

SENSORY MODULATION

What is this developmental skill?

Sensory modulation is the brain's ability to regulate responses to sensory information. It allows children to respond appropriately to everyday sensations without becoming overwhelmed or under-responsive.

How does this normally develop?

As children's nervous systems mature, repeated experiences with responsive caregivers help them gradually tolerate a wider range of sensory experiences. Co-regulation teaches the brain when to increase or decrease its level of alertness.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect often exposes children to chronic stress while depriving them of consistent co-regulation. As a result, the nervous system may remain overly reactive to everyday sensations or fail to respond appropriately. Many children fluctuate between sensory seeking and sensory avoidance depending on their level of stress.

What might this look like?

Children may:

- Become overwhelmed by everyday environments.
- Seek intense sensory experiences.
- Avoid certain activities.
- Shift rapidly between high energy and shutdown.
- Have frequent emotional outbursts following sensory overload.
- Appear unpredictable across different settings.

Parenting Implications

Observe patterns rather than isolated behaviors. Identify situations that consistently overwhelm or calm the child. Build sensory breaks into the day, maintain predictable routines, and collaborate with occupational therapists when sensory challenges significantly affect daily functioning.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of asking, "Why is this child overreacting?" caregivers can ask, "What is this child's nervous system experiencing right now?" This shift encourages compassionate responses that promote regulation rather than escalating distress.