“I’m Not Doing It to Be Annoying”: Understanding and Supporting Students with Compulsive and Sensory-Seeking Behaviors

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**The goal: to foster a shame-free and comfortable space for every student to be who they are and to have their individual needs met**

**What are body-focused repetitive behaviors?**

“Body-focused repetitive behaviors include any repetitive self-grooming behavior that involves biting, pulling, picking, or scraping one’s own hair, skin, lips, cheeks, or nails that can lead to physical damage to the body and have been met with multiple attempts to stop or decrease the behavior.” (BFRB.org)

**What are sensory processing disorders?**

“Sensory processing disorder is a neurological condition that interferes with the body’s ability to receive messages from the senses and convert those messages into appropriate motor and behavioral responses. It inhibits a person’s ability to filter out unimportant sensory information, making them feel overwhelmed and over-stimulated in certain environments. SPD also interferes with the body’s ability to process and act on information received by sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste.” (ADDitudeMag.com)

**Tips for making a classroom sensory friendly**

• Soft, natural lighting (windows, lamps, colored LEDs)

• Rubber bands on chair legs

• A fidget/sensory bin

• Student check-ins and surveys to gauge their needs

• Different seating options (regular chair, rocking chair, wobble chair, couch, soft seats)

• Class policies that students can get up and move around as long as they’re not disturbing others

**Tips for supporting students with a variety of sensory needs**

• Discuss a student’s habits with them privately, rather than calling them out or shaming them in front of the rest of the class.

• Try to give students the benefit of the doubt. If they are wearing headphones, doodling, or engaging in other behavior that seems disrespectful, start from the assumption that they are trying to meet a sensory or emotional need, not that they are trying to be “bad.”

• Offer more leeway for habits that are not disrupting other students’ learning.

• Try to offer alternative coping mechanisms. Rather than telling a student to just stop engaging in a behavior, work with them to find less disruptive ways to get their sensory needs met.

• Acknowledge that the same rules don’t always work for every student.