**Parenting Sensory Seekers | S5 EP121**

But if you find yourself utterly exhausted at the end of the day, like in fear of your child's life because you're never entirely sure what they're about to do, if the noise in your house is completely freaking you out from this little human being, if they're resisting sleep because sleep is boring, if they are the most gregarious, flirty child and everybody keeps telling you your child is the most amazing kid, but you've got to deal with the aftermath, then potentially you have got a sensory seeker. 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 mums and dads just like you to chat about the week's wins, the challenges, and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the ParentSense app, and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life.

And now, meet your host. Welcome back, mums and dads. This is Sense by Meg Fora, and I am Meg Fora.

I'm welcoming you here today. We're going to be chatting about a very, very interesting topic. As you know, each week we look at the different aspects of early parenting, from feeding to sleep to development stimulation.

And sometimes we actually have a look at the baby's sensory personalities. And today is such a day, we're going to be talking about sensory seekers. So if you have got a baby who is very busy, very socially engaged, and is bouncing off the walls, then today we're going to be talking about all the things that you should be doing with that little one, and why it's a super skill and something not to be fearful of, but something to embrace.

And when I'm doing podcast topics that kind of pick my brain, I always like to have somebody alongside me to actually do the picking for me, and to actually ask all the questions. And so today I'm going to welcome Tove Gant here with me. Welcome, Tove.

Hi Meg, thanks for having me. Thank you so much for joining us and being the voice for the mums. So you're going to have all the questions on sensory seekers.

Yeah, I've got a little sensory seeker myself. So it's definitely got my own load of questions loaded up, which hopefully will help all those mums and dads of sensory seekers out there. So I guess to kick off, what is a sensory seeker Meg? How do I know if my baby is a sensory seeker? Well, if you don't know what a sensory seeker is, you probably don't have one.

But if you find yourself actually exhausted at the end of the day, like in fear of your child's life, because you're never entirely sure what they're about to do, if the noise in your house is completely freaking you out from this little human being, if they're resisting sleep because sleep is boring, if they are the most gregarious, flirty child, and everybody keeps telling you your child is the most amazing kid, but you've got to deal with the aftermath, then potentially you have got a sensory seeker. So they are little ones who really, really go out, all out to get any type of sensory and social stimulation. So they love engaging with the world.

They actually, their default kind of sensory threshold, which we talk about, and anybody who's interested in this can go back and listen to a few of our podcasts on the sensory thresholds and the sensory personalities. But their default sensory personality, interestingly, is that they are undersensitive. So a lot can be going on in their world without them really perceiving it.

And so when they, at about three to four months old, discover that the world is quite interesting, they tend to start seeking a lot of information. So they are super busy, very active, gregarious, visual learners, auditory learners, kinesthetic learners, like they use their senses and they want to keep moving. So, and they, as I said, they're really, really exhausting.

They often don't know their limits, so they overstimulate themselves. And so then they can look like a sensitive child because they've completely overwired themselves. So what does a parent of a sensory seeker need to know in order to parent them optimally? So I think, you know, I mean, I think there are a lot of labels associated with busy children and particularly if those busy children verge on being more chaotic and non-directed, like where they really are very busy.

And those labels are things like hyperactivity or, you know, kind of, you know, and that's the main one actually that goes around is those children are, you know, undisciplined and hyperactive. The reality is that those kitties are actually just really seeking sensory stimulation. And I think one of the things that parents need to know is that it's not naughtiness, as frustrating as it can be, and that it's sensory seeking.

And, you know, we had a, one of us, our son, who was our eldest, was a sensory seeker. And he used to do this like high-pitched squeaking sound, like it was a shriek where he'd inhale when he was doing it. And he was so, so noisy.

And it just would send us over the edge. Like, you know, there was always a noise. There was always something being broken.

There was always, you know, he was that kid. And, you know, I think the important thing for parents to know is this is not naughtiness and it's not hyperactivity. They are sensory seekers.

And I think if you can understand the need for sensory stimulation in the context of the way that their brain works, it makes you a much better parent because you can be more empathetic to what's going on. So instead of trying to curb their need for movement, sound, helping them to find constructive ways to do it. So, you know, one of the things that we did, James used to make these high-pitched squeaking sounds.

We'd give him something vibrating because vibration is a very regulating sense, but it is stimulating as well. So I had this little wiggle pen that I used to carry around with me in my nappy bag. You know, he was two or three years old and I'd pull out the wiggle pen and it wouldn't have a pen on the end of it.

You used to be able to insert a little kind of pen thing in the end of it, but I just have it as the vibration. And he'd walk around with this little thing and giving himself this vibration. It's a form of self-stimulation, I guess, but it was more socially acceptable than this high-pitched squeal that he was doing.

So it's kind of, first of all, understanding why they're behaving like they are. And then secondly, trying to find things that help them to meet their need for speed or their need for sensory stimulation in a more socially acceptable way. And can you suggest daily routines or activities that would satisfy both the sensory seeker craving for that stimulation, but also contribute to their growth and wellbeing? Because as you said, there's the socially acceptable, but you also want them to do activities that are good for them and not kind of destructive and, you know, feeding into that chaos.

Yeah. So, you know, there are things that we love to do. I mean, one of the things that I always look at the sensory systems and one of the senses that really is fabulous for helping to satisfy the need for stimulation, but at the same time is a very regulating sense, is the sense of proprioception.

And proprioception is made up of a couple of different sensory inputs. Proprioception really is just input into your muscles and joints. But the ways to target it really nicely are activities that target your joints, which are things like traction and compression.

So pulling and pushing. So think about when you are pumping a swing, you know, if you're sitting on a swing, obviously a young child can't do it, older child on a swing and they're kind of moving their body backwards and forwards and pushing into their arms throwing their legs up and putting their legs back. Now, if you think about all of that input that you're doing when you're pumping a swing, that is great proprioception, because what you're doing is you are doing active movements that compress and kind of pull at your joints as you go.

So that's an example. Another great example of proprioception is jumping on a trampoline where, you know, kind of on a kiddies trampoline holding onto a little bar and you jump, jump, jump. And what you're doing is you're getting all this lovely compression going through all of your joints.

Another great one is the monkey bars, because when you do the monkey bars, you, you kind of, your feet are off the ground, you're holding onto the bars above you on the jungle gym, you're swinging across. And what you're doing is your shoulder joints and your arms are having to hold your body weight. So that's, you know, kind of, but you're hanging.

So it's traction as well. And then you're pulling your legs up as you go to the next monkey bar and as you go along. Now, those type of activities are incredible for our sensory seekers because they feed into their need for stimulation, but they're giving them proprioception with movement.

So because you're getting the movement as you jump, as you pump a swing, as you go on the monkey bars, it gives you all the movement, the vestibular input, but at the same time, you're getting the proprioception. So one of the secrets with sensory seekers is always try to find some way to activate their muscles and joints with proprioception. And so that is, as I said, traction, compression.

The other one is vibration, which I spoke about just now, giving James that little wiggle pen. Vibration is a lovely way to activate those muscles and joints because that input comes through those muscles and joints. And then also actually deep touch massage.

So like having a deep massage, some kiddies, sensory seekers are actually averse to that if they're sensory sensitive to the tactile sense, which sometimes happens because you can sometimes get that sort of sensitivity, but most sensory seekers will love a little massage, you know? So it's putting into their routines activities that are regulating and that generally centers around proprioception. Another quite nice one that I want to mention, and we have more proprioceptors around our mouth and our neck than anywhere else in our body. And a really nice activity to give them is something that is very, very hard to suck on.

So for instance, giving them yogurt, a normal yogurt, not drinking yogurt, but with a straw in it. And now they've got to drink the yogurt through the straw. It kind of really activates those deep proprioceptors in their mouth.

Or another one would be giving them an ice lolly that's really cold that they have to suck the flavor out of, so freezing juice ice lollies. So those type of things that you can weave in and out of a day actually help to regulate your sensory seeker, but give them nice stimulation as well. Let's talk about screens, Meg, and screens and sensory seekers.

What is the impact there? Yeah. So screens, I mean, you probably picked up on that because when you think about a screen, it's almost the exact opposite of going on a trampoline. I mean, when all the things I've spoken about, your body is being actively moved and activated, and that proprioception is very regulating.

When you're sitting in front of a screen, you've actually got absolutely nothing going on on a proprioceptive level at all, like you are a lump of potatoes. The only senses that are being activated are your sense of auditory listening and definitely your sense of vision. The problem with those two senses is that they are senses where you are quite, I almost want to say you're a victim of what comes in.

They're not regulating. They generally can be quite stimulating. When they're coupled with having no movement and no proprioception, they really can overwhelm you and overstimulate you.

We definitely do see, and there are other neurological mechanisms behind this, which I'm not fully aware of, but have read a little bit about. Some of that neurological mechanism is that a TV viewing in the absence of any proprioception really isn't great for mood and particularly for our sensory seekers. What you'll find is they'll watch TV, and then you go to turn the TV off because it's time for supper or whatever, and they'll have a complete and utter meltdown.

That meltdown is happening because they just were so dysregulated that had a long period of time with no proprioception and vestibular information. Screens and sensory seekers are really, really not fabulous. Meg, how can parents create a balance between providing enough sensory input to keep their sensory seekers engaged while also ensuring that they're not overstimulated? Because we know that can be very dysregulating and also unproductive.

Yeah. It does come down to which senses are being stimulated. I think always in the back of your mind, think about what senses are being stimulated through this activity.

If it is a visual sense only, so let's say it's watching a movie or doing a puzzle while they're lying on the floor or just all the visual things or just tactile information, like a ballpoint, let's say, for example, or the ballpoint will give you some proprioception because you're moving inside of it, but they can become overstimulated quite easily, and particularly because they seek and they seek and they seek and they seek. They can have the capacity to become overstimulated. I've got two tips here.

The one is... This episode is brought to us by ParentSense, the all-in-one baby and parenting app that helps 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? 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. I've got two tips here. The one is, first of all, try and link proprioception activities with whatever they're doing.

If they're going to a busy play space, try and make sure that there's a trampoline in the space so they can actually jump on the trampoline as well, which will help them regulate a little bit. That's the first thing. The second thing is to try and watch their signals.

You will get to know your little one. You will start to see that actually they are becoming overstimulated, and so they're looking away, starting to shriek, getting just a little bit too busy, and you know it. You get that sense of, oh, the tears are coming.

You know how parents say, oh, this is going to end in tears. You can actually tell that they are getting overstimulated. First tip is look for proprioceptive opportunities.

Second tip is to watch their signals. The third tip is you've got to watch for their routine, particularly with these social butterflies, because they often don't know their own signals, so they don't give you signals for downtime, that they're tired. You can't look at them and go, oh, I think he's getting tired now.

You might look at him and go, oh, I think this is going to end in tears, but you're not going to think, I wonder if he's getting tired now, because he never looks like he needs a sleep. With social butterflies, I often say to parents or sensory seekers, make sure you've got a time in the day that is really for downtime. This is all the way through till the child is five years old, which is about the time when they don't really need a midday rest anymore.

I suggest that all kids until they're five years old have got a time in the day for rest, a good hour to two hours of rest time, so an hour and a half. That's a time where they don't have to sleep necessarily, although children under the age of three usually will, but where they can just go to their room and read a book, listen to a story, and just have some calm time. That would be the next thing would be to have this routine.

Then the last thing that I want to mention is that it's very useful to have a hidey space or a timeout space in the house. Here, I'm not using the word timeout in the connotation of discipline. I'm using it in the connotation of timeout from sensory stimulation.

I usually recommend to parents with sensory seekers to actually set up a little wigwam tent type space in the main space of the house where you all are. It might be the TV room or the dining room or the entrance hall. We definitely had this for our son.

In fact, we had it for all three of our kids. Inside this little tent, you put a lovely bean bag, super soft with some nice furry fabric on top of it. You put a vibrating toy, so like a little back massager or even a vibrating toothbrush if you can't get anything else, pop that in there.

Put a little bit of music, put some drops of lavender oil, and put some books, and maybe one of those sensory jars that you can turn upside down that has the bubbles move through it. When you've got that kind of environment, no other toys in there, just all the calming stuff, and their dummy can be in there, that's a place like if parents are trying to wean their babies off dummies, they can only have their dummy if they're in that space or if they're in their cot. They've actually got somewhere they can go where they can go and have a little suck of their dummy that can help them to soothe, and then they can come out again.

This space becomes a firm favorite. It becomes like a little nest for them where they can retreat to. You can actually use it as a timeout.

If you can see they're about to, they're bouncing off the walls, and you can see the tears are coming. You just know that they're going to hit the wall. You know what? I think it's time for you to go and have some downtime or whatever you want to call it, some thinking time.

If they go to their little tent, and they can go and have some calm time there. Those type of strategies work really well with our sensory seekers. What are some of the signs that a sensory seeking needs more or different input? How can parents respond to these cues appropriately? I think that they need more input is generally they'll start to seek it.

They might start to become fidgety, move a lot. It's kind of like that feeling. I don't know if you've ever had restless leg syndrome when you're lying in bed.

Some people who are listening all have had it. It's a terrible feeling. I used to get it when I was a teenager.

You feel like your legs have to move, and they almost feel like they're itchy, but they're not itchy. It's an itch that's inside the leg. It's that sort of almost like physical itch that these sensory seekers get.

They tend to get a little bit more busy. They tend to maybe start pulling at their clothes, and they just seem to be a little bit more irritable in their body. That can be a signal that they're just needing a different type of or change in sensory input and maybe a little bit extra sensory input.

Meg, parents of the sensory seeker, what tips do you have for them in terms of introducing new textures, new movements, in a way that's beneficial for the babies or the child's exploring and learning? Yeah. First of all, lots and lots of physical activity. I think a sedentary lifestyle, too much TV, is just very noxious for these babies' brains.

They need a lot of opportunities to play with moving activities. Things like you want a jungle gym in your garden. You want a garden.

You want some space that they can go to. If you don't have a garden, be able to get out to a park. A little baby trampoline either with a fence around it if it's bigger and if it's off the ground or with just a little handle.

Those are the type of things that you actually really do want to make sure your child has opportunity for. You do want to have that type of thing in the environment. Then you want to have opportunities for exploring sensory activities.

I love bean ponds. I always had this with my kitties where I'd set up shells, those huge big plastic shells. They're probably about 1.2 meters across in diameter.

You can put anything in. You can do sand. You can do water, but then you've got to watch your child all the time.

You can do balls. You can do rice, whatever. I would change those up all the time.

Those type of sensory activities are fabulous for your sensory seeker. Then if it's summer and it's nice weather and you can, also giving them opportunity to play in water because that's a lovely way to stimulate that sense. Those are the type of things that you can do just to have your child having opportunities for exploration and learning.

Then setting up time for things like baking. That's another lovely activity where you actually give them dough and then roll it with a rolling pin. You can see that when you're moving that rolling pin and rolling something out for the older child, it's great proprioception and feedback into their bodies.

It's trying to find activities that are really, really good for them in terms of feedback to their bodies that you're looking for. Meg, when would a parent seek professional advice for their sensory seeker? I think this is where I started off. We spoke a little bit about labels at the beginning.

The people say, oh, my gosh, your child's hyperactive or whatever, chaotic or difficult or too busy or whatever. I always say to parents, if you've got a child who's under the age of three who's super busy, don't diagnose them, don't label them, just give them the opportunity to play because play and movement is very much how their brains work. I don't really like talking about diagnoses too early on.

When would it be that there would be a red flag? If you've got a child under the age of three who never sits still and never does anything constructively, everything is just breaking, pushing, hurting, damaging, and they never ever do anything constructively, then I probably would see an OT. I had a little kid in my practice many years ago who was like this. He was absolutely unplayable.

If he was in a room, something was broken. He hurt himself all the time. He was covered in bruises.

He just was that kid. That child, we really started to work with at a little age. We started to work with him when he was probably 18 months or two years old, and we put in lots and lots of sensory stimulation that was more constructive and slowly we got his brain to start registering the sensory information, but he actually had a sensory integration dysfunction.

He was on the far end of the spectrum. That's a case and example of when if it's always unconstructive and if it's always damaging, then you would maybe get a diagnosis. Then for your older child from three to seven years old, you do expect them to start to be able to sit for a little bit to be able to complete a task like read a book or do a puzzle.

What I would be recommending there is before you go off to go and look for a diagnosis is to actually do what we call a sensory diet, which is where you give them a whole lot of activity to do that's physical, that's regulating, involving proprioception first, and then you bring them to a puzzle. What should happen is that they've done all of that activity, they've taken in that lovely sensory input, they've taken in the proprioception, and so they should now be able to sit down and be engaged in a new activity, shift their attention and actually sit down and do it. If they're not able to do that, and they can never do that, and usually it'll then be flagged by their teacher, then I would probably go and ask for a therapist to just help with some sort of, not necessarily diagnosis, you don't need to get labels, but some sort of sensory diet.

That's where OTs come in. OTs in general are not fixated on the diagnosis and the label, we fixate it on the fix. It's very much around what can the sensory diet look like to actually provide a better platform for learning and engagement.

It kind of comes down to, is my baby's busyness interfering with forming relationships, and is my baby's busyness interfering with learning? If it's doing those things, I'd be concerned. If my baby's busyness is in the context of relationships and facilitates learning, then I would not be concerned. When I cast my mind back to my excessively busy oldest child, it was on a level where all the girl moms were like, that mother doesn't know what she's doing.

It was kind of one of those, because he was very, very busy, but jeez, Tove, it was so constructive. He was always building, making, and then breaking, painting, thinking of something, inventing something, and then taking everybody around him along for the ride. If there were kids at a play date at our house, everybody was involved in James's mischief.

I think that for me is a hallmark of a busy kid that's being constructive. To this day, he's unplayable if he doesn't have something to occupy his mind, a challenge that he has to get his teeth into, or a sport that he has to play. I know that our moms are moms of a younger population, but I wanted to give them a tip that we'll see them through adolescence, and that is that sporting activities and extramural activities can be very, very protective for these children.

It really can be. In James, in his case, it was rowing. I've known other children who do karate, also fabulous.

Those martial arts are fabulous activities for proprioception, as is ballet and your dance techniques, because you have to control your body. You have to get all this amazing proprioception. Gymnastics, incredible.

Get your little one into sports and activities that, A, I don't want to say tie them out, but meet their need for speed, and B, give them all that wonderful proprioceptive feedback. If you're doing that, you shouldn't need to seek professional advice, but if they are unable to form relationships and they're unable to complete a task ever because of this bodily distractibility, this need for speed, then you can go and have it checked out. That's amazing, Meg.

Thank you so much. I don't think there's anything left to unpack on the sensory seeker front, but yeah, I mean, if any parents have any questions, feel free to write in and send us a message, and we can unpack it in our next podcast, but thank you so much. Pleasure, Teva, and thank you for joining me.

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