

Sensory Trauma in Autism: Recognizing Sensory Over-Responsivity as a Biological Source of Adversity

Lori McIlwain, National Autism Safety Coalition

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Introduction

The framework of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has profoundly shaped how we understand the long-term impact of early trauma on health and development. Traditionally, ACEs emphasize clearly observable external threats such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction. Yet for many children on the autism spectrum, adversity may be far more internal and subtle, emerging from the body's response to sensory input and the chronic stress that follows.

Sensory Over-Responsivity (SOR) is a behavioral and neurobiological profile marked by intense negative reactions to stimuli that most people consider innocuous. Sensory hyperreactivity is included in the diagnostic criteria for autism as part of the restricted and repetitive behavior domain. Research indicates that SOR affects approximately 10 to 20 percent of school-aged children and occurs in as many as 50 to 95 percent of children with autism or other neurodevelopmental conditions (Schwarzlose, 2025).

Emerging neuroscience suggests that for children with SOR, everyday sensory experiences may function as chronic internal stressors, producing biological effects similar to toxic stress, even in the most loving and supportive homes. This reframes sensory overload from a behavioral challenge to a form of **sensory trauma** with measurable neurobiological consequences.

Defining Toxic Stress and Why It Matters

Stress is a normal and essential biological process. In manageable doses, it supports learning and adaptation. However, stress becomes harmful when it is chronic, intense, or experienced without effective recovery, also known as buffering. Together, this creates what's referred to as toxic stress (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Toxic stress disrupts brain architecture, alters nervous system regulation, and increases lifelong risk for emotional and physical health challenges (McEwen, 2016). Prolonged activation of stress-response systems can also affect immune functioning, learning, and long-term health outcomes (Magalhaes-Barbosa et al., 2022).

The key distinction is not the presence of stress, but the frequency, duration, and ability to buffer.

In children with autism and SOR, everyday sensory experiences may meet the conditions for toxic stress. Stress systems can be activated frequently, buffering may be less immediate or effective, and developmental vulnerability is high. Together, this may reframe sensory overload from a behavioral concern to a biological stress exposure.

While research increasingly supports links between sensory over-responsivity, anxiety, and stress physiology, many pathways remain correlational and are likely moderated by protective factors such as early intervention, environmental supports, communication access, and caregiver response.

Sensory Overload as Chronic Stress

Children with SOR do not experience sensory input as benign. Their nervous systems may interpret sounds, lights, textures, or motion as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and threatening. A child may experience the hum of fluorescent lights with the same physiological intensity that others would experience an alarm siren.

Sensory gating, the brain's ability to filter irrelevant sensory input, relies on inhibitory neural processes that develop during infancy (Schwarzlose, 2025). When sensory gating is reduced, the brain processes too much sensory input, which can create persistent sensory overload.

Neuroimaging research demonstrates reduced sensory habituation in individuals with autism and sensory over-responsivity (Green et al., 2015; Jamal et al., 2021). These findings align with the Intense World Theory, which proposes heightened perception and attention that can become overwhelming (Markram & Markram, 2010).

Parents frequently report highly specific triggers that provoke immediate fight, flight, or freeze responses. Examples include vacuum sounds, flushing toilets, certain tones or music, and sudden environmental changes. Traditional co-regulation strategies may be less immediately effective for some autistic children, suggesting buffering may require individualized sensory and nervous-system supports.

Rethinking Buffering

Traditional ACE research assumes buffering occurs through supportive relationships. While these relationships remain essential, children with neurodevelopmental differences may require specialized forms of regulation support.

When stress responses remain elevated despite caregiver support, the conditions for toxic stress may still be met. This expands the ACE framework beyond external adversity to include neurodevelopmental vulnerability.

To understand why specialized buffering is necessary, we must examine how early sensory stress shapes the developing brain.

How Early Sensory Stress Shapes the Brain

Early childhood is a critical window for building neural systems responsible for emotional regulation, language, executive function, and social engagement.

Research shows that elevated SOR at 12 months predicts later autism diagnosis (Schwarzlose, 2025). Reduced sensory gating in infancy predicts later anxiety (Carpenter et al., 2019). Infants later diagnosed with autism show increased cortical reactivity to repeated sounds at eight months (Kolesnik et al., 2019).

Children with SOR may be less able to habituate to sensory input. Persistent neural overload may interfere with language development, social communication, emotional regulation, and executive functioning.

Sensory Stress and the Anxiety Pathway

Longitudinal research shows that sensory over-responsivity predicts later anxiety, while early anxiety does not predict later SOR (Carpenter et al., 2019). Repeated uncontrollable stress increases hypervigilance and anxiety (Seligman et al., 1971). Reduced sensory filtering may also make the world feel less predictable, increasing threat monitoring (Lawson et al., 2014).

This suggests a developmental sequence: the sensory world feels unsafe first, and anxiety follows as a secondary response to chronic unpredictability and overwhelm.

Nervous System Activation, Fight and Flight Responses, and Reinforced Trauma

During sensory overwhelm, children may rapidly shift into autonomic survival states (Porges, 2011). Fight or flight responses can include impulsivity, agitation, panic, or sudden attempts to escape. Freeze responses can include withdrawal, loss of speech, dissociation, or shutdown.

Repeated activation of these states can lead to reinforced trauma, in which the nervous system becomes primed to expect danger even in safe environments.

Elopement Fatalities

One possible consequence of sensory trauma is elopement, the act of fleeing an overwhelming environment. For many autistic children, elopement is a fight or flight escape response.

Elopement-related injuries and fatalities illustrate how sensory trauma can escalate to life-threatening crisis. A 13-year-old autistic girl reportedly jumped from a moving vehicle while upset and was struck on a highway (Annese, 2013). A 17-year-old autistic teen left home during distress and was fatally struck by a vehicle (Grantham, 2017). Federal advisory data and mortality analyses show that drowning and traffic injury are the leading causes of death associated with wandering and elopement in autism, often precipitated by stress response and sensory overwhelm (McIlwain, 2017).

Understanding elopement as a nervous-system response shifts the focus from discipline to prevention, safety planning, co-regulation, and environmental design.

Acute Sensory Crisis, Impulsivity, and Suicide Risk

Autistic individuals experience significantly higher rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors than the general population (Cassidy et al., 2018; Hedley et al., 2018; Kirby et al., 2019).

Chronic sensory distress may contribute to hyperarousal, burnout, feelings of entrapment, and heightened impulsivity during distress. During intense sensory overwhelm, thinking can become urgent and survival-driven, contributing to impulsive and uncontrollable crisis behaviors.

Recognizing sensory overload as a potential crisis trigger highlights the importance of sensory safety planning, early anxiety and burnout prevention, and crisis-informed care.

Sensory Trauma as Neurobiological Adversity

Sensory trauma shares critical characteristics with externally-caused adverse childhood experiences: chronic stress exposure during sensitive developmental periods, disruption of brain architecture, heightened anxiety and hypervigilance, and increased risk for long-term health challenges.

Unlike traditional ACEs, sensory trauma originates from within, from the nervous system's atypical processing of everyday stimuli. This distinction is important as it explains why behavioral interventions alone may be insufficient, why loving caregivers cannot always buffer the stress, and why environmental modifications are not accommodations but medical necessities.

Recognizing sensory over-responsivity as a source of trauma rather than merely a behavioral preference enables earlier identification, trauma-informed clinical support, and policy changes that prioritize sensory-safe environments in schools, healthcare settings, and public spaces.

Protective Factors and Pathways to Resilience

Not all children with SOR develop anxiety, trauma responses, or safety risks. Protective factors can significantly moderate outcomes and support resilience.

Early intervention - Occupational therapy targeting sensory integration, when started early, can help children develop coping strategies and reduce stress reactivity.

Environmental adaptation - Modifying environments to be sensory-accommodating (reducing lighting, providing noise-canceling headphones, creating sensory-safe spaces) can dramatically reduce daily stress exposure.

Communication access - When children can communicate their sensory needs and distress, caregivers can respond more effectively, strengthening the buffering relationship.

Autonomy and control - Allowing children agency over their sensory environment (choosing clothing, controlling sound volume, taking sensory breaks) reduces the unpredictability that drives anxiety.

Co-regulation - When caregivers recognize sensory distress as physiological rather than behavioral, they can respond with nervous-system regulation and co-regulation strategies and modify demands and expectations.

These protective factors suggest that while sensory trauma risk may be neurobiological in origin, outcomes are not predetermined. With appropriate support, many autistic children with SOR can develop effective regulation strategies and avoid the cascade toward chronic anxiety and crisis behaviors.

Limitations and Individual Differences

Autism is highly heterogeneous. Many children with sensory differences do not develop anxiety, trauma responses, or safety risks. The pathway described here represents one possible developmental trajectory supported by emerging research.

Conclusion

Sensory Over-Responsivity is far more than a benign trait or a preference. For many autistic children, it represents sensory trauma, a biologically grounded form of adversity that originates from within the nervous system but produces measurable effects on development, mental health, and safety. Recognizing sensory trauma opens the door to earlier identification, trauma-informed support, and environments designed for safety and regulation. Every child deserves the opportunity to feel safe in their body, their home, and their classroom.

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