

# THAT PESKY



# IN "SPD"

By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA

**S**alutem Plurimam Dicit! In Latin, this means, "Many greetings," and its acronym is SPD.

Say, by any chance, did you just fly in from Saidpur, Bangladesh, where the airport code is SPD? Are you en route to Canada, perhaps, to fish for Speckled Dace, abbreviated as SPD? If the fish aren't biting, you may want to play a computer game with your Spinning Piledriver, or brush up on Subjective Probability Distribution, or drive down to the Schenectady Police Department, all known as SPD.

I learned this trivia by googling "SPD acronym" and studying a list with 136 definitions. It is reassuring to see that first on the list is Sensory Processing Disorder. We all know what that is, right?

But wait. Maybe that term ain't what it used to be.

As I updated the third edition of *The Out-of-Sync Child*, I wanted to continue referring to SPD, a term that is now familiar to increasing numbers of parents, teachers, therapists, pediatricians and other professionals. "S," of course, is for "Sensory," and "P" is for "Processing."

But what about that "D"? It could stand for a variety of D-words: Disorder, Dysfunction, Delays, Deficits, Disabilities, Difficulties, Dimensions, Diversity, or Differences. Take your pick!

#### Background about the D-word

The late A. Jean Ayres, PhD, an occupational therapist ("OT"), was the first to describe sensory problems as the result of inefficient neurological processing. In the mid-20th century, she developed a theory of sensory integration and taught other OTs how to assess "sensory integrative problems," which she also called "dysfunctions" and "disorders."

Many brilliant OTs – Dr. Ayres' colleagues and mentees – continued her work. They used various terms, such as "Sensory Integration Dysfunction," or "S.I. Dysfunction." This mouthful was occasionally abbreviated to "SID," but that was a problem, because "SIDS" is the acronym for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. For a while, to avoid confusion, "DSI" was used, for "Dysfunction in Sensory Integration." The American Occupational Therapy Association uses the term, "Sensory Integration and Processing Challenges." Some practitioners prefer to call their intervention, "Ayres Sensory Integration."<sup>2</sup>

#### The D-word in 1998

When my book was first published, its subtitle was, *Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction*, because that was the term in use, 24 years ago.

"Dysfunction," however, sounds negative. The fact that a child prefers to keep his feet on the ground or always is up to his armpits in mud does not mean that the child is abnormal, unhealthy, or unable to function in daily life.

#### The D-word in 2005

For the child's sake, using consistent terminology is imperative so that OTs, health professionals, families, educators, and insurance companies can understand one another and agree on a diagnosis and the appropriate treatment. Thus, in the 2000s, using Dr. Ayres' original concepts, a group of eminent OTs led by Lucy Jane Miller, PhD, OTR, proposed to clarify the terminology.<sup>3</sup>

In their classification, Sensory Processing Disorder is the overall term, encompassing three diagnostic groups -- Sensory Modulation Disorder, Sensory Discrimination Disorder, and Sensory-Based Motor Disorder -- and their subtypes. Their goal (partially met) was to have the condition acknowledged and included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5)*, so that children with sensory processing challenges could get an accurate assessment and diagnosis.

Based on Dr. Miller's evolving classification, the second edition of *The Out-of-Sync Child* had the subtitle, *Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*, because that was the term in use. Seventeen years ago, "Disorder" was less derogatory than "Dysfunction." However, "Disorder" is not the right word, either. Disorders are signs of illness or dysfunctional health, such as anxiety, depression, and OCD. For many children with sensory processing issues, the word "Disorder" simply does not fit.

#### The D-word in 2022

Today, perspectives are changing about the words we use to describe individuals with various traits and abilities. Unless symptoms are found to impact the ability of an individual child or adult to function in everyday activities, atypical sensory

processing is not considered a Disorder. Indeed, atypical sensory processing can be a gift, such as when a person with an exceptionally sensitive auditory system has perfect pitch, appreciates sounds that most of us are unequipped to hear, and composes glorious music.

As scientific knowledge evolves, terminology continues to be updated. Dr. Miller and colleagues Shelley Mulligan, PhD, OTR, and Sarah Schoen, PhD, OTR, have proposed using a dimensional approach. In an upcoming diagnostic tool, the *Sensory Processing Three Dimensions Scale (SP3D)*, they measure the presence of sensory differences along a continuum, ranging from mild to severe. In a specific context, "Dimensions" is the just-right word.<sup>4</sup>

In other contexts, different D-words work best. Thus, the subtitle of my book's third edition is, *Understanding and Coping with Sensory Processing Differences*. The term "Differences" indicates that each person processes sensations in a unique way. (Everyone can get in sync with that idea!) Throughout the book, I use the acronym "SPD" because it still works.

Please think of that pesky "D" as you like. ■

Carol Stock Kranowitz writes about SPD and children who are "out of sync." With Joye Newman, she co-authors materials about the "In-Sync Child" method.



[www.out-of-sync-child.com](http://www.out-of-sync-child.com)  
[www.insyncchild.com](http://www.insyncchild.com)



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