringing your prayer book for Church, you will need to put on sun protection. And remember to take your water bottles with you before you leave the cabin."

Our camper who has difficulty processing auditory input is still processing "take your prayer book with you". The remainder of the instructions that were given are lost and our camper will not be able to recall the other instructions given (putting on sun screen and bringing his water bottle.) This camper needs the directions that were given to the entire cabin repeated to him/her individually and slowly.

Why it's important: Auditory Processing issues can make learning, memorizing and following directions very difficult. This is certainly important to understand in the camping environment when unexpected noises, spontaneous eruptions of clapping or chanting and tons of directions happen all day long.

How counselors can help: There are so many ways counselors can assist in this type of situation. The most important way is not to over-stimulate your camper. Don't



repeat words over and over (i.e. “Go! Go! Go!, or “Faster, faster, faster!”). Remember! Processing can be slower and is *not* automatic.

Additionally, try lowering your voice with your camper because high-pitched voices tend to be more difficult to process correctly.

Lastly, watch your body positioning. Bend down to the child’s level and make sure you give *and get* direct eye contact. It will allow you to better gauge where your instructions are landing with your camper.

3. The Sense of Movement

When any of us move, we automatically right ourselves with gravity. It’s automatic for most of us. For us, we can walk, run, climb, shift ourselves in a chair, turn our head, bend over, etc. and not lose our balance.

This is not the case for our sensory sensitive camper. For them, it’s likely that they won’t be as coordinated and could use a little extra time moving through their day.

What it is: The *vestibular system* is an elaborate system located in our inner ear. It is the sensory system that provides the leading contribution for our sense of balance and spatial orientation for the purpose of keeping our bodies upright in relationship to gravity.

The vestibular system includes movement of the head and neck, body, and visual stimuli. Think of being on a boat in the ocean. One has to process the vestibular input of the movement of the boat to stay standing, constantly readjusting our bodies so as not to lose our balance, while at the same time, processing and adjusting to the visual stimuli of the waves and up and down movement of the boat so as not to get sea sick. That's a lot to process!

An example: Maybe your camper loses his/her balance easily. Maybe they pause walking through nature, or up an incline. Hiking, running games and walking back and forth to the cabin may take extreme effort.

Why it's important: Understanding and looking for ways to support our campers with vestibular issues is critical for counselors because it not only provides for their enjoyment of camp, but it can quite literally help keep them physically safe.

How counselors can help: A few of the many ways counselors can help support vestibular issues include having a buddy designated to assist campers during activities, providing motivation and encouragement for the camper to participate.

Also, allowing for extra time, or even, extending a steady hand may be a huge resource for certain campers.

The Most Important Thing

It goes without saying that there are so many ways camp counselors and staff can support our campers. Even something as simple as a firm hand on their shoulder and reassuring words like, "You doing okay?" can offer a sense of calm and brief reprieve from what might otherwise be considered tremendously stressful.

General awareness is a critical first step towards providing for the sensory sensitive child. With so many transitions during each day at camp, your awareness will allow them a safety from all the unexpected happenings. Simple things, like letting the child know what each day will look like, and reminding them throughout the day what is coming up next will serve the sensory sensitive child immeasurably.

More important to understand though, than any of these tools, is that all of us were created in the image and likeness of God. God makes no mistakes. These campers are here, exactly as they are, with you as their counselor, at this specific time in history for a reason. Pray for them. Love them. Be the icon of Christ for them. It will impact them in ways you may never know.