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Occupational Therapy  
Speech Therapy

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(919) 928-0204

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## Social Anxiety Disorder and Overlap with Sensory Processing



Bonnie Hacker, MHS, OTR/L  
Founder / Director

Social anxiety disorder is defined as a marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others.<sup>1</sup> It can occur in early childhood or first present in teenage years. If untreated, social anxiety disorder typically follows a chronic, unremitting course, leading to substantial challenges in career and social functioning.<sup>2,3</sup> Anxiety serves as a normal emotional response that ultimately enhances a person's ability to overcome challenges. However, for a significant percentage of children and adolescents, the normal anxiety response does not function properly. The distinction is simple. When anxiety proves ultimately helpful, it is normal. When anxiety is too intense or too consistent, and it ultimately interferes with needed activities, people should seek assistance.

Behaviors generated by sensory processing sensitivity overlap many behaviors of social anxiety disorder.<sup>4</sup> Research has connected sensory-processing sensitivity with anxiety, harm avoidance, and agoraphobia.<sup>5,6</sup> Sensory processing disorder (SPD) refers to the normal reception of sensory input but an exaggerated or diminished central processing of that input. Parental descriptions of a sensory processing disorder commonly include concerns over a child's level of anxiety. In children especially, fearfulness about situations compounded by the embarrassment of not fitting in sometimes results in persistent, unhealthy anxiety.

Whether SPD is a causative factor in the anxiety disorder or simply exists concurrently with anxiety disorder, moderating the SPD can result in significant improvement of the anxiety. **If you know a child with anxiety problems, consider these determining questions. Does the child also demonstrate signs of SPD such as** resistance to being touched, bothered by certain clothing, unpredictable temper tantrums, easily overwhelmed in groups, or too easily distracted or distressed by noises? Have behavioral interventions fallen short of goals? Expert pediatric occupational therapy at Emerge - A Child's Place can help make life better for children with anxiety challenges. Our approach typically includes both "bottom up" sensory processing and "top down" cognitive tools.



**Signs of Higher than Normal Social Anxiety**

- Fear or lack of interest in new things
- Refusal to speak in social situations
- Anxiety present with peers, not just adults
- No or few friends
- Fear of separation from parents beyond normal for age
- Poor social skills



### Integrating Occupational and Speech Therapy

Among children with social anxiety, both sensory processing and speech difficulties can exacerbate the problem. For many types of challenges, Emerge provides a more comprehensive pediatric therapy approach by integrating services from both occupational therapists and speech therapists.

Please tell parents about Emerge – A Child's Place  
Believing in a Child's Potential to Flourish

## References

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