

MENTAL HEALTH TIDBIT (BETTER INFORMED TOGETHER)

PREPARING FOR OUTINGS WHEN YOU HAVE CHILD WITH SENSORY PROCESSING CONCERNS

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/A/DP
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Summer is here and with that comes pool parties, picnics, and family vacations. For children with sensory processing issues, these events can be challenging and stressful. For parents of children with sensory processing issues, managing a child having a tantrum or meltdown in these settings can be exhausting and even embarrassing. Sensory processing challenges are not a specific diagnosis, but rather a set of symptoms seen in children with behavioral health concerns. Children with sensory processing issues will become overwhelmed by external stimuli. This can be described as a “traffic jam” of sensory information in the brain and can lead a child to be overwhelmed to the point of exhibiting extreme acting out behaviors such as screaming, tantrums, or even running away. In this edition of Mental Health TidBIT we discuss tips for parents when they are preparing for outings with their children who have sensory processing concerns.

Give Lots of Warning

Children with sensory processing issues can struggle with unexpected transitions so giving lots of warning about upcoming events or outings that are going to occur is very important. Explain where you are going and what you will be doing. Create a clear, reliable schedule for outings. Some children may find it especially helpful to have the schedule written down. They may find it beneficial to have their own calendar to view with the daily schedule for the summer. Let your child give input on the schedule if they can do so. While unexpected things can come up, it is important that the schedule that is created be followed as best as possible.

Make Space for Sensory Time

When preparing for an activity or outing, it is often a good idea to make sure there is a plan for a child who has a sensory processing issue to have the ability to remove themselves from the event or activity and take a break. A child who is more self-aware may be able to do this on their own; however, a child who is less able to self-regulate may need your assistance in noticing when it is time to take a break or walk away for 10 minutes.

Make a Go-Bag

Prepare yourself with a bag of items that are calming for your child. This does not have to be complicated but can be prepacked and ready to go when you have an outing. Some examples of items that may go in a bag such as this:

- ❖ Noise Cancelling Headphones
- ❖ Sunglasses
- ❖ Headphones for playing music on a tablet or phone
- ❖ Fidget toys
- ❖ Stuffed animal
- ❖ Weighted blanket
- ❖ Bottled water and snacks

Have an Exit Strategy

Sometimes, no matter how well you plan, things become too overwhelming for your child, and you may need to leave. Talk to your child prior to the outing and discuss a potential “signal” (such as a simple wave) your child can give you when they are becoming overwhelmed. Having an exit strategy can help your child get out of the situation before a meltdown occurs. This will make the situation a lot less stressful for all involved. If you are at an outing or event with more than one child, ask another parent if she would be able to give your other child a ride home should you need to leave the outing prematurely. Another option if you have more than one child with different needs going to an outing, would be to discuss an agreed upon time to leave the event that would be a compromise for everyone.

Look for Sensory Friendly Activities

Once you and your family have worked out strategies, you can start adding more fun activities. A growing number of museums, theme parks, and other institutions are offering sensory friendly events. A good resource for a listing of these activities is <https://www.belikebuddy.com/pennsylvania>.

Excerpted from: <https://childmind.org/article/tips-for-going-places-with-sensory-challenged-kids/>

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