



THE GROWING BRAIN

EPISODE 16: Helping Kids with Sensory Challenges

Guest: Amelia Baladez

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Itchy tags, bright lights, loud noises, a constant need to be touched – these can all be signs of children with sensory challenges. Join guest Amelia Baladez to learn more about what parents can know to help manage sensory challenges at home and out in the world.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. I am Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to all things, social emotional health. Welcome to Season Two, where we're diving deeper into some of the most challenging aspects of parenting - dating, sleep, ADHD, anxiety, and so much more on this season of The Growing Brain. Thank you for joining us.

Maureen *Welcome back to the growing brain podcast. Our guest today is Amelia Baladez. Amelia is the client coordinator for the launch program at Momentous Institute, which is a therapeutic preschool, and Amelia and the launch team do a brilliant job of helping kids really express their emotions and their experiences in a very socially, emotionally healthy way. They have just magic in that program. Amelia is also a mom to three kids who are 19, 14 and then a sweet little nine-month-old at home. And her 19-year-old, um, we'll, we'll be talking some about his experiences today because he has some sensory challenges. And today we're talking about parenting children who have sensory challenges. So thank you Amelia for being here.*

Amelia Thank you for inviting me.

Maureen *And I'm wondering as we go into this, would you just share a little bit about your son, so that.. I know that when you hear stories that have similarities to experiences, they can kind of help you connect. So I know parents listening whose children have sensory challenges may be interested to hear a little bit about your son.*

Amelia Yeah. Um, when you first approached me, I was like, I'm no expert, but I was also like, um, but I've had experience with my son. And, um, like you said, he's 19 now. And, um, kind of my perspective and point of view is like, what, um, where he was at then, and the difficulties that I had without having the information. And now looking back, like we talked about, like it's easier to look up and, and have a different perspective and see, you know, oh yeah. You know, and the wish of, you know, somebody I talked to would have said, oh, you know what that is? It's, you know, sensory challenges. And here's a way that you can go through that. But back then, especially there wasn't much information or at least readily enough. And sometimes I feel still, you know,

when you speak with, um, pediatricians and things like that, there's still some like, yeah, but... And so like, and so for my son, he not only has some sensory challenges, but he is, he has, um, autism. So he's on the higher end of the spectrum. As well as has ADHD.

Maureen *So I want to talk about some tips for parents and some things parents should know, but before we dive into that, can you just tell us a little bit about what sensory challenges are and what they might look like in children? What are some of the common sensory issues that we see for kids?*

Amelia I think, first of all, like we all have some sort of sensory kind of challenge for different little things, but we can adjust and then we move on, I think for our little ones though, it's because they're so new to this world and those challenges are so new for them. And then it's like, um, what, what happens and how they express those challenges and then how do we respond to that, right. Um, it could be anything. It can be, you know, noise, how they react to noise, whether they need a lot of noise or not so much noise. It could be around food, textures, you know? Um, like for my son, it was tags on the shirt, you know, like I always say, thank goodness there's like tagless shirts all around. Otherwise he lived in an age where I had to cut them out. And so we always had holes at the back of his shirt. Um, yeah, and it can be, you know, or the things that we don't think about, like sometimes, um, bumping into things cause they really need to feel that extra pressure in their body or maybe that, you know, uh, or they don't want to be touched as much, you know, they don't want to be hugged. Um, or things like putting things in their mouth, you know what I always talk about, and you'll probably say this later, but just what... what's being curious and what's behind that behavior. And then how do I respond to that?

Maureen *So you described some things that I think most of us probably think about, the loud noises and, um, the tags on the shirts, but you also said there's some that you said something like a child might need louder noise. So, so it sounds like there's some things that are, some kids are highly sensitive to noises and some are under sensitive. Is that...?*

Amelia So it's sensory seeking, so they're looking for, or sensory avoidant. And then the professional terms are, you know, being hypo sensitive. Hypo sensitive is, um, they're seeking that information they need more of, and then the hyper is if they don't need it as much. And I guess in relational terms of like, say for instance, a child, um, doesn't do well with fluorescent lights. His behavior is like off the wall, but as soon as you change the lighting to something different, then you know, like a little bit darker or softer light, and then you notice his behavior changes differently. Well then he's going to be, um, hyper sensitive to light.

Maureen *Yeah. That makes sense. So, what are some of the sort of early signs that a child might have sensory issues? What are parents looking for in the early stage?*

Amelia So, because I'm so aware of this now, my nine-month-old this week, we're talking about, um, so I wondered about noise with him because, um, we're doing some construction in the house and we started, um, blending shakes in the morning. And so I noticed with the blender, you know, he would jump. And so I was like, hmm, is that something that I should worry about? And so then, what I did was I would do the blender, but I'd smile at him. Or after the blender noise happened, I'd be like, it's okay. It was just mommy making a shake, you know? Um, regardless if he was aware of not the situation, I just made it look like it was something that's normal. Now, if I would have seen him after this, you know, in doing the noise again, he no longer had issues with it. You know, he never, he didn't jump anymore. And I was like, oh, that's different. He's not jumping anymore. So that means he's okay with that noise. He just needed to be familiar with it. But I think if he were like my son, Alfonso, like he had haircuts, you know, when he started having haircuts, it was very hard to get the haircuts. And it was a real challenge, you know? Um, sometimes my mom had to hold them. I had to hold them, you know, both of us had hold them. And then we were lucky enough, but we had a neighbor who was patient enough to kind of cut his hair. Um, and that didn't change for a long time. Um, and then when it did change, you know, I think it was just part of, it was maturity and part of it was him adapting and, you know, and sometimes I would ask him, what was it about that?

And for him, I don't think he said it wasn't so much the noise. It was the heat he said. And I was like, you know, thinking about a razor, you know, that goes up on your head. I didn't realize that it does produce a little bit of heat for him that he was too intense.

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah. That's a perfect example of a sensitivity to sense that most of us wouldn't feel at all. That most of us wouldn't have even been able to identify that there was heat associated with. Yeah. So how does some of these sensory issues change over time? So you're talking about young kids, you know, some of the signs with young kids and then what happens as kids get older?*

Amelia Well, I mean, overall human beings are resilient and they adapt. Right. And so I think that's what happens for some of our children. Some of the sensory challenges, they can adapt it. Like, so Alfonso, he was, um, a lot of it was also chewing in his mouth and you know always wanting to have something in his mouth. Like I couldn't hand, hand me down his shirts to his younger brother, cause all the buttons were chewed off, you know? Um, and how did that change for him? Well, eventually he now chews water bottle caps, you know, or gum, you know, it's so it adapts and it changes. Um, sometimes for the better, right. Um, and sometimes, or for some people they need more intervention.

Um, I think a good book to reference when we're talking about sensory challenges and even going into sensory processing disorder then is, um, *The Out of Sync Child* with Carol Kranowitz. And she says that when the brain is so

disorganized and a person has difficulty functioning in daily life, then that person is diagnosed as having sensory processing disorder.

Maureen *Okay. So when it's interfering with your life, yeah. That makes sense. And sensory processing disorder then is sort of the, I guess, on the more extreme end of a spectrum of sensory processing, because it's a diagnosable thing versus maybe some kids who are just slightly or moderately sensitive to things, is that accurate?*

Amelia Yes.

Maureen *So if you suspect that your child has some sensory issues, even on the sort of mild side, um, or really anywhere on the spectrum, what, what are some of the first things that you would recommend a parent should do?*

Amelia Um, so I always had this motto about behavior. And so my motto is, you know, behavior is actually way a child's communicating to you and they know that they have some sort of need. So, um, I think the first thing is to be curious, you know, what is behind that behavior? What is my child trying to communicate to me? Because, you know, obviously they can't say, oh, I have a sensory disorder. I, you know, I can't tolerate the touch of, um, velvet, you know, uh, And so, yeah, and like, I, and what I mean by that is like, um, for instance, even I, as a young child, um, the wool, like I would get all itchy. And so my mom would always try to put on this certain sweater on me and I'd always like happen to take it off. And she was like, what's, you know, and it wasn't until she realized that, you know, my body started getting red and blotchy that, oh, you know, she's got something going on behind that. And so, yeah. So I think the first thing is being curious, being present with your child, noticing, um, this is just more than um, like today's thing, it's a perpetual happening. And so maybe even probably journaling to get a good view of what's happening and it's something that you you've already thought about then, you know, internet is a great place to go to. I think you have to make sure you're looking at reliable sources. Right. And, um, there's different types of, um, sensory processing, um, checklists. That kind of give you a better idea. And then, um, again, the book Out of Sync Child also has a checklist in there, and then you take that information and you go see your pediatrician.

I think from pediatricians though, they're going to want to know if it's just in your environment or in another environment. So it's also good to talk if they're in school or if the babysitter or daycare finding out, you know, is this happening also at home or excuse me, in that other environment.

Maureen *You mentioned school.*

Amelia Yes.

Maureen *I know this is a big one. What, how do you sort of handle sensory processing and school, you know, in your home, I imagine there are things you can do to*

control that, and then you send them out into the world and that's a whole different environment.

Amelia So I think first, um, is kind of figuring out, you know, does my kid have like extreme sensory challenges that is going to affect, you know him in the school setting, you know, if it affects him in the home setting probably is gonna affect them in the school setting. So then, you know, you can do two, two routes. One is, you know, go to the school and say, I like a full individual evaluation on my child because I believe he has sensory challenges that might affect his learning. And so they will start doing an assessment and, you know, you have to go through all the red tape. Uh, an easier route would be, you know, going to an occupational therapist, who's trained in sensory integration and she would be the best professional then to make such diagnosis using her clinical evaluation.

And then once you have that information, then you can go back to the school and say, my son has this. And, um, the process then, you know, unfortunately they're not qualified under special ed, but they qualify under what's called a 504. And so the difference between the two and, and then this is very basic, and I'm sure there'll be another podcast out though, who give more information about special education and 504 is and what that all means, but basically, um, if he's qualified at under a special education, then it's a legal document. You know, there's goals attached to it, you know, objectives, things that they're going to be working on, for sure. The 504 is kind of like one or two accommodations. This is what we're going to do so he has a good learning environment. And that's pretty much it.

Maureen *Perfect. And we do have a podcast episode about advocating for your children, um, who needs special accommodations at school. So we'll go more into that, but, um, that's more holistic. And so this is a little bit more specific to sensory processing.*

We'll be right back.

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Thank you so much for listening to our podcast. I'm so excited to let you know that our conference is coming up. It's my favorite two days of the year, the Momentous Institute's Changing the Odds conference, and we have an incredible lineup this year. We have two days of inspiring, thought-provoking speakers. Kicking us off this year is Cheryl Strayed, the author of Wild, which was also turned into a movie starring Reese Witherspoon. The theme of the conference this year is flourishing. We'll be talking about creating systems and families and communities that can help children flourish. I cannot wait to be inspired by the incredible lineup. Tickets open on May 1st. We hope you'll check it out. It's momentousinstitute.org/changingtheodds.

Maureen *Okay. And we're back. So I know that there are certain things or environments that may trigger something in a child. Of course, you mentioned the tags or the*

fluorescent lights or textures, sounds. And I imagine to some extent you want to minimize their exposure to some of those things that, you know, will trigger. And then there are times where, of course you can't avoid them. Your child has to go to the grocery store, even if it has fluorescent lighting or has to go, you know, to a doctor's office or, you know, has to wear clothes, has to wear a uniform to school. Um, so what considerations should parents take for their child when they're interacting in places or environments that may trigger their child?

Amelia Um, I think, you know, and this is the ideal world, right? Because you know, we're parents that live in a world where things always change. But planning ahead if we, if we can, you know, you know, you're going to go to the grocery store on this date. So, you know, and you know, there's going to be fluorescent lights and you know, that they, um, try to avoid that type of lighting or they react differently towards that lighting, so maybe he wore sunglasses, but definitely, you know, planning around for the needs of the child, because I think again, like we talked earlier, an adult, he, or she may be, um, already regulated, knows the social norms and cues, a child really doesn't. So being able to support that child within what's happening, and then if you know, all else fails, you know, you just go back and you talk about it when the child's regulated and can talk about it and kind of ask them, you know, what he experienced or, you know, what you think happened, um, for that child in that moment and then, um, kind of plan around it and say, no, we should try it again. I think, um, Siegel talks about name it to tame it. Right? So naming, you know, that was an awful experience that we had the grocery store. I'm wondering if it's because the lights were too much for you. Um, perhaps next time we can use the sunglasses. Um, maybe we'll try it again, uh, next week when we have to go get groceries.

Maureen *That's good. And you mentioned that kids don't know the social norms. That's such a good point to keep in mind because it can be frustrating for us as parents, when our kids are doing things that are not socially acceptable, you know, throwing a fit or doing whatever. And we think, how can they do this? You know, but they they're responding, like you said, their behavior is telling us something. So they're responding to their environment and they have no idea that maybe the way they're responding is not socially acceptable.*

Amelia I'm smiling so big because it triggered a memory about my older son and, um, so, you know, some, some, uh, grocery stores has like the fish market area right, where you get fish, and so he's very sensitive to smell. And so just walking by it, he starts gagging. It just like really out loud and really like, and I'm like, oh my God, people... But again, it's a social norm, norm, norm cues that of, you know, he doesn't realize that, you know, in doing that, but that's not okay, but he's telling me again, the behaviors he's telling me that he hasn't needed that this stuff, you know, it really affects them. And so we need to move on and not linger in the fish section.

- Maureen *So exactly. That's such a, that's such a perfect example. Like that's so embarrassing as a parent for your son to be gagging in public and you're...*
- Amelia Yeah. So needless to say, we feel really quick by the fish market.
- Maureen *(Laughs) Learned behavior. So speaking of this, I'm just wondering, is there a balance between avoiding things like the fish market that may trigger something and giving them the child practice and managing their, their triggers or is it best to just avoid it at any cost? Is there some advantage to like helping them get exposure to some of the things that trigger or should we just not even try that?*
- Amelia I think, um, we could. I think in anything, you can try your best to avoid it. Right. But it's always going to come up in some form or fashion. So, um, unless it's like going to be extremely crucially painful for the child to go through it, then, you know, take baby steps to experience whatever it is. You know, again, planning, you know, what does he need or she need to be successful when we know that she has, or he has this type of sensory challenge, how can I support them within that? And then if it didn't work again, you know, go back to the drawing board, you know, a slight conversation with the child - that was really scary for you to go to that, um, party like new year's and all the flashing lights, you know, that you didn't know if, you know, we were going to have regular light, you know, um, that made your eyes, you know, um, want to stay closed. Um, that was just a way of saying that we were happy that it was a new year. Um, maybe next time we can try those lights and, um, in our house. Cause we're happy about, um, next week, we're going to a big party, you know, or something, you know, relating it to something for them, and then letting them try again, um, again, you know, naming the experience that they had and then talking about what that was, and then what mommy can do to help them feel and stay safe.
- Maureen *So I love what you're talking about, this conversation that you have with the child. And I'm curious, how much information do you share with the child about their special circumstance or do you just kind of, uh, just have a general conversation like you would with any kid who's having a hard time with anything or in your experience, is it best to kind of include them, like you, you have, you're a little more sensitive to sounds than other kids, or do you not kind of go towards that?*
- Amelia Well, I think, um, you would go towards it, you know, developmentally appropriate, right? So younger child, less words than, um, less explanation, just but always this awareness of what they're feeling that makes sense. The physicality of it. Um, for instance, so you might have a child that seems to always like climbing furniture a lot and turns out what they need is more input in their legs. And that's what, how they're doing it, right. And so you say, you know what? I noticed that your body likes the, um, your legs, like to move a lot. That you're, that's what your body needs. And so the way you do that is by

climbing on the furniture, but that's not okay. But when you feel like you... your legs needed, climb something, tell me, and mommy can take you to the park. Or we can go outside where you have your jungle gym, you know, whatever the case may be.

Um, that's like real simple. If they have different things that they need to use, you know, to help like noise canceling headphones, cause you know, the noise is too much for them. You know, this is a tool, it's not a toy. It's something that you use to help you. Um, so that, yeah, you don't have to listen to all that noise. Cause sometimes it's hard to be able to concentrate on something when there's so much noise. Basic statement, your body's saying it needs more input or less input. Right? So comparison: glasses, something that they see on people all the time, you know, so-and-so like I use myself when I'm with the kids in Launch, I'll say miss Amelia has a special tool, her glasses, she uses it so that she can see, you know, that's her tool to use to help her.

And, you know, your body needs, um, more input to be able to sit down at carpet. And so that's why you get to use, uh, Princess, which is our, um, weighted puppy. So you sit with Princess and Princess helps you stay seated at the carpet.

Maureen *Nice. Yeah, that's perfect. That makes a lot of sense. And. I want to talk a little bit about educating the child's environment. So we talked a little bit about school, but just in general, caretakers, grandparents, relatives, babysitters, siblings, teachers, anyone who interacts with the child, um, outside of your home. And what are some ways that you kind of talk to them about your child's needs and make sure that they're taken care of in other people's hands?*

Amelia *When I saw that question, I thought it was a hard one because, you know, I think culturally, you know, sometimes people misinterpret sensory challenges as, um, he's just being, he's just being spoiled, you know? And so then going back and saying, no, you know, these are some challenges that he experiences at home, and this is how, you know, in order for him to be successful, this is what we do to help him. Um, and I think that you have a better experience, um, with him, if you're able to try some of these things. I think sometimes, um, we, we have to even, um, which is hard, but even kind of be empathetic to them. Because they're not aware of those, um, challenges that our child has. And so instead of being like, you know, gosh, you know, they are really treating my kid unfairly. They really, no, it's more like taking the view of they've never experienced this, so I'm going to be able to help them with this so that not only can they help my child, but they can help future children that might go through this.*

Maureen *That's a good attitude. I imagine that you and others listening, who have children with sensory challenges have probably faced challenges in this area with adults who don't quite understand.*

Amelia Oh yeah. I think, um, sometimes go through a grieving process because, um, not that you want to say your child's not normal, but he's going to experience different things that maybe the average child might not. And, you know, And then it makes some, for some people, if you don't have the support, you know, or, or the type of person who goes out, looking for the information saying, no, there's more to this than that. You know, you feel isolated, you know, you feel I can't do anything because my child has these issues.

And, um, I think. When I saw, um, so when Disney Plus first came out, I was all about it. And on it, they have a Pixar animation and it's called, um, Float. It's called Float by Bobby Rubio. And it really it's about his experience with his child who has autism. And my child also has autism, but that experience of why can't you be normal and then realizing no, you know, there's stuff about my child that, you know, he's great at and things that I can celebrate and do with him. And I just need to be us.

Maureen *I'm so glad you said that because that's so powerful and, um, for anyone who has a child with special needs, I know it is hard. It's hard for you and you have to show up as such a fierce advocate and you have to take care of yourself when you do that too. So I know, um, you know, your son's 19, so you've had 19 years of really showing up in that role for your son, so kudos to you and all the people listening who are in the trenches. I know it's hard.*

Amelia I think it helps when you find, um, groups like, like for Alfonso we do social skill building group. And through that group, we found other parents that, you know, like, oh yeah, I went through that too. And it's like, oh, it's not just me. Right. And I think having that connection really helps too, because then you're like, okay, you know, I'm not the only one there's other out there and together we'll support our families. Right?

Maureen *Well, definitely. I mean, really, I, I just can't say it enough. I know that it's a lot of work to be that advocate and you're an awesome mom and everyone listening, who's really seeking more information and really learning how to help their kids is just, it's a lot of work and take care of yourselves.*

Amelia Oh, I did want to say that, you know, with sensory challenges, sometimes there are other diagnosis too, that are behind it. And not saying all kids who have sensory challenges will have another diagnosis, but I know for my son and for some of the other children in the social skill building group that I spoke of, um, usually it's attached to autism, ADHD, you know, other things behind it too. So it's not only good for your child to have that OT evaluation. But if you suspect that there's much more going on than, you know, seeking those other, um, services to, to help your child and be successful.

Maureen *And I assume sometimes sensory challenges might be the thing that you notice first.*

Amelia Yes, definitely.

Maureen *Before you notice the other things... So it's good. It's really good to pay attention to those, anything that feels just a little off, any kind of sensitivities, because they may be alerting you to something bigger, it sounds like. So do children outgrow sensory things? I know you talked about adapting, but I'm just curious. How do they change over time?*

Amelia *Honestly, I think they're probably better at hiding it, you know? Um, I think and for some, I think, I think it just depends the approach that the parent's going to take, right? The parent empowers them and tells them what, you know, this is what you have and it's nothing bad and it's nothing to hide. And you know, this is how you adjust to it. Then they can then communicate to somebody else. So I'm like this because of X, Y, and Z. And that's why I use resistance bands in my classroom when I sit at a chair and that's okay. Cause that's my tool. Right. Um, but for some kids that maybe who didn't have all that, you know, they still kind of don't know what it is, but they've adopted it or are better at hiding it. Like, you know, it's not appropriate. And they finally get those norm cues stuff, and they out you're like, oh, I shouldn't be chewing on stuff, you know, but I'll, you know, hide it or I'll chew on it and not notice it. And then, no, like for me, with my son, it's like, you know, oh yeah, I did do that. I mean, that's like, yeah, you didn't notice that you were chewing that it's like, no, I did it, but yeah, it was me.*

Maureen *So, yeah, that makes sense. So I think, I think what you're talking about makes a lot of sense to me that you just, the more you can kind of verbalize and talk about it and help them normalize it and make sense of it and then learn the tools to take care of themselves when you're not going to be there all the time, their whole life, to kind of help them adapt to that makes a lot of sense. And then they can advocate for themselves.*

Amelia *Right. That's the hope at the end.*

Maureen *Exactly. This has been such a great conversation and I, I know people are, will take comfort in sort of hearing some of your experience. And it's been really touching for me to sort of connect with you about some of what you've been through as a mom.*

What do you just, as we close out, what do you wish... what advice do you wish someone had given you as you started on this journey?

Amelia *Um, I always go back to this quote by Gary Landreth. He says, and it's hard, so I'm going to say it twice. What is most important may not be what you do, but what you do after what you did. So what is most important may not be what you do, but what you do after you, what you did. So. That's it for me, it's the hope, the hope that I always get to parents, you know, that repair piece, you know, you, you do as much as you can with the information you had at the time. And so, um, you have to have grace with yourself and then once you do have information, then use it and, you know, advocate for your child, help your*

child, do whatever you need to do so that they can be successful and grow and be able to advocate for themselves one day.

Right. So we've been talking about, and so, um, with my son, I think not only did I have to realize that and still hold onto that hope, you know, not just for him, but for his other brothers too, but, um, is that, that conversation that I've had with him, you know, um, sometimes I feel like I wasn't a good parent to him because I forced him to do so many things without knowing that he had sensory challenges.

Right. And so we have a conversation every, so, um, now, and again, as a reminder, maybe more to myself and to him. So you are my first child and I love you. And you've taught me so much, you know, I'm sorry that, you know, I wasn't able to do these things for you, but you know what, because of you I'm able to do and be more aware, so I can do for other, other children. So I say to him, you are the one who's made the change for many children in their lives.

Maureen *That is so beautiful, I know now we're just a crying mess here in this podcast studio, but that is beautiful. That's... that's so sweet. And I know, like you said, you do what you can and then you learn more and you do better and that's parenting and that's especially parenting of children with special needs and it's, um, it's a process and you're showing us such a great example of the beauty and the work that goes into that. And I really thank you so much for sharing that. Thank you so much, Amelia. I really appreciate you sharing with us today.*

Amelia Thank you.

Thank you for listening to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. We hope you have enjoyed this conversation. Don't miss an episode, be sure to subscribe so that you're notified when new episodes are released. And for more content, including articles, videos, and much more, please visit us online at momentousinstitute.org.