

Why a Sensory Profile™ Assessment is best.

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Winnie Dunn is a renowned Occupational Therapist and researcher who has made great strides in contributing to our understanding of sensory processing and how it is such an important part of how our brain works and of our individual temperament. While many occupational therapists have gotten stuck in the concepts and language of "sensory integration", Dr. Dunn has been able to see past this to the bigger picture. To many people, sensory integration is a term that is used to describe an approach to therapy and an understanding of how learning and function can be affected by our senses and our neurology. I respect Dr. Dunn because she was able to put the old terms aside and recognize sensory integration for what it truly is, a natural neurologic process that happens in all nervous systems comprised of more than one sensory modality. The larger, more encompassing concept of **Sensory Processing** encompasses integration, and many other factors and processes that determine how we respond to the world around us. Calling things what they are and teasing out the factors and influences involved has allowed us to reach a much deeper understanding of how our sensory processing affects who we are and how we work. Winnie's work has been closely tied to the work of Lucy Jane Miller and many other leaders in the field who have helped us to move forward in our understanding of how neurology affects behaviour and personality.

Many occupational therapists over the years have developed check-lists that parents, educators, and others could use in order to gain information on how to support a child whose processing and sensitivities cause challenges with function. These, however, have been subjective and do not tell us how significant the observed differences are, in relation to the rest of the population. Dr. Dunn worked with statisticians and researchers to develop an instrument that would give a clear idea of:

1. Which areas of sensory processing are most discrepant within an individual and
2. How different is this person's processing from the general population in which that person lives

She worked with hundreds of volunteers and families to come up with as few items as possible that would present a comprehensive picture of each area of sensory processing. She tested and re-tested her tools until she and her team were satisfied that the items were valid and reliable measures of sensory processing. Then she employed her armies of people in using the questionnaires with representative samples of North American society. Once this exhaustive amount of data was collected and collated, she employed another team of statisticians and diagnosticians to analyze the responses and patterns of responses to develop a broad statistical picture that could be used to score and measure responses to give a better understanding of what aspects and items are indicative of a general population and which responses and patterns are indicative of variations from the 'norm'.

With this detailed information, her team was able to describe the curve of sensory processing in the 'typical' population and measure the variation seen in any given individual.

After years of working on this, Dr. Dunn brought her work to the Psychological Corporation, a company very well respected in the field of psychometric assessment. The Psychological Corporation (Now Harcourt Assessment and Pearson Assessment) built a small army of analysts and statisticians to tear apart her work and make recommendations to improve the strength of her instrument. As a part of this lengthy process, different methods of statistical analysis were used to group items in the most meaningful way from a human and therapeutic perspective. It was during this process that Dr. Dunn discovered the Quadrant Scores, a measure of Sensory Temperament never before understood.

Eventually, her product was ready for use and she began to use what she learned to build similar tools for use with infants, toddlers, and adults. She also developed a tool that could be used along with her standard tool to provide more information on how a child's sensory behaviour is different in the school setting.

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In 2014, revised Sensory Profile Assessments were introduced. Less significant items were dropped to make the questionnaires easier, and a new standardization was completed and validated.

Being a bit of a black and white thinker, I really liked how her tool could measure how different one's processing is from the norm, leading to a less subjective way of looking at sensory data. Initially I thought I could just score this instrument like I do with other standardized assessments and get a lot of important information. To some degree this is what happened. It soon became evident, however, that just knowing "how different" this or that is will not allow me to know what to do as a therapist or how to help others to understand sensory processing. I love to 'chart' the results and see which areas and factors are well beyond the 'typical' range. When I write a sensory profile report, however, I need to look at each and every response and try to understand how the different areas interact and how to support function in that individual.

Writing up the Sensory Profile results is a time consuming and cognitively challenging process, but one that results in a deep understanding of how that person works. This, along with my own history and my extensive experience with sensory processing differences, allows me to make down to earth recommendations and suggestions with regard to how that individual can function closer to potential. Understanding how a person's sensory processing works will allow me to really understand how different environments will affect a person, and what accommodations can be made to make the environment friendlier. You see, when sensory processing is significantly different, the stress response system will be working differently, and this can greatly affect behaviour and learning. Also, if a child's sensory needs are not met, then it will be difficult or impossible for that person to attend and focus on different tasks or stimuli. Alternatively, if I know how a person's sensory system is different, I can often help that person to have basic sensory needs met so that the person is free to attend and interact in the world in a more calm and alert manner.

I have written hundreds of reports based on the sensory profile, and most of those have been written before I met the individual to whom the data refers. Parents and caregivers are often blown away with how accurate my reports are, and that is only because I have thorough and accurate data that I can study through my lenses of sensory processing, cognition, and function. My sensory profile reports are often the first time a team has really seen "the whole picture". With many ideas to support sensory balance and enhance function, most teams find that my reports give them a whole new understanding and many goals and strategies that can be used and explored for months and years to come.

My reports are not intended to guide my therapy so that a person can achieve a higher level of function. They are intended to provide a unique and deep understanding that allows every one around an individual to support that individual in a way that is positive, effective, and developmentally sound. You see, people do as well as they can, and that is true regardless of age or cognitive skills. When a person's sensory needs are understood and supported, that person's cognitive energy can be freed for interaction with the world around him or her, and this is what promotes development. Whether a team takes a natural learning approach to intervention or a more strict ABA approach, this sensory understanding takes a lot of guess work out of helping someone to be ready to perform at a higher cognitive level.

The Sensory Profile is one of the most powerful tools we have in learning to understand each others' personalities and learning styles. It takes a lot of time to put together, but has revolutionized my practice. While there are a lot of other 'questionnaires' out there, there are none that compare to this. Having said that, there is no quick and easy interpretation of these results. Reading a report put out by someone in an hour or two will give me no idea how to support that individual and is a dis-service to such a powerful instrument. A person's sensory profile will not change too significantly through life, but how that person learns to find balance and to feel calm and alert in the world can be altered drastically. This can have a large impact on how that person gets by in the world. I've heard from many families that a report based on this tool has opened many eyes and hearts to really understand what makes a person tick and to find ways to be allies in life rather than behaviourists trying to make a square peg fit into a round hole.

more at www.sensoryprofile.com

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