



# Research Brief

A SUMMARY OF A PUBLISHED RESEARCH ARTICLE

---

## Parent Reports of Sensory Experiences of Preschool Children With and Without Autism: A Qualitative Study

By Virginia A. Dickie, Grace T. Baranek, Beth Schultz, Linda R. Watson, and Cara S. McComish

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

---

A growing body of research supports clinical observations that many children with autism respond to sensory experiences differently from other children. However, questions remain concerning how children with autism experience these sensory differences in the context of their daily lives. Research with this population relies on direct child observation during natural or test conditions, and/or parent report (Baranek et al., 2006). Parent report instruments are most often used in studies characterizing sensory processing difficulties and their impact on daily life.

Qualitative studies can add to our knowledge of both autism and the sensory features associated with it by providing rich description and insight into how these behaviors affect the individual and his or her family in daily

activities. In essence, qualitative studies may tell us why the sensory experiences of children with autism matter. The use of a focused interview that includes parent descriptions and explanations of sensory experiences of preschoolers with and without autism is proposed as one important source of information to aid relevant interventions for children with autism. This qualitative study aims to describe children's "sensory experiences", generate parents' perceptions and explanations of these experiences, and compare these experiences across children with and without autism.

An open-ended interview based on Flanagan's Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (1954) was used to interview one or both parents of AUT, DD and TYP subjects. The interview

This Research Brief was based on the following article: Dickie, V., Baranek, G., Schultz, B., McComish, C. (Submitted). Parent reports of sensory experiences of preschool children with and without autism: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

consisted of two sets of questions. Parents were first asked to describe an incident during which the child seemed to have a good sensory experience. They were then asked to tell why it had been a good experience for the child, and last to explain how it had made the parent feel. The same set of questions was then asked with respect to a bad or unpleasant sensory experience. Parents of 152 preschoolers (62 AUT, 39 DD, 51 TYP) participated.

Parents' explanations of their child's response to sensory stimuli fell into three broad categories: (a) qualities of the child, (b) qualities of the stimulus, and (c) the situational context of the event and response. Parents in all groups frequently described pleasant sensory experiences as being calming for the child, producing a sense of security, and being relaxing. These also tended to be experiences the child sought out repeatedly. Negative experiences tended to be those that caused distress for the child, often leading to some avoidance of a situation, or accommodation on the part of the family. Parents of children with autism sometimes couched sensory preferences in terms of the child's condition /diagnosis.

The CIT data adds a unique and personal perspective of sensory experiences in children's daily functioning to a largely "quantitative"

body of knowledge, to deepen our understanding of contextualized sensory experiences. By comparing parent reports of children with autism, other developmental delays, and typically developing children, we were able to see that sensory experiences overlapped between the groups. Children in both groups reacted negatively to some sounds, responded positively to movement, and disliked certain foods or sensory aspects of foods.

One striking feature of the interviews was how positively parents responded to the interview process. Use of the CIT may help to establish rapport with parents, give interventionists a better understanding of the child in the context of the family, and shed light on what parents value in their child and in their family's life together while also identifying family stressors and/or adaptations associated with the child's sensory experiences.

.....

Virginia Dickie, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA is an Associate Professor, Director of the Division of Occupational Science at the University of North Carolina, School of Medicine. She is a co-investigator on the Sensory Experiences Project.