



Meeting Sensory Needs to Support Successful Learning and Engagement.

Isabel Lee MA ECE (M.Ed candidate) Sarah Law M.Ed.
Utah State University Logan, Utah

Introduction:

Every individual is born into a body they need to learn to use and control as they interact with their environment. Through everyday experiences, we learn how to control big emotions, touch different textures and materials, and make sense of all the different messages we receive from these interactions. Our nervous system acts as the hub that receives this input from the environment and decides how we react to these stimuli.

Children exhibit sensory needs in various ways: spinning, running into things, avoiding certain foods or materials, fidgeting, covering their eyes to bright lights, or pushing other children, to name a few. It's important not to overlook how a child's sensory processing plays a role in how they behave and communicate. Ensuring that a child's sensory needs are met is critical for them to be successful in their learning and development.

Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH) often have additional sensory needs and require support in developing strategies to meet those needs. When we provide children with a sensory rich environment and individualized sensory input before and during an activity they are better prepared to learn, engage, and thrive.



What dysregulation can look like in children:

- Running into people or things
- Spinning until dizzy
- Jumping
- Pushing or shoving without cause
- Covering eyes from bright lights
- Sensitivity to certain textures, tastes, and smells

What is going on in the body:

Proprioception:

This is the body's ability to ground itself to the earth. Your muscles, joints, and tendons take in information from interactions with your environment. When a child is having challenges with proprioception it could look like running into things and balance issues.

Vestibular System:

This is the body's ability to stay balanced and sense where your head is in space. When a child is having challenges with their vestibular system it could like spinning, not wanting to move their head from upright, or problems with balance.



When we help a child meet their sensory needs before and during a demanding activity we set them up for success!

Sensory Activities:

- deep pressure with a yoga ball for 5 minutes before meal time
- Eating something chewy or crunchy before/during story time at the library
- Jumping on a minitrampoline for 5 minutes before a car ride
- Pushing a chair with a stack of books before bed

Creating a sensory rich environment can help our DHH children with:

- Wearing their devices
- Participating in group activity like circle time
- Social pragmatic language and skill building
- Connecting with others through movement

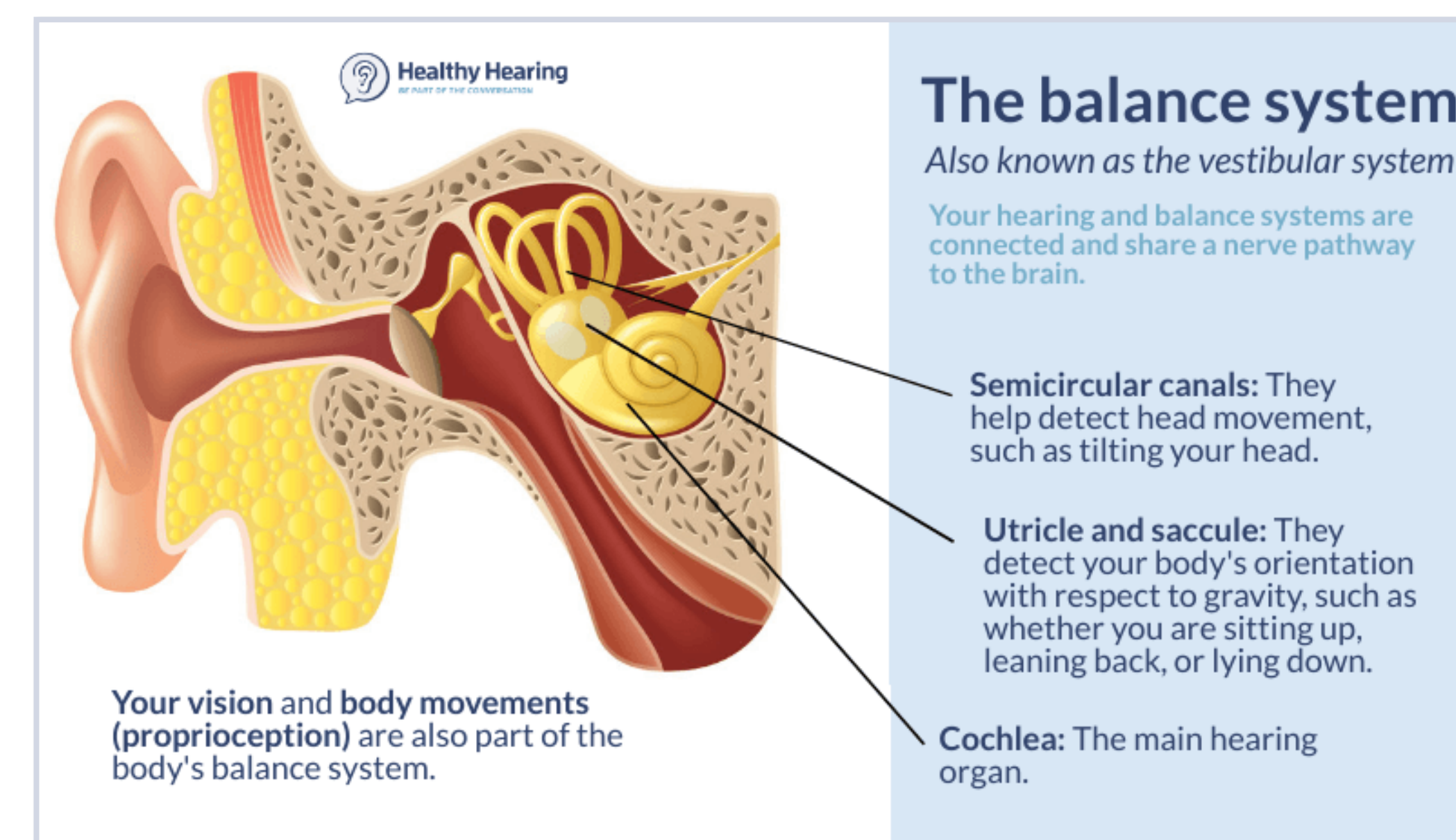
Integrating language learning strategies:

- Newer language learners can engage in a simple "stop/go" or "1, 2, 3, Go!" game to work on expressive and receptive language. What this could look like: When an adult says "1, 2, 3..." the child fills in the blank with "go!". Replace "go" with jump, bounce, push, pull, stomp to add in new vocabulary.
- Create a sensory rich obstacle course and have children follow directions: "First jump on the trampoline 10 times and then carry 5 heavy books to the table"
- Work on social language by learning how to take turns with a peer using sensory materials. When using the yoga ball for deep compression, support children to make a plan for turn-taking.
- Incorporate music and singing into a sensory activity: roll a child up tight in a blanket like a burrito and sing "Wheels on the Bus". When you sing "round and round" rock their body on the ground. Get creative by adding a movement element to any of your favorite songs!

The vestibular system and hearing loss:

If a child's vestibular system is impacted it can cause sensory processing challenges that can impede their ability to learn and socialize.

Children with hearing loss are at a higher risk to developing sensory processing disorder (SPD) compared to their hearing peers.



Behavior or dysregulation?

It's important to recognize when a child's behavior is the result of an unmet sensory need:

- A child is running into their friends and pushing them over. Do they need proprioceptive input?
- A child can't sit still at dinner and keeps bouncing off their chair. Is their body ready to sit and focus on eating or do they need input first?
- A child is chewing on all their toys. Do they need something to chew on in order to focus on an activity?

