



Wired Differently

A Teacher's Guide to Understanding
Sensory Processing Challenges

Keriann Wilmot, OTR/L

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by Kerriann Wilmot, OTR/L



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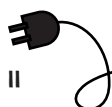
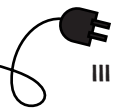




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Introduction



Being an early childhood educator to children ages three to five is one of the most fun and exciting jobs I can imagine. Children this age are just adorable little sponges soaking up all the information the world can offer as they expand their knowledge and language, while they play and engage in the types of fun-filled activities that adults envy!

Preschoolers love to play with vehicles and dollhouses, and they are also learning to color while holding a crayon, engaging in painting and crafting activities, talking about the weather, learning to go to the bathroom by themselves, and learning how to dress themselves for outdoor playtime. At this age, they learn about colors, shapes, letters, and numbers as they are receiving their first introduction to academics and education.

Starting the school year can be a challenge for any teacher, but especially for early childhood teachers. Children at this age are curious, excited, and learning the classroom routines. For most children, learning the rules of preschool takes time and practice, but with repetition and structure they do; every day is a little easier. Confidence blooms as children develop new skills. But what about those children who struggle in preschool?

Ava, Zion, and Min-jun

Let's meet three early childhood students in three different early childhood environments.

Ava

Ava is a four-year-old girl in a private child-care setting where she participates in a structured preschool opportunity in the morning. Ava's beautiful long hair, which she will not let anyone cut or put into a ponytail, is a straggly mess. It frequently covers her eyes and interferes with her play as she struggles to see through it. She likes organized and structured play activities that involve color sorting. However, she always wants to play according to her own agenda and does not like to follow the teacher's rules. Ava orders other children around when playing. She may scream when she is mad if they don't participate her way. Transitions to activities she does not like, such as classroom art projects or circle time, can lead to yelling, crying, and tantrums or running away to another part of the classroom. Children and teachers who try to engage with her in an effort to help her may be met with lashing out through hitting, kicking, pushing, and yelling. Ava refuses to sit on the carpet with her peers at circle time and is often found playing with a toy on her own at the back of the room. Redirecting her to the circle-time carpet square leads to her flopping on the floor and more



outbursts. Ava frequently refuses to put on coats or other clothing with fasteners prior to outdoor time. She dislikes using the restroom at school because she is terrified of the automatic toilet flusher; consequently, she is often constipated. She has a limited diet of foods she likes to eat. She does not use utensils properly, shoving food into her mouth and taking bites that are too large. Rest time has become a significant challenge, as she is not able to settle down on her mat to fall asleep; her wakefulness leads to disruptive and inappropriate behaviors as she tries to leave her mat and play with toys in the room. Ava has not been successful with building friendships and relationships in the classroom. She is often dressed in the same cotton, loose-fitting clothing, and she prefers wearing old sneakers or winter boots, even when they are too small or out of season.

While Ava is able to speak and communicate, she struggles to use her language effectively to share her frustrations. Instead, in an attempt to get her needs met, she resorts to physical actions such as hitting or yelling. Ava is not responsive to her teachers' attempts to help her, and other students are beginning to copy her behavior. The director has met with her parents multiple times about her disruptive and unsafe behavior and is considering asking her parents to find another program.

Zion

Zion is an energetic four-year-old boy in a private, half-day, morning preschool program at his community church. At circle time he is unable to remain on his carpet square, lying on the carpet, frequently changing his position, and bumping into other students who complain that he is in their personal space and that he is hurting them. When sitting in a chair at the table, Zion rocks back and forth in it unsafely and prefers to stand at the table to complete his work. When playing with toys, he bangs them together forcefully, often breaking his creations or those of his peers. When building with toys, he struggles to use the right force to attach pieces correctly and is often frustrated. During computer time, Zion refuses to wear headphones. In the classroom environment, he covers his ears and complains that the noises are too loud. He speaks so quickly at times it can be hard to understand what he is saying. Zion brings the exact same lunch every day and is very particular about what he eats and how he eats it. Yet, for some reason, he puts all sorts of toys in his mouth and frequently bites and

chews on his clothing and other classroom items. Playdough and sand-and-water play are his favorite classroom activities, but he avoids sticky or messy painting. He frequently complains that his hands are dirty and requests wipes to clean them off. Zion's parents tell his teacher each morning how difficult it is for him to fall asleep at bedtime and that he was up several times during the night. Other teachers have wondered whether Zion could have an attention disorder that is affecting his ability to learn new skills, because he's constantly on the go and has difficulty remembering any of his letters or numbers.



Min-jun

Min-jun is a sweet but very quiet and shy little boy. Each day he struggles to say goodbye to his parents and transition into the preschool classroom routine. However, he eventually settles in and takes his spot on the carpet for circle time. He remains seated in the correct spot but often can be seen chewing on his shirt during circle time. As his teacher reads stories aloud, he does not appear to be following along. He needs a little bit more time to process a question before he answers, but he is able to effectively remember details of the stories. While Min-jun occasionally needs some reminders and cueing, he participates in classroom routines appropriately. His parents have shared that he is struggling at home with a lot of behaviors. Getting to school in the morning is a huge stress for the family and a daily hurdle for Min-jun, as he takes a long time to wake up and get moving in the morning and then does not want to wear certain clothing items. His refusal can lead to intense meltdowns before leaving for school. When he arrives home at the end of the day, he can also be challenging and has frequent tantrums. His parents wonder if he is exhibiting the same behaviors at school. They are worried about his ability to learn and participate with his peers, but for the most part, he is succeeding at school without any major issues.

Despite the repetition, routine, and practice, and even though peers are making progress, children like Ava, Min-jun, and Zion continue to demonstrate more frustration. Instead of each day being easier, it's harder and a lot more challenging for them, their parents, their teachers, and their peers. Situations in the classroom cause meltdowns. The idea of transitioning to the carpet to sit "crisscross applesauce on their pockets" is met with resistance and tantrums.

You may have experienced similar situations in your own classroom. Even though you've agonized over choosing the best circle-time book ever, you can't figure out why, as you read a book, one little girl is refusing to sit with her peers, preferring to play alone at another corner of the classroom. Most of the class cheers with excitement over playdough, sand, or slime in the sensory table, while another student stands there screeching, both hands held high in the air as if it's the worst thing ever, refusing to look at or even touch the substance at all. Any transition to a nonpreferred activity, including mealtimes and nap times, might be easy for these children one day, but on another could lead to running away, hitting their friends, kicking their feet, and yelling. Making new friends is a struggle for them; other children who approach them could encounter an unpredictable scream, swat, hit, or kick.

If you have a child like Ava, Zion, or Min-jun in your classroom, you recognize the challenges.

The strategies in your teacher toolbox just aren't making a difference. Each and every day in the classroom has become a struggle. While you know certain activities might make the child happy and some days are great, other days the child seems to disrupt and derail the entire classroom. You've begun to wonder whether you'll make it through the year together and meet every academic target. You, the other teachers, and the children are walking on eggshells, trying not to set this child off.

You've reached out to the parents to find out if this behavior occurs at home too. How can you share your concerns with the parents? You aren't sure what is going on, but something does not seem right. Some of the child's behaviors have become unsafe and even required incident reports. Others have required a trip to the director's office and a phone call home to the parents. Perhaps, as you have reached out to friends, perused websites, and engaged in seminars to try to make sense of these behaviors, you've stumbled across the term *sensory processing disorder* (SPD). Could this be what is making it difficult for your student to participate and learn in your classroom? And if so, what can you, as a preschool teacher, do?



First, know that you are not alone. Many of your colleagues teach children like Ava, Zion, and Minjun, and they, too, struggle with similar issues. Second, it's important to understand that what you see these children doing is not something they choose to do; it is their way of communicating to you that something isn't right. Finally, there are solutions, which you'll read about in this book. Helping children with sensory issues involves offering fun, child-friendly tools and experiences—often through play—that can make a world of difference in a child's school day.

How This Book Is Organized

In the first chapter, you'll learn what SPD is, how it is recognized, and what services are available for children with SPD. Chapter 2 covers how children with SPD present in the early childhood classroom; how occupational therapists can help; and what your role is in getting assistance for these children, including how to communicate with families. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, you'll learn how to set up a sensory-friendly classroom and read about tips, tools, strategies, and even apps to help you teach children with SPD. The book concludes with specific examples of accommodations for children with different sensory issues.

My hope is that this book will help you understand your role, learn some new strategies, and formulate a plan of action. Then, you will have the tools to help a child who has SPD be as independent and successful as possible, even if she is only in your classroom for a short period of time and moves on to another program.

My Qualifications for Writing This Book

I have worked as an occupational therapist in public schools, outpatient clinics, and residential hospital schools for children. I also have offered in-home intensive services for children in a birth-to-three early intervention program. In birth-to-three, I have spent many hours cross-legged on living room floors alongside teachers, speech therapists, and physical therapists, exploring ways to help children with all types of special needs meet their developmental milestones. I drove almost 40,000 miles my first year as an occupational therapist, seeing children at their homes and schools and spending several thousand dollars buying toys, games, and other activities to use with the vast array of children I was helping.

Over the years, I've worked in other early intervention programs and at a children's hospital alongside neuropsychologists, nurse practitioners, neonatologists, psychiatrists, speech pathologists, and physical therapists, helping children with significant medical issues. I have worked in the public school system evaluating children to determine whether they are eligible to receive occupational therapy services at school. I've spent countless hours observing students and educating teachers on accommodations and strategies to help children feel more successful in their classrooms, using many of the recommendations and strategies you will read in this book.

I have noticed that, over the last twenty years, it has become harder and harder for children to succeed in preschool. Year after year, the number of referrals has increased, and the issues children are having in the classroom seem to be more and more complicated. How is it possible that, for an alarming number of children, the preschool classroom is not the fun, productive learning environment teachers and parents hope it will be? Often, families are asked to unenroll their children, but they quickly learn that a new environment without the proper supports yields the same disappointing and frustrating results.

More parents have begun referring their children for specialized services, as they hear from their children's private-school teachers about incidents regarding unsafe behaviors. Often, upon transition to a specialized program where sensory needs and learning styles are met in a smaller environment with more-skilled teachers and access to supports and accommodations, children no longer exhibit the behaviors they had shown previously. They are thriving and learning in the new environment.

I'm truly thankful to all of the families who agreed to let me enter their homes and work with their children. I'm grateful to teachers who have the ability to keep children learning for several hours a day, because I truly understand how difficult it can be to keep children motivated to learn. I'm thankful for opportunities to collaborate alongside parents, teachers, and medical professionals. When everyone involved in a child's day-to-day life is positive and focused on what they can do to help make a difference, families' lives change for the better. I hope that you benefit from the support of occupational therapists who want the best for children's preschool success and education.



Decoding Behavior

Preschool is a time of wonder, when curiosity, development, and learning intersect. With many new sights, routines, and experiences, preschool can be exhilarating. But, what about those children who struggle? Perhaps they exhibit one or more of these behaviors:

- Melting down during transitions
- Chewing on their clothing, toys, and other inedible items
- Covering their ears in response to certain noises
- Avoiding certain textures
- Refusing to sit with their peers
- Preferring to play alone
- Pushing, hitting, kicking, or biting
- Yelling or screaming when frustrated
- Bolting out of the room, fleeing from an activity or teacher

These actions may seem like everyday challenging behaviors, but they could signify something much more. It's possible that these children are struggling with sensory processing disorder (SPD).

Wired Differently will help you understand what SPD is, how it can interfere with a child's learning, and ways to help children be successful in preschool. You'll learn how to set up a sensory-friendly classroom and will read about tips, tools, and strategies to help you teach children with SPD.



Keriann Wilmot, OTR/L, is a pediatric occupational therapist with 18 years of experience in helping teachers and parents to connect and improve the lives of children. She is a blogger on her site [Toy Queen.com](http://ToyQueen.com), covering toy recommendations and play tips.


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