

**Ep #10: “I Can’t Take It!”: How To Deal with
Sensory Overload as a Parent**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Do you feel like sometimes you're just going to explode if you hear one more sound or one more kid touches you? You are not alone. Today, we're going to talk about sensory overload in parenting and some strategies for dealing with it. Stay tuned.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Welcome back to *Parenthood Prep*, the podcast that prepares you for parenthood. I am so excited because I am about to go into my annual girls weekend with some of my girlfriends, who not all of them live nearby. In fact, most of them live pretty far away. So, we try to get together at least once a year, all of us together for the weekend. So, we're doing that this weekend.

And after that, I am headed to London for two weeks, which will be very cool; almost two weeks. I'm going to go to Edinburgh and Copenhagen and Sweden, which I've never been to those other two countries. Copenhagen is not a country, but you know what I mean. I have been to Edinburgh, but I was very sick at the time. So, I'm looking forward to enjoying it healthy.

I also decided that by the time I am 50, which is in a little over seven years, I want to go to 50 different countries. I'm currently at I think 34. Yeah, so I have about seven years to go to 16 countries. I'm going to check two off the list next week. So, that's going to be really cool. I'm really excited for that.

I'm also doing a webinar on traveling with your baby at the end of June, June 26th, I believe it is, and I would love to have you join for that. It's free. It's on Zoom. You get to see my face while I talk to you. So, go to HappyFamilyAfter.com/webinars to sign up for that. I hope to see you there.

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Today, I want to talk about something that I think a lot of parents are very surprised by when you become a parent. And in fact, you might not even be able to identify it for what it is. What it is, is sensory overload. You've probably heard that term when it comes to kids. People are always talking about the nervous system nowadays. You may have heard the term “overstimulation”. It certainly can happen to babies, and it can also happen to you.

And if you are a person who before you had a baby, or before you had kids, had a pretty calm, chill, peaceful life where you could just come home to a quiet house, maybe play some music that you wanted to play, or watch a show that you wanted to watch, or listen to a podcast you wanted to listen to, you don't necessarily know what the sensory overload of having kids is like. And it is intense.

I think it can manifest in the way that you feel. You don't necessarily say, “Oh my God, I'm having sensory overload.” You get angry, you lash out, you scream at your kids, you scream at your partner. You just want to run and hide. You avoid activities, you may feel anxious. You may feel super tense and nervous, and your shoulders are up by your ears and you're super stressed. All of those things are how sensory overload can manifest.

And listen, when you have kids, from the day they're born they are just bombarding your nervous system in every way. So, when it's a little baby, a newborn, of course there's crying and everybody thinks, “Oh, crying that's so awful.” But it's not just the crying. It's like they're constantly making noise. They're grunting, they're doing this thing that I call “muttering”, where they're just like ‘grrrrr’. And yeah, the crying. Sometimes there's screaming and it just goes through you like nails on a chalkboard.

Do people even have chalkboards anymore? Do kids have chalkboards in school? Do we even use chalkboards? That's so crazy. Kids today are never going to know the sound of nails on a chalkboard, which I guess is good.

Anyway. So, sensory overload. You have this baby, and you're holding this baby all the time. If you're nursing, chest feeding, breastfeeding, body feeding, you

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have them literally sucking on you all the time. You're just touching them constantly and they're touching you.

And then, as they get older, they're wanting to be picked up and carried around. Of course, all of these things are lovely, but they can also get to a point where it's just too much. A phrase you might have heard is “touched out”. A lot of times, parents, especially parents that are the primary caregiver, will say that they're feeling “touched out”. It just means that they have had someone touching their skin, touching their body all day long, and they are done. They do not want anyone else to touch them.

You don't think to yourself, in the moment, when it's five o'clock and you're trying to get dinner ready, and your two-year-old is tugging on your leg, and the baby is crying in the bouncy chair, you're like, “Oh, wow, I'm touched out. I need to do some strategies for this.” But if you can be aware of when that sensory overload is hitting you, it's so much easier not to hit the point of screaming, anxiety, exploding, just feeling terrible. Catch it early, or prevent it, and it'll make your life so much easier.

So, let's talk about some of the specific things you might be experiencing as your kids get older. We talked in the last episode or whatever, a couple episodes ago, about crying babies, and how overwhelming that can be. And how sometimes babies just cry; they're tired, or they're overstimulated or something's wrong, or they have colic and they're just crying and crying, crying.

You do not need to parent on hard mode. You do not need to make it more difficult for yourself by listening to that crying in your ears at top volume, constantly. You can wear earplugs. You can wear headphones. You can hand over the baby and leave the room. All of these things are strategies that you are able to do. That sound stimulation, the overstimulation of baby crying is just tremendous.

Now they get a little older and maybe they're not crying so much. Maybe they're whining. That is the worst sound. My lovely friend has a lovely toddler, I adore him. He is a precious angel. He is one of the sweetest, greatest kids. But once

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in a while, he just gets in a mood where he's like ‘neeehe’, especially when his mom's around. I watch him sometimes and he doesn't really do that. But kids are so bad for their parents. I'm going to talk about this a lot more too.

Kids are so bad for their parents. And it's not fair. I mean, bad. You know what I mean. No kids are bad. But they can be very annoying, especially to their parents. So, he does this like whining. And I realized, it was me and her and him hanging out. Again, lovely kid, I adore him. But I realized that my whole body was holding tension because I was constantly hearing this whining sound coming from him.

And then, when he went to bed, or when he went down for a nap, suddenly, my body felt so much more relaxed because I was not hearing this ‘neeehe’ all the time. That can be really challenging when you're hearing that all the time. And unfortunately, when they're little toddlers, there's not a lot you can do about it.

When they're older, and they understand and they can communicate and they can speak and use words really well, you can say, “I do not respond to whiny voices.” And then you have to not respond to the whiny voice. My girlfriend, she has older kids, she is so funny.

She literally tells her child, and other children that come over, that there's a special forcefield around their house where whiny voices are silent, and she cannot hear them at all. And if somebody says something to her in a whiny voice, she just literally pretends she did not hear them. And then, they say it in a not whiny voice. Great. All those things are great.

Screaming, kids are screaming constantly. Not just crying, but yelling and fighting, or just yelling happy, or just shrieking for God knows what reason. There was a tweet a few years ago that I love, that cracks me up. “A fun thing about parenting, is that someone will scream in the middle of the night, and you don't know if they're being murdered or if their mouth feels spicy.” Because sometimes they'll just scream because they've decided their mouth feels spicy.

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So, just being aware that all of these sounds are going to be bombarding you. Not only are kids screaming, you've probably got the television on, or the music on or you have multiple kids and they're all yelling and screaming. Or somebody's trying to talk to you while the kids are screaming, and the toys are making noises 'bleep-bloop-bleep-bleep', and the music, the annoying music. There's just a constant barrage on your ears of all these different sounds.

Okay, we're going to talk about some strategies for it. I'm not just going to terrify you, that having kids is absolute sensory overload at all times. There are things you can do about it. Again, don't parent on hard mode. Other senses: We talked about being touched out by a baby, but also you touch a lot of gross stuff when you have kids. You're changing diapers, you get poop on your hand. You get boogers, drool.

I, for some reason, hate drool so much. I would rather get pee on my hand than drool. I don't know why; it just has this weird sort of slimy texture to it that I hate. See? I'm getting tense just thinking about having baby drool on me. Because I'm just like “eww”.

They're sticky, little kids are sticky all the time. I don't know how they manage it; they're not even necessarily eating sticky things. They're just sticky all the time. They get dirty outside. And for some people that can be really triggering, actual dirt, if you're maybe like a super clean person, and you're a germaphobe, or you're just don't want dirt on you or in your house, or whatever. And you see it on your kid, and you're like, “Oh, my God.”

Food, their food, they make a mess with their food. Babies get food all over their face, all over their hands. You're cleaning them up, or they're grabbing you with their sticky food-covered hands. It is a lot. It is so much. And again, it can be really overwhelming. Then it can manifest as screaming, as running away, as freaking out. And then you feel guilty because you've lashed out. And the whole reason you lashed out was because you were overstimulated, but your kids don't know that.

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Smells, there are so many different smells; dirty diapers, kid food, goodness knows what. And then forget it, if you go somewhere where there are a lot of kids. Like you take your kids to the park, then there's like a million kids, and they're screaming.

You're the best parent on Earth so you take your kid to Chuck E. Cheese, or the McDonald's play area. And then, it's the lights and the sound and the music and the millions of kids screaming, and the smells of food and fryers, and all kinds of stuff. And you just want to crawl into a hole.

So, all of these things are going to happen to you while you're parenting. And you want to be aware of them. You want to know what your body's response is, how you can catch it before it gets out of control, and when to step away to do some of these strategies.

Another thing I want to mention, is that sometimes kids are not doing anything annoying or difficult or loud or challenging, but they're just nonstop. They're just talking and talking and talking and talking, and asking questions and making you answer the questions, and then saying, “Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?” And that is also a form of sensory overload, because you're just being bombarded by this constant sound and mental load of answering these questions.

I have another dear friend who is a wonderful parenting blogger, she has a big following on social media. She had a blog, back in the olden days when people had those. I actually know her in real life. I've met her a bunch in person, we've hung out locally. Her parenting blog is all about gentle parenting. Literally, I'm a sleep trainer; she is anti-sleep training. But we are actually on the same page about a lot more than you would think, even though we have a difference of opinion on that, a lot more similarities.

She just gives these examples of these beautiful ways that she gentle parents her kids. Like, “Oh, my kid was losing his shit at the store. And I went over to the side with him, and I rocked him in my arms.” It was so beautiful. And I think it's such a good example for parents. But it can also make you feel really guilty.

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And something that she's not shy about saying, but I think for a lot of people it doesn't register, is that she is mostly deaf. She can read lips, she can sign. She can hear certain things, but she cannot hear everything. And I think that makes a huge difference in her ability to gentle-parent, because she is not through the roof, redline sensory overload all the time.

In fact, one time we were together. Her daughter, one of her kids, was like 18 months old. She was just walking around, we were outside, she was just tooting around going, “Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy.” Not trying to get her attention, just saying it. Because her kids learn, with her being deaf, that they have to touch her to get her attention. She wasn't trying to get her attention, nothing. She was just singing this word over and over and having a great time.

And it was driving me crazy. I was like, “Oh my God, I cannot even hear my own thoughts.” I said to my friend, “Can you hear what she's doing?” And she looked at me and she was like, “What, what is she doing?” I pointed to her, and she saw that her daughter was saying ‘Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy.’ She just shrugged and she was like, “No, I can't hear that.”

I was like, “Oh, okay, this makes so much sense. Because this is not even my kid and I want to run screaming in the opposite direction. You just literally can't hear it.” So, her sensory overload doesn't happen as easily from that auditory stimulation.

She certainly can still get touched out. She can get visual overload. But without having that auditory sensory overload she is much less likely to freak out. And I really do think it contributes to her ability to gentle-parent. And I think it makes it so much harder for other people to be “gentle parents” when your body is just absolute at 11, redline, going nuts.

Another sense is visual. If you're looking and you're seeing clutter everywhere, if you're seeing toys, if every light in the house is on.... I keep beating this drum, dim the lights. Dim the fucking lights all the time, just have the lights dimmer. I'm sitting in a room right now, in my house, where the lights are too bright, and I

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hate it. I am literally working with an electrician to get them all replaced because I can't deal with how bright they are.

Stuff everywhere, visual clutter, toys that light up, that are flashing and doing different things. The television on, kids shows, bright colors, kid commercials, all that stuff. All that visual stimulation can be a lot.

So, being aware that all of this stuff is happening, what are some strategies? What can you do to catch yourself before it gets too bad, or to handle it when it has gotten to that level? Again, dim the lights. Turn off the television. Put the light-up, electronic, bleepy-bloopy toys away. Like I said, remember a couple episodes ago, I was telling you, “Only use those toys when the kids need to be contained, or do something they don't want to do.”

Don't have those light-up, noisemaking, crazy toys out all the time. You don't have to. They can be just for special. Honestly, also from a clutter perspective, kids do so much better with fewer options. I used to be a teacher. I taught preschool and kindergarten, Special Ed, and I literally at one point just threw out half the toys in my classroom. They were all old and crappy. I donated the nicer ones.

But I just got rid of half the toys, because all the kids were ever doing was dumping everything out. So, really limit what they have access to, and it'll keep the visual clutter down, it'll keep them more engaged in what they have and what they're doing. It doesn't mean you have to throw the toys away, but you can rotate what is out at any given time. They don't need every toy they've ever owned in a basket for them to dump out on the floor.

So, limit the opportunity for that visual clutter, that overstimulation. Especially if you're someone that is really bothered by that. My sister and my mom, they hate that stuff. I don't mind it as much, but I did hate when my kids were just dumping the toys all over the floor and not actually even playing with them. Then when I got rid of half the toys, all of a sudden, they were playing with everything. It was amazing.

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Take a break. I know this is hard. I know sometimes you're on your own with the kids, or you have so much going on you can't do it. But if it's safe, walk away, step away, go outside, put the baby down in the bassinet and just go outside and take a couple of deep breaths of fresh air. Go into another room, go in a room where it's dark and listen to some nature sounds or some white noise. Just to get your nervous system sort of wiped clean. Wipe the slate clean.

If you can get a weighted blanket or a heavy something that you can put over your shoulders even. You don't have to be lying in bed under your weighted blanket when you're supposed to be taking care of your kids. But if you have something putting pressure on your body, that can make the sensory overload much better.

Again, get your plugs, get noise-cancelling headphones, put AirPods in. You do not need to be listening to all this like kid shrieking all the time. If you're feeling like you've been overly touched, or you're sticky or whatever, give yourself a rub. Literally rub your own skin... I'm doing it... Rub back and forth. You know how if a little bug crawls on your hand and it like tickles you, and then you shoo it away and you have to rub your hand to erase that tingly feeling? Do that all the time.

Squeeze your skin; squeeze your arm, squeeze your body. Get someone to give you a big squeazy hug, someone who's your size, or bigger than you, to really put pressure on your body. All of these things will calm down your nervous system. Take a break from screens. Put your phone down. Step away. Turn the television off. Go into the laundry room or go into the bathroom, where you can just have peace and quiet and dark for a few minutes, with no screens, no lights, no sounds, all that stuff.

Sometimes, even if you can't get away, just closing your eyes for 10 seconds can make all the difference in the world if you're feeling overstimulated. Again, if you can't leave, take some deep breaths. It's really good if you exhale longer than you inhale. So, if you inhale for a count of four, then exhale for a count of eight. That is really, really good for your brain and your nervous system. That's

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something you can do when you're right there in the thick of things with your kids, with your baby.

Plan for downtime. If you're going to take your kids to the park, or to Chuck E. Cheese, or somewhere that's really loud and really crazy, don't then plan to do something else loud and crazy back-to-back. Plan for everyone to get a break. When you're on vacation, it's so tempting to go-go-go all day long, but you and the kids will be absolutely wiped by 4pm. Take a break in the middle of the day. Plan for downtime. Plan for lots of sitting, lots of no activity; just open time when you can just chill out.

And in that case, sometimes looking at a screen is helpful. You want to just zone out on your phone for a little bit and shut the world out? That's fine. I mean, somebody should be keeping an eye on your kids. But taking basic care of yourself can also really help you not get overloaded.

Imagine your energy, your body, your nervous system, is a cup. If it's already half full of stress, because you didn't sleep well, you're dehydrated, or you haven't been eating, then any added stress is going to make that cup spill over. But if the cup is empty, if it's a clean slate... I realize that this is a bad analogy, because we talk about ‘filling your cup,’ and ‘you can't pour from an empty cup,’ but just stay with me...

So, say the cup is full of stress. We don't want the cup to be full of stress, we want the cup to be full of good things. So, if the cup is already half full of stress and you add more stress, it's going to spill over. So, try to start from a baseline of as little stress as possible. Get some sleep, hydrate; drink tons of water, eat something; have a snack, because being hungry/hangry can make the sensory stimulation so much worse.

Communicate; communicate with the people around you. Communicate with your partner, your mom, your babysitter, your kids themselves if they're older and able to communicate.

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And say, “Hey, listen, I’m feeling really touched out right now, and I need a break. Everything is too loud, and I need a break. I need to leave the room. Hey, when I start to get tense, I’m going to hand the baby off to you and I’m going to walk away, and you need to just take over.” And if they’re a good partner or family member or whatever, they’ll understand that and they’ll want to help you. So, communication is so, so, so important.

Yeah, I mean, that’s about it. Just really be aware of when the sensory overload is getting to be too much. What are your main triggers? Is it auditory? Is it visual? Is it touch? Is it smells? Is it all of the above? Be aware of those triggers and try to avoid them. Try to give yourself downtime, if you can. And then, if you are triggered, if you do hit sensory overload, take a break. Close your eyes, take some deep breaths, give yourself some physical touch, some rubbing, some squeezing, some of whatever feels good in your body to calm that down.

And if you find yourself reaching that boiling point and lashing out, it’s okay. Just, if you can take a break, try to calm down and say, “Okay, what set me off? What was my trigger? How can I catch myself before I get to that point next time?” Because you know what? It’s going to benefit you. It’s going to benefit your kids. It’s going to benefit everyone around you. And then you can set a good example for others who might be dealing with the same thing. So, yeah, that’s about it.

I will talk to you again soon.

Alright, listen up folks. We love to joke around but it’s time to get real. And that real talk, it’s all about giving your babies the roasting they deserve. Yep, you heard it right. We’re calling for an epic baby roast. We want you to drop a voice note on our website and call out your little ones for their adorable crimes.

Did your baby spit up on your brand-new dress the second you put it on? Or maybe they decided to scream through your sister’s wedding vows? We want to hear all the juicy details. Head over to happyfamilyafter.com or hit the link in the show notes. Every page on the site has a button on the side for you to record

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straight from your phone. Your story might just make it onto an episode of the Parenthood Prep podcast. We can’t wait to hear.

Thanks for listening to this week’s episode of *Parenthood Prep*. If you want to learn more about the services Devon offers, as well as access her free monthly newborn care webinars, head on over to www.HappyFamilyAfter.com.