

Understanding Your Social Butterfly

| S3 EP 79

AD: [00:00:00] Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora, the podcast that's brought to you by ParentSense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you're a new parent, then you are in good company. Your host, Meg Fora, is a well known OT, infant specialist, and the author of eight parenting books. Each week, we're going to spend time with new moms and dads, just like you, to chat about the week's wins, the challenges, and the questions of the moment.

AD: Subscribe to the podcast, download the ParentSense app, and Catchmaker every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life. And now, meet your host.

Meg: Welcome back moms and dads. Lovely to have you join me. I am Meg Faure and this is Sense by Meg Faure and each week I'm joined by guests and sometimes experts and sometimes [00:01:00] moms. And we talk about the hot topics of the moment the challenges that parents encounter and the questions that parents ask and obviously all the joys of parenthood as well.

Meg: And then sometimes I record something just on my own where I talk about a topic that's really close to my heart and we've been doing a series over the last couple of months on sensory processing. What are the different sensory personalities? And what does it mean if your baby is one of these sensory personalities?

Meg: So for those of you, if you have not done my sensory personality assessment it's worth going onto the parent sense app. You'll find it there along with a course or a talk on it. And if you haven't heard the podcast, looking at all the different sensory personalities. It is our most popular podcast.

Meg: It was recorded with myself and Bailey Georgiades. So you can go and listen to that. What I have been doing is each week through this series is I've actually been, I'm looking at a little bit more depth at one of the sensory personalities and today it's the turn of the sensory seeker.

Meg: [00:02:00] And the sensory seeker is a super busy little human being. In my books, I call it the social butterfly. And these social butterflies are those absolutely exhausting babies and children. I actually, my firstborn was a

sensory seeker and his dad is too. And so I had this going on in my household, this super, super busy, busy little human being.

Meg: And I can remember when I fell pregnant with my third one and I had worked out that according to my gestation, well, according to my cycle she would probably be a boy. I thought, Oh my goodness, how am I going to do another boy? Cause at the time I was absolutely convinced that this was a boy thing because he was so exhausting and I was quite deflated at the thought of having to raise another one that was that busy.

Meg: Of course she turned out to be a girl and with a very, very different sensory personality. She has my sensory personality. So that, that brought challenges out of itself, having too slow to warm up human beings in a house. But I had lived through having this social butterfly. And [00:03:00] it is super, super exhausting.

Meg: So I think what we're going to do today is I'm going to kick off. I'm going to talk a little bit about what is sensory seeking. Then we'll have a look at what babies who are sensory seekers look like, and then we'll go on to have a look at how we can kind of cope with them and just deal with them.

Meg: First of all, what is sensory seeking behavior? Well, we know that our sensory systems are taking in sensory information every minute of every single day. So, you will have the sounds, the sights, the smells, the feel of your clothes on your back, your hair against your neck this sensory information is going in.

Meg: Absolutely. All the time into our brains. Now the normal human brain or the functioning human brain actually filters out some of this information because it's just simply not needed. And so it filters it out and it says, I don't need to notice that I don't need to be cognizant of it. And that system is called habituation.

Meg: It's the ability of the brain to filter out extraneous information that's not important. And that is a [00:04:00] very important function of sensory integration in the human brain. Now, sometimes the system works very, very well. And sometimes for other human beings, it doesn't work as well. So for instance, for our sensory sensitive babies and humans, that filter doesn't work very well.

Meg: So we become a lot more sensitive as in terms of our brain profile or sensory processing. But sometimes that system works really, really well. And we habituate an enormous amount of sensory information. So actually not

everything's getting through, we tend to have kind of periods in which a lot can be going on that we're not really noticing.

Meg: And that's often how, what our settled babies are like. So. A lot can be going on and they don't over respond at all. And my second child was a settled baby and they're actually quite pleasant because they, they just really laid back human beings. What happens with our social butterflies or sensory seekers is they have this profile.

Meg: They have this profile of habituating a lot of sensory information, but the brain works out that actually it wants sensory information and it has a need for sensory [00:05:00] engagement and sensory information in order to functional in an optimal zone of arousal. In order to be well focused and happy, secure, entertained, sleep well, feed well, whatever.

Meg: So all levels of function that the human being does in any day from play to learning to feeding, to sleep, they actually work out that they need more sensory information in order to actually optimally function. And so they start to seek a lot of sensory information, and this often happens at around about 12 to 14, 15 weeks that their sensory system wakes up to the fact that actually the world's more exciting than my senses are letting me know.

Meg: And so I'm going to seek sensory information. And I will never forget the day that this happened for James, my firstborn. He had been a relatively settled baby. And at about 12 weeks, I went to a wedding and I had left the wedding reception to go and separate myself out and go and breastfeed. And on that exact day, James woke up to the fact that the world was more interesting.

Meg: And on that [00:06:00] day, he stopped feeding very nicely and he would. Arch his back, look over his shoulder. If something was going on in the room, he didn't want to be breastfeeding. Breastfeeding was super boring. And that was kind of the first hint that I got that this was going to be a super busy baby. And from there we went on.

Meg: If he had, if he was placed under a mobile, he would kick and wriggle and squirm. And his developmental milestones were very precocious. So he crawled super early and was walking by nine and a half months. It was kind of one of those you know, this absolute need for speed and to get going all the time, and it was exhausting, absolutely exhausting.

Meg: If you saw me as a young mom in those days, you would see that I would feel absolutely exhausted. And if you were a friend of mine who had a daughter

and I had a number of friends that only had daughters, I think they would look at me and think, my goodness, what is wrong with this child?

Meg: In fact, I do think that people had said to me in the early days, does James have ADHD now to James actually did go on to have ADD, but that was, that's a whole different story, but and I don't believe in. Labeling little ones at this age as [00:07:00] having ADHD but he was a real sensory seeker.

Meg: On that subject, I think if you do have a sensory seeker, you are very likely to be at some point presented with a diagnosis of ADHD. And I think I would just caution, really, really would caution against going down that road because not all little ones who sensory seekers have ADHD, number one, and number two it's a diagnosis or a label that really shouldn't be put on young children because by nature of what their brain needs, the little human being is a very busy creature and can look like they've got ADHD, but all they're doing is exploring the world. So caution against labels at that age and also caution against connecting sensory seekers with automatically having any type of ADHD and so on. Having said that, very often our ADHD kids do have some sensory processing difficulties, but it doesn't always work the other way around. So that's the brain of the sensory seeker. They often start off with settled babies. They start to seek sensory information. Once they know that sensory information is [00:08:00] interesting, that for them is just like that they start to seek and seek information.

Meg: So what does this look like in a daily life? Well, these are the ones I mean, and let's start with talking about weaning and feeding.

AD: This episode is brought to us by ParentSense, the all in one baby and parenting app that help you make the most of your baby's first year. Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby? When to feed them. How to wean them, and why they won't sleep?

AD: ParentSense app is like having a baby expert on your phone guiding you to parent with confidence. Get a flexible routine, daily tips, and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download ParentSense app now from your app store and take the guesswork out of parenting.

Meg: So they often are quite good breast feeders and that they take to the breast fine. They're quite interested in [00:09:00] feeds. But the minute there's something more interesting on offer, they will very quickly rotate towards that. So the bottle, for instance, is something that's different. It's novel. They love novelty.

Meg: So they'll take to the bottle. And once solids can start, then they go headlong down that Avenue very, very quickly. And I can remember very clearly having James, who was kind of sitting on our laps at three months old at a dinner table, looking super interested in our food and wanting to engage and actually my mom in law handing him a chicken bone to chew on and me completely freaking out because he wasn't at weaning age yet and saying, no, no, no, he must have a chicken bone. He must've a chicken drumstick to know on he must have absolutely nothing because obviously he wasn't weaning at that stage, but the point was.

Meg: The James was super interested in food and very often this is the trajectory that happens with these social butterflies is that they want to move off milk as soon as possible. And the minute you introduce solids, they tend to go off their milk very quickly. And it's one of the cautions we have with social butterflies or sensory seekers is that under six months [00:10:00] of age, milk is the priority.

Meg: And so you need to be careful and to kind of protect the appetite for milk by offering milk when they're hungry. And solids just as something for interest when their appetite has been taken care of by milk, because if you start to offer them solids for hunger and milk afterwards, they simply will go off their bottles altogether.

Meg: So sensory seekers tend to be quite gregarious eaters. In terms of weaning, you'll do a better job with weaning them if you've got more variety. So great color, quick changes again, I can remember with James, I had introduced rice cereal. This was back in the day. We don't do that anymore. We prefer introducing vegetables, but back in the day, we introduced rice porridge. And at first he was absolutely fascinated and loved the texture and loved the flavor, but very quickly went off his solids. And so we needed to move him on to more colorful, more flavorful solids. So if you're looking for a solids journey for these little ones, do read the book weaning sense, it will guide you.

Meg: And what you'll see there is that we talk about having bright colors, lots of variety and lots of [00:11:00] heavy flavors, go in with the herbs and the spices and a bit of chili and olives and whatever it is, because these flavors will be great for your little one.

Meg: In terms of sleep and your social butterflies. So your social butterfly, when it comes to sleep they really don't love to sleep because sleep is boring. Like nothing goes on behind our eyelids. And so they are going to want to

rather be engaged, focused, seeing people. And so sleep time is really a hassle for them. They often are little ones that fight sleep.

Meg: So, for many of us, as your little one is moving from being in an awake state into a sleep state, they have a period of irritability of like kind of niggle just before they fall asleep. Well, this tends to be accentuated with social butterflies because they actually really don't want to sleep because sleep is boring.

Meg: If they know that the world exists. When they go to bed, they are likely to not want to go to bed. So one of the good tricks with social butterflies is to pretend that the whole world finishes when they go to bedtime. So literally keep bedtime super consistent. So, 6:30 [00:12:00] is go to bedroom.

Meg: Let's just say, don't take them out of the bedroom after bath time. So don't let them go down into the passage and the kitchen and the TV room so that they know that something else is going on, literally from bath into bedroom, keeping the bedroom super muted, really calm, really quiet, reading a story, and then putting them down absolutely consistently as if nothing exists outside of their bedroom after that time.

Meg: And this is a really, really good trick because if you can get that right, you can actually trick them into believing that the world stops at 6:30 in the evening. And I did that very successfully with my little ones until they were like two and a half years old, just by never taking them out of their bedroom.

Meg: So the world stops at that time. Everybody goes to sleep, is what their belief system would be. So they do tend to be little ones that fight sleep. They need good routines. And then they also need very quiet sleeping spaces because if something else is going on in their sleep space, they would actually wake up and want to engage with it. So. Dark room, muted sounds, things like white noise would be [00:13:00] a really, really good idea for our, for sleep and sensory seekers.

Meg: Sensory seekers love playtime, they love activities, they love outings, and because of the way that their brain is wired, they actually need that stimulation, and so sedentary activities like, for instance, TV and screen time can make social butterflies very, very irritable.

Meg: So one of the things that I suggest with our social butterflies is to actually schedule time every week for a play date. And for an outing and for something

novel and have stimulation ready for them every single day. That stimulation, that social engagement, those outings are really what does wire their brain.

Meg: It helps them to sleep better at night and it helps them to be happier human beings. They do tend to otherwise get bored and need some stimulation. So stimulation is really, really important for these little ones. One of the caveats to that though, is that they can tend to become overstimulated and that happens because they go and go and go like that Duracell bunny until their [00:14:00] batteries run out and then they simply fall over or throw a temper tantrum.

Meg: And so as a parent who's a good co regulator, It would be very important for you to actually be able to make sure that your little one is having that downtime and watching their signals. So watch for your little one. If they're getting busier and busier, if they're getting slightly more irritable, if they're starting to push their friends, those are all very clear signals that actually they're starting to reach the end of their tether and they actually need to rather have some downtime.

Meg: And then it would be acting as a co regulator, as a parent. To actually help them to have some downtime and to calm down and to remove them from the situations.

Meg: So, I think I've spoken through a little bit around what they are needing and what their brains actually need and how to respond.

Meg: I think in terms of when is it a problem? Is it ever that this could become a disorder? Everything when we talk about sensory personalities happens on a continuum. So you've got your normal range, which 90 percent of babies will fall into. And then you've got your fringe [00:15:00] cases where you've got a kind of 10 to 15 percent of your population would fall into of either.

Meg: Really not seeking information or overtly seeking information. And for these little ones who overtly go out of their way and they absolutely cannot function without stimulation. Obviously we do need to to address the situation. If your little one is so busy that they can never engage with anything for longer than a minute, like let's say they start to play with an activity and instantly they have to switch to another, they will never sit still for long enough to look through a book with interest.

Meg: They absolutely can't fall asleep and are heavily wired and not sleeping at night or a super irritable because they're permanently overstimulated. These are all signs that potentially you need to seek professional help and support. My

suggestion there is that you would take them to an occupational therapist who specialized in sensory integration and sensory integration is a specialization that looks at these sensory profiles.

Meg: It's very important that she is SI trained. A good SI therapist for an under three is [00:16:00] never going to label your child with any disorder here. They're just going to be looking at their function and they're going to be saying, right, what we're looking at is that this is how they function in their world and how can we adjust their environment to make it more applicable to their sensory personality.

Meg: What they will probably do for you is give you what is called a sensory diet and sensory diets are ways in which to put sensory information into the day that will help your little one to kind of be in the optimal state of arousal. Look out for an OT who will assist you with that. I don't think this is something that needs to go to a pediatrician.

Meg: I don't think this is something that needs to go to a psychologist necessarily. I do think that an OT is the best person to chat to about this. And she will give you a sensory diet, as I mentioned. And then last thing to say is that if anybody's coming at you with diagnoses or labels run a million miles until your little one is three years old, little ones are supposed to be busy.

Meg: They are supposed to be learning from their environment. There's no reason, absolutely no reason why we should be labeling children and creating a concept of a [00:17:00] disorder. We should rather be catering their world to what their sensory profile is at this period in their life. So lots of sensory stimulation.

Meg: Lots of social engagement is the secret with these social butterflies. So there you have it a little bit of a snapshot of what our social butterflies, our sensory seekers are up to. And if you want any more information, do pop into the parent sense app. There is a full course on this that you can have a look at.

Meg: Thank you for joining me this week and we'll connect again next week.

AD: Thanks to everyone who joined us. We will see you the same time next week. Until then, download ParentSense app and take the guesswork out of parenting.