

Occupational Therapy Newsletter

When It's Not Sensory: Understanding Student Dysregulation

In school settings, dysregulation is often quickly labeled as "sensory." While sensory processing challenges can absolutely impact behavior, **not all dysregulation is sensory-related.** Understanding the difference helps us respond more effectively and support students in meaningful ways.

WHAT IS DYSREGULATION?

Dysregulation occurs when a student has difficulty managing emotions, behaviors, attention, or energy levels in response to a situation. It may look like:

- Refusal or avoidance
- Emotional outburst
- Withdrawal or shutdown
- Impulsivity or silliness
- Arguing or noncompliance
- Leaving the classroom

SENSORY TOOLS ARE POWERFUL, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE ANSWER TO EVERY BIG FEELING.

Sometimes a child doesn't need more sensory input. They need more support, structure, and skill-building.

And that's real self-regulation.



When Dysregulation is Sensory

Sensory-related dysregulation typically includes:

- Clear triggers (noise, touch, movement, lights, crowds)
- Consistent patterns across environments
- Fight/flight responses to sensory input
- Improvement with sensory strategies (movement breaks, deep pressure, noise reduction)

When the right sensory supports are in place, regulation improves.

WHEN IT'S NOT SENSORY

Sometimes what looks sensory is connected to underlying challenges:

- **Emotional Regulation** (difficulty managing frustration, anxiety, embarrassment, or disappointment).
- **Executive Functioning** (task initiation, organization, flexible thinking, planning, transitions).
- **Skill Deficits** (tasks that are too hard academically, socially, or motorically).
- **Environmental or Social Stressors** (peer conflict, unclear expectations, transitions, or change in routines).
- **Trauma or Chronic Stress** (students under chronic stress may remain in a heightened alert state that mimics sensory defensiveness).

WHY THE DIFFERENCE MATTERS

If we assume all dysregulation is sensory-based, we may:

- Over-rely on sensory tools
- Miss teaching coping skills
- Fail to address academic or social challenges
- Overlook executive functioning skills

Supporting Strategies When It's Not Sensory

When dysregulation is skill-based, helpful supports may include:

- Explicit instruction in coping strategies
- Visual schedule and predictable routines
- Task breakdown and scaffolding
- Choice-making opportunities
- Co-regulation with a calm adult
- Problem-solving conversations after the student is regulated
- Teaching flexible thinking and perspective-taking

Our goal is not just calming behavior- it's building lifelong regulation skills.

The Big Picture

Sensory processing is one piece of the regulation puzzle. Effective support requires looking at the whole child: emotional skills, executive functioning, environmental demands, and underlying abilities.

Our goal as a team is not simply to calm behavior, but to:

- Build Skills
- Increase independence
- Strengthen self-awareness
- Support long-term regulation strategies

If you're unsure whether a student's dysregulation is sensory-related or skill-based, let's collaborate. Together, we can create supports that build independence, confidence, and long-term success.